

Reason or Chance
Parashat Pinchas
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Our country's census is in the news again, that constitutionally mandated process by which we count heads every ten years, prompting reflections on our changing diversity, lifestyle choices and priorities. But, while census data paints one national portrait, we know that numbers can often distract or obscure other elements of a narrative. This will be true of our upcoming census and it was true of the census described in today's parshah, Pinchas. Our contemporary census raises issues as to whether constitutional mandates are being ethically met. Our biblical census raised issues as to how perceptions of these ethics are colored. And as often happens in Torah, the juxtaposition of this week's parshah stories deepens our inquiry. Parshah Pinchas asks, what measure of intellect or devotion, reason or chance, will or impulse informs our sense of righteousness?

Our parshah opens with a Dickensian twist; it was the best of times and it was the worst of times. It was the worst of times in that the Israelites, once again, had been led astray through sexual improprieties into pagan worship; consequently, they had suffered a devastating plague, no doubt killing both sinners and the innocent alike. On the other hand, from a biblical perspective, these were also good times as the Israelites were now more enlightened, no longer thinking of plagues as random disasters but rather as purposeful acts of God over which humanity had some control via its own behavior. And thus, briefly, we have our hero, Pinchas, whose zealous murder of Zimri and Cozbi halts the plague. Pinchas, then, comes to embody both Divine righteous will and a devotion to justice. But are we sure this is the good news?

The British rabbi Jonathan Sacks points out that zealous devotion to a cause easily can become self-righteousness, the belief that murder and mayhem can be justified, that ethics and morality can be set aside for some assumed higher purpose. Ironically, a too passionate grasp of the law sows anarchy rather than furthering civility and peace. And I would add that there is a parallel here; just as the chaos sown by acts of God undermine our ability to love and trust the Divine, self-righteousness undermines our ability to trust and love each other. Humanity then must constrain itself in its imitation of God. But then, how do we safely hold the Divine within us with all our hearts, our souls and minds?

An initial textual ambiguity appears: Did God desist from destruction because of the righteous intent of a single human being? Or was the Divine taken by, or taken aback by, the depth of Pinchas' passion? Did observing Pinchas prompt Divine self-reflection? And, conversely, what do we know of Pinchas' self-insight? Did Pinchas anticipate the depth of his rage? Was it strictly driven by righteousness? Did the outcome haunt his dreams? These first parshah chapters hint only of God's thoughts as God constrains Pinchas' zealotry, binding it to priesthood service rather than to secular or military power. Furthermore, our parshah defuses potential religious zealotry by instead quickly redirecting us to the mind-numbing details of a Levantine life. Passions settle as



attention turns to the equitable distribution of land and of future martial and ritual obligations. Outlines, then, of a spiritual boundary between devotion and passion seem to emerge.

The neatness of this separation is quickly challenged, however, by a census detail, one that reoccurs in the final chapters of our parshah, and one that I find curious. The rabbis assure us that not only was the land distributed equitably among the tribes by their numbers, but that each portion was equally good, that there was no reason for the tribes to contend against each other on this matter. But then what are we to make of the use of lots to distribute the land to individual clans?

Now, we understand that free will is not supposed to affect the drawing of lots, that human hands are not to influence their outcomes. But why did God stop short of visibly distributing Divine good will, or not, to individuals? What is the point of this ambiguity? We just suffered terrible consequences for not fully trusting the will of God. Is the pagan idea of luck now being re-introduced? Has God truly lifted Her hand off the throttle a bit, and is the Divine as curious as we are about who gets the grazing land closest to the water? Or are we being fooled into believing luck plays some role in our fortunes while outcomes are already destined? Does Divine whim, not equity, hide in chance? And how does this ambiguity affect our trust?

We have a problem. The Divine's message in our parshah's opening chapters seems to be, "do as I say, not as I do;" in other words, try to intellectually catch the intent of God's message without being carried away by the intensity of Divine passions. The second section, devoted to the census, initially reiterates the message, saying, "use your head, fairness is in the numbers." But the introduction of lots allows perceptions of Divine inequity or disinterest to enter our spiritual space. Outcomes of Torah's lofty ideals then float between Divine and human control. Consequently, a potential breach opens between the promised happiness of a just society and individual feelings about its rewards. In other words, while our spiritual space may be bounded by intellect and intended devotion, its interior space becomes strewn with emotional obstacles to whole-hearted faith. How are these obstacles to be addressed?

In the closing chapters of our parshah the Divine appears to once again harness our disturbing thoughts, binding them up this time in detailed rituals for the expiation of sins. We understand that these rituals do nothing to repair our damaged relationships with humanity, only those with God. It seems to me that most of these moral breaches fall into two categories, sins of hubris in which we self-righteously abuse God's authority, and sins of disbelief in which our actions reflect doubt in God's interest in our behavior. In other words, whereas our sins against humanity are generally defined by intent—for instance did I willfully or accidentally injure my neighbor—sins against God can mostly be distinguished by our emotional self-awareness, our mastery of our passions.

Wisely, the Torah recognizes our need to expiate our remorse for both conscious and impulsive moral failures, but it strains to draw a boundary between the two. Thus, a ritual requiring two undifferentiated, equally nurtured goats is introduced. One, goat, representing sins of forethought, will die swiftly, in the presence of its confessors. The other goat, representing our unspoken, unheralded thoughts, will die an ignoble death, stumbling alone, unacknowledged in the wilderness. How neatly our darker motives are separated from our preferred narratives. But the goats' fates are not predetermined, rather decided at the last moment by chance, by lot. We thus ritually enact the dignity we believe self-awareness brings to our lives, but also ritualize our fears for where our

sub-conscious thoughts may take us. And, again, chance pulls at these desired, neat spiritual boundaries. Regardless of how much intellect we bring to a situation, how well thought out it is, how much we profess allegiance to its good intent, how sure are we ever of what propels us in the moment we act? How self-assured, how smug can we ever be that the Divine, and only the Divine ratifies our thoughts. After all, two ritual goats will stand on the sacrificial platform again next year and Pinchas will raise his spear.

Shabbat Shalom.