

**The Reward for Action in a Time of Plague**  
***Parashat Pinchas***  
**July 3, 2021**  
**Fred Ledley – Guest Darshan**

It is great to be here at Temple Aliyah today after the pandemic of the past year. It is great to look around and see all of you who I count as friends and fellow congregants and turn our attention from the pandemic to the future.

Our parsha today – Parsha Pinchas – is about a similar moment in time. The parsha sets the stage as being: “acharey hamagepah” “after the plague” and goes on to command the Israelites to count the people of Israel and to prepare for their future in the promised land.

In last week’s parsha - Parshat Balak - we learned that the Israelites were afflicted with a plague or pestilence, which Torah ascribes to God’s anger at their immoral behavior with Moabite women and worship of their deity. We read that when God gave Moses instructions for ending the plague, Moses called a meeting; but, before they could do anything, an Israelite – Zimri – started cavorting with a Midianite woman right in front of them. At that point, Pinchas took a spear, impaled them both, and the plague ended.

In case there was any uncertainty as to what ended the plague, our Parsha today begins by saying: ““Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion...,”” emphasizing that it was Pinchas’ passion, his action, his deed, that brought that plague to an end.

Of course, the COVID plague was not caused by immoral behavior or idolatry. Moreover, what brought it to an end was not impaling people with spears, but rather spearing them in an injection of a vaccine.

I received the vaccine at Temple Israel in Boston, which was a vaccination site for the Beth Israel Hospital. Walking into Temple Israel back in March, I was acutely aware that it was the first time I had set foot in a synagogue in over a year.



I had given some thought to what berakah would be most appropriate on receiving a vaccine.

As Tevya reminded us, there is a blessing for everything – even the czar – and there were many interesting, often eloquent suggestions on the web.

I chose to say three berakah suggested by Rabbi David Wolpe.

- The first was a familiar prayer: Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, shehecheyanu, v'kiy'manu, v'higiyanu laz'man hazeh  
Blessed are You, ...who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this season.
- The second was: Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, She'asah li nes bamakom hazeh,  
Blessed are You .... who has done miracles for me in this place.

Some of you may recognize that this formulation is similar to the berakah we say at Hanukah for the miracle of the lights “she-asah nisim laavoteinu v'imoteinu bayamim hahaeim baz'man hazeh” “Who has as done miracles for our ancestors in this place.”

- And then I said a final prayer: Baruch atah, Adonai Eloheinu, Melech haolam, l'basar v'adam  
Blessed are You .... who has given divine wisdom to flesh and blood.”  
Talmud teaches that this is the appropriate blessing for seeing a wise gentile, or a scholar of worldly wisdom.

I found this third prayer – “Blessed are You .... who has given divine wisdom to flesh and blood.” – particularly meaningful. Let me explain.

The COVID vaccines we all received were the products of genomic science, an area of research where I spent much of my professional career. The essential principle of genomics is that the genome of a species is an instruction set for constructing all the structures and functions of that species. It is like the written instructions that come inside a box of Legos, telling you how to assemble the various plastic blocks to make various different object or how to construct people in different professions or even superheroes.

In fact, the most successful vaccines – the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines - are little more than short pieces of the COVID virus genome, which carry the instructions for making a fragment of the COVID virus in your body, and it is this small fragment of the COVID virus that stimulates your protective immunity.

From the earliest days of research in genomics in the 1980s, parallels have been drawn between the coming to understand the instructions by which different organisms are created and evolve and the religious narrative of divine creation. When the first complete human genome sequence was announced in 2000, President Clinton celebrated the event, commenting “Today we are learning the language in which God created life. We are gaining ever more awe for the complexity, the beauty, the wonder of God's most divine and sacred gift.” He went on to say that “With this profound new knowledge, humankind is on the verge of gaining immense new power to heal.”

These words were actually written by Dr. Francis Collins, now the director of the NIH, who had led the government’s efforts to sequence the human genome. Francis Collins is not only an eminent scientist and leader, but also an outspoken, evangelical Christian. He expanded on his views of genomics in a 2006 book titled “The Language of God.” In that book, he wrote: “It is humbling for me, and awe-inspiring, to realize that we have caught the first glimpse of our own instruction book, previously known only to God.”

Collins’ association of the genome with the language of creation rearticulates a centuries old philosophy, which states that the natural laws revealed by science are, in fact, representations of the divine law. Many of you may be most familiar with this philosophy from the T-shirts that you many have seen math and physics nerds wear in college - I just happen to have mine here! The top line says: “And God said...;” the next four lines show the Maxwell equations that describe light as a wave; and it concludes with the statement “and there was light.” The inference, of course, is that the laws of physics embody the form of God’s creation of light described in the first words of Genesis. So too, Francis Collins is saying that the language of genomics reveals the mechanism by which God created life.

This view is not foreign to Judaism. In his Guide to the Perplexed, Maimonides wrote: “The Almighty commenced Holy Writ with the description of the Creation,

that is, with Physical Science.” He describes that science as being “on the one hand most weighty and important, and on the other hand our means of fully comprehending those great problems being limited.” Because of our inability to comprehend the complexity of this science, he writes: “Divine Wisdom found it necessary to communicate to us, in allegorical, figurative, and metaphorical language. ... Therefore, Scripture simply tells us, ‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.’”

So too, the description of God creating “...seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind...” in verse 11 of Genesis and, several verses later, “...swarms of living creatures...” may be considered allegorical or metaphorical representations of the principles embodied in genomics and evolution, and the vaccine that is the product of genomics may be considered to be an embodiment of this divine wisdom. In this context, that saying a berakah for – shenatan michochmato - the granting of divine wisdom - seemed to be particularly appropriate on receiving my vaccine at Temple Israel.

Our tradition also teaches, however, that the law itself is not enough; it must be practiced. In the second chapter of Genesis, for example, we are told that even after “God finished the work that He had been doing;” even after the first shabbat, yet “...no shrub of the field was yet on earth and no grasses of the field had yet sprouted, because the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil.” Today’s parsha can also be interpreted as teaching us about the importance of human action in realizing the fruits of divine wisdom.

Rabbi Jonathan Sachs made this argument in an essay that drew parallels between the plague in Parshat Balak and the COVID-19 pandemic published shortly before his death last November.

Rabbi Sachs wrote: “Pinchas saw that there was no one leading. The danger was immense. God’s anger, already intense, was about to explode. So he acted...”

So too, the COVID pandemic will only come to an end because of the actions of men and women who tilled the soil and brought new vaccines and drugs to fruition; scientists and healthcare providers who applied their knowledge and skill to the pandemic, citizens who wore masks and maintained social distancing until the vaccine was available, those who managed the development, manufacturing,

and distribution of the vaccines, and those who are today working feverishly to deliver the vaccine to people around the world. It was in the gratitude for the myriad human actions that contributed to bringing this pandemic to an end that it was appropriate to offer a berakah not only for the divine wisdom embodied in the vaccine, but also for that wisdom having been granted to “flesh and blood.”

There are other important parallels between the events of Pinchas and those of the present day. There was an ambiguous moral and political calculus to both Pinchas’ action and the public response to COVID-19. Centuries of rabbinic commentary have considered whether Pinchas was justified in taking two human lives, whether he was empowered to make this decision on his own, and the danger inherent in religious zealotry. So too, the public health measures that were necessary to curtail the pandemic involved restrictions on civil liberties, commerce, free association, and personal autonomy, and they compromised our ability to perform mitzvot, pray with a minyan, visit the sick, and comfort the mourners among us.

Nevertheless, Rabbi Sachs reminds us “Pinchas acted...”and Torah is not ambiguous about the reward for his action. Our parsha teaches that, for his action in ending the plague, Pinchas was rewarded with briti shalom “a covenant of peace.”

There is a beautiful passage in Pirkei Avot in which Rabbi Elazar ben Azariah describes those whose deeds exceed their wisdom. He compares them “...To a tree whose branches are few but roots are many, so that even if all the winds in the world come and blow upon it, they cannot move it out of its place, as it is said, “He shall be like a tree planted by waters, sending forth its roots by a stream. It does not sense the coming of heat, its leaves are ever fresh. It has no care in a year of drought; it does not cease to yield fruit” (Jeremiah, 17:8).

On this shabbat we pray that our actions and our deeds continue to yield fruit; that we succeed in bringing this pandemic to an end; and that each of us and our community comes to be blessed with a covenant of peace.

Shabbat shalom