

Parashat Pinchas

Har Shalom 2022, Rabbi Rachel Simmons

I've been unpacking all of my boxes and taking all of the shrink wrap off of my furniture, and the process is like breathing a huge sigh of relief. Finally I am surrounded by all of my favorite things! And I'd like to show you a few of them.

For example, this week I unpacked my mug that says Tea. Earl Grey. Hot. (does anyone know what this is referencing?)

[\*Holds up mug\*]

And I also unpacked this pillow [\*holds it up\*].

OK, we're going to go a little more niche now.

Yesterday I unpacked my two toy Daleks! [\*hold up blue stuffed Dalek\*] (does anyone know what show Daleks are from?)

...if you got any of those references, let's chat more after services!

And if you didn't, don't worry- that's OK! I'll explain.

I am a huge trekkie (that's what we call people who love Stark Trek) and that mug is a Star Trek reference. And the pillow is in the shape of the Millennium Falcon from Star Wars. I am also a "Whovian", which is what we call people who really love Dr. Who, and Daleks are the main nemesis in Dr. Who.

Both "Trekkie" and "Whovian" are really just other words, though, for my true title—which is, that I am a huge, HUGE nerd.

And one of the things I love to nerd out about, as I'm sure will not surprise you, is all things Torah! I don't just mean that I love Torah. I mean that I love to collect Torah facts, both about the content and about the scrolls themselves, and I love to know the stories behind the stories, and the quirks of these sacred objects, and the details that few people know. I am a proud Torah nerd.

I love knowing the stories behind individual scrolls—for example, I love knowing that among the dozen Torah scrolls that Har Shalom cares for, there is one that is at least 250 years

old and was saved from the Czech Republic during the Holocaust.

I also love learning about Torah scroll trivia in general. Did you know, for example, that most Torah scrolls are made from thin, preserved, blemish-free leather? Or that the deep blackness of the ink used in all Torah scrolls comes from soot, not artificial coloring, giving it that deep, unique hue? Did you know that when a synagogue is facing a natural disaster like a wildfire or a hurricane, Torah scrolls are evacuated like people—buckled into car seats and nestled in blankets?

Or that part of why Torah scrolls are so priceless (and so expensive) is because they are all written by hand, painstakingly, in exactly the same way, with even brand-new modern scrolls mirroring ancient ones to the nearest degree?

This last fact is one that I love in particular. Whether brand-new or hundreds of years old, if you open up one Torah scroll and compare it to another, they will have much more in common than different.

How many of you have seen a Torah scroll up close?

Were all of the letters the same size? Or were some tiny, and some big? Were all of the words together in a big block without breaks, or were there sometimes breaks in the text? Did the placement of the breaks always make sense to you?

If you've ever chanted Torah, another question—could you always figure out why some letters were written super loooooooooong, while others were close together? There are certain *psukim* in the Torah, certain verses, where all of a sudden in a middle of a sentence a letter will take up half of a line. Or a third of a line.

It can be hard to find a pattern or a consistent explanation for these Torah quirks. And yet, year after year, century after century—our *Sofrim*, our specialized Torah scroll makers, keep on making the same letters super loooong and the same letters super short. They keep on adding in the exact same breaks in the lines, the exact same dots and smudges. They guard and remember these written traditions.

But why are the letters written in this incredible variety of ways?

If the letter is written loooooooooong, does that maybe mean that back in the day when the Torah was chanted, and not written down, people who sing that letter in a way that was loooooooooong?

Or perhaps, a thousand years ago, a scribe was working on a Torah scroll very late at night, and fell asleep, and the quill dragged across the page, leaving a loooooong mark..... and now, centuries later, it's become a fixed custom that we carefully, carefully follow.

Or does it mean we're supposed to meditate on the meaning of that letter, perhaps, for a loooooong time?

In Judaism, we have the concept of *Midrash*, which is the ancient practice of filling in the blanks of stories, adding details, giving extra personalized meaning to the text. The existence of special letters in our Torah scrolls, letters that are written differently in different places, has led to the concept of "visual *Midrash*", where we look at the letters themselves, and the variations between the letters themselves, to discern a deeper meaning to the words of the Torah scrolls. We are accustomed,

as Jews, to plumbing the stories of our ancestors again and again for new meaning. But visual *Midrash* gives us the additional opportunity to look at the physical form of the letters and ask ourselves: what is the extra level of holy truth we can find here? What is the literal text itself trying to teach us?

See? I'm a Torah Nerd. A huge Torah nerd!

And guess what. My FAVORITE letter in the WHOLE TORAH (and that's saying something)....

My FAVORITE anomaly in the way that our Torah scrolls have been written for hundreds and hundreds of years—

Is found in this week's *parasha*, in *parashat* Pinchas!

To remind us all of who Pinchas is, we just have to look back at the end of last week's Torah portion, Balak. In our Maftir last week, we learned about how the Israelites were cavorting and hooking up with non-Israelites ("cavorting" and "hooking up" are, I admit, not the exact words used in the Torah, but you get the idea.) The Israelites also start worshipping idols. Suffice to

say, God isn't happy about any of these developments. And Pinchas, son of Eleazar, grandson of Aaron, takes matters into his own hands and summarily kills an Israelite and a non-Israelite who were actively, as we said, cavorting. This is where last week's Torah portion ends.

And then this week, we learn that God's response to Pinchas' violent act is to extend "*briti shalom*", "my covenant of peace", to Pinchas and his descendants.

And every time I get to this story, there's a little part of me that just thinks—What? The reward for skewering two people is an enduring Covenant of peace? This doesn't seem to make sense to me, especially when so much of our tradition encourages us to be *rodef shalom*, to pursue peace, or as we sing frequently and often say at the end of Kaddish, *Oseh shalom bimromav, hu yaaseh shalom aleinu*—may the One who brings peace in the world bring peace on us. If God is the bringer of peace, why give a Covenant of peace to Pinchas, who had just killed? Pinchas' act certainly doesn't seem very peaceful to me.

Thankfully, I am not alone in my wonderings. Commentators throughout our history have wrestled with this *briti shalom*, both in regards to what its true meaning could be, and also because the word “*shalom*”, in this one very particular case, includes one of those special letters I was talking about a few minutes ago. It includes my very favorite special letter.

Specifically, the *vav* in the word Shalom is, in every kosher Torah for centuries and centuries, broken into two.

That’s right—the letter *vav* is broken.

Here, I’ll show you. It wouldn’t be very feasible for us all to line up, re-open the ark, and find this broken *vav*. But today is a special day, remember? A day of visual aids. So here goes.

In so many places, in our Torah and in our liturgy, we see the word Shalom. And it is almost always written like this:

[\*holds up piece of poster board with giant SHALOM on it\*]

But in parashat Pinchas, specifically in the phrase “*briti shalom*”, in the phrase where we learn what God gives to

Pinchas in response to his killing of two people, *Shalom* is written like this:

[\*flips over poster board to show that SHALOM is now written in a broken way, like SHAL—M but in Hebrew letters]

Precisely in the phrase where God extends to Pinchas a Covenant of peace, that word for peace is, itself, shattered. In almost every Torah scroll, this vav is not one line, but two.

As far back as the Ritva, a Jewish commentator in the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE, this broken *vav* has been named and required in our holiest text. For centuries, every time a new Torah scroll has been written, this *vav* has been intentionally broken.

But *why*?

Different commentators over the centuries have offered different explanations for why this vav **MUST** be broken.

The Netziv, writing in Lithuania in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, suggests that the broken vav in the briti shalom shows that Pinchas' violent act, though extreme, does not condemn him to a

lifetime of violence—that he will not become an inherently violent person. His brokenness does not preclude peace.

Rabbi Haim Ovadia responds to the broken vav by suggesting that either sometimes peace must first be shattered in order to reach our most lofty ideals, OR that peace which is accomplished through violence is never truly complete peace.

Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin asserts that peace or wholeness is inherently a bit of an illusion, as the existence of any peace has to come from pieces being put together.

If we look at history, the brokenness of the vav in the word *shalom* in Parashat pinchas lines up with our human experience. Most peace treaties—like the treaty of Versailles, the Magna Carta, the Camp David accords, or the Geneva Conventions-- came on the heels of incredible pain, of incredible destruction, of moments where humanity has NOT lived up to our highest ideals of harmony and sharing this Earth. We KNOW that peace is not something that is just handed to us on a platter. We understand that sometimes we need to name

peace as our goal precisely BECAUSE we are struggling so much to achieve it.

We know that, like the vav, we are broken into pieces, and so we name that our goal is to become whole once again.

My hope for us all here today, though, is that we can internalize the broken vav personally, as well, beyond any existential discussions we might have about civilizations or Scripture in a broad sense.

I see the broken vav in parashat Pinchas as an invitation for us all—an invitation to join with God in repairing this world, in bringing together the two pieces of the vav to make them one, instead of tearing them further apart. This requires that we first open our eyes and hearts to brokenness, not as a failure, but as a fact of who we are.

I also see the broken vav in *parashat* Pinchas as a reminder for us all, that we are not defined by any one action, but by the sum of our actions, and that even when we make a mistake, or don't live up to our best values, we still have an opportunity—and an obligation—to move forward and do our best to rebuild

from the pieces of our failures and to make the world as peaceful as possible. This requires us to show ourselves the same grace we show others, and perhaps, to show our imperfect ancestors like Pinchas that same grace and forgiveness as well.

On a personal level, I see the broken vav in *parashat* Pinchas as a personal, intimate reassurance—saying that just because I, as a person, feel broken sometimes—just because I, as a person, feel unworthy sometimes—I can still find peace. I am still worthy of peace.

And this is true for all of us. God did not give up on the Israelites; God did not give up on Pinchas; and God has not given up on us—so we shouldn't give up on ourselves, either.

It is in the work of putting the pieces back together that we can one day find peace again—as a people, and as individuals.

Shabbat shalom.