

Parshat Pinchas 5779

It has always seemed strange to me that the actual story of Pinchas begins at the end of Parshas Balak and concludes at the beginning of this week's sedra. It is not as if the sedra would have missed the beginning few pesukim as it is 168 pesukim long, the second longest sedra after Naso.

Finishing the story in Balak would also have avoided the problem of ending the sedra with the death by plague of 24,000 Bnei Yisrael. The rabbis were very concerned that public readings should not end on a sad or tragic note, which is why we frequently repeat an earlier verse to conclude, as in the case of megillot eicha and kohelet, or add in an extra passuk or two as in the case of the daily psalm for Wednesday. There are several other such instances.

The division of the sedros dates back to the tenth century. So Why did the Massorettes decide to split the sedros thus?

Rabbi Moses ben Jacob of Coucy, the author of the SMG (sefer mitzvoth gadol) who lived in the first half of the thirteenth century, suggests that the interruption comes to teach us that we do not rush to approve the acts of a zealot, which may appear criminal.

We are told that Pinchas's act in slaying Zimri and the Midianite princess, was only allowable because it took place at the exact time of the transgression; if Pinchas had done it sooner or post facto, he would have been liable himself for the sin of murder. Furthermore, another person present would have acted correctly were they to have killed Pinchas to prevent him from killing the couple.

Says Moses ben Jacob, G-d waited before rewarding Pinchas as the Bnei Yisrael suspected his motives and it was only after time that they came to realise that his actions were genuinely motivated for the general good.

Rav Joseph Pearlman in the name of Rav Ordman expanded the theme. Kannaos – zealotry, can be a dangerous thing and needs careful deliberation to ascertain whether the action was one deserving of praise or whether it was an act of arrogance. So the Torah put the reward for the act in a different sedra to teach us that we have to wait sometimes before judging motives. Do not reward people until you are sure they are not motivated by fanaticism.

Rav Pearlman then brings an opinion that states that in any case of emergency or emotive action, a cooling off period is necessary to assess the effect; and he brings two examples to prove his point.

The first is the case of Dama ben Nesina (Kiddushin 31a), a non-Jew who lived in Ashkelon and was approached by the Rabbis to buy a precious jewel he owned, to replace one that had been lost from the breastplate of the Cohen Gadol. They were prepared to pay 600,000 gold coins. Although he was willing to sell, Dama would not disturb his father who was sleeping with the gem under his pillow and the purchase fell through.

The following year G-d rewarded him in that a red heifer was born in his herd – a rare event and obviously precious to the Rabbis who came to buy it from him. Although Dama knew he could ask whatever price he wanted for it, he only requested the amount he had lost on the deal for the gem.

The second example is the story of Chanukah. The festival with Hallel was not instituted until the following year after the actual episode.

The question in the first case is, why was the reward delayed and in the second, why was a Yom Tov not immediately proclaimed. In both these cases and in the instance of Pinchas, the answer is the same. The events had to be assessed to see if they had permanence and durability or whether they were just momentary occurrences of no significance.

Only when it had been established that Dama ben Nesina was consistently showing such respect to his father was he rewarded; Only when it became clear that the Chashmanaim were motivated by spiritual and lofty ideals was it fitting to proclaim a festival; and only when it was certain that Pinchas's motives were pure could he be rewarded with the covenant of peace and that is the significance of the break in the story.

Another theory brought by Rav Pearlman in the name of his brother-in-law, is that Chazal wanted to call a sedra after Pinchas and perforce his name would have to feature in the opening passuk or two. Were the sedra of Pinchas not to commence here it would have to begin either at the start of the story in Balak, but that would mean commencing the sedra with the distasteful behaviour of the Bnei Yisrael; or the only other possibility is Chapter 25 verse 7, But there is no open (pesucha) or closed (stumah) paragraph to end the sedra before and start a new one. So they were left with no option other than to start here to get Pinchas' name as the name of the sedra.