

Parashat Pinchas 5778

Last Shabbat was the 17th of *Tammuz*, which was observed as a fast day on Sunday. The Fast of *Tammuz* ushers in a period known as “*bein ham'tzarim*,” “between the sorrows, or between the straights. We are now within the three weeks of mourning commemorating the destruction of the first and second Beit Mikdash and the subsequent exiles of our ancestors from the Land of Israel, which according to tradition occurred on the 9th of Av.

The breaching of walls is serious business, and even today, Jews understand these three weeks as a time for living “in the breach,” if you will. Our tradition asks us to feel like we are starting to break. We let our defenses down and stare into the void, because this is when the internal work of preparing for High Holy Days begins. We bring ourselves to the brink of exile, we stand over the abyss, and reflect.

The Pinchas character in today's *parashah* offers a way into that process. At the beginning of today's *parashah*, upwards of 24,000 Israelites have been killed in a plague brought by God, as punishment for rampant idol worship brought on by sexual intermingling with Moabite and/or--probably and--Midianite women. In order to end the plague, the Israelite officials have been ordered, at the end of last week's *parashah*-- to kill any man who worships the pagan god, Baal. Straightaway, an Israelite man, Zimri, brings home a Midianite woman named Cozbi. Pinchas strides into Zimri's tent and kills the two of them as they lie together. As a result of that slaying, God lifts the plague, and today's *parashah* opens with God extolling Pinchas, saying:

“Pinchas has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by showing them his passion for me, and as a result, I did not wipe them all out.” God goes on to make a *B'rit Shalom*, a covenant of friendship with Pinchas. God will protect him and his descendants from vengeance over the slayings of Zimri and Cozbi, and Pinchas and his descendants will become the High Priests for all time.

Although the *Talmud Yerushalmi* and some modern commentators are less enthused about a person whose righteous anger causes him to kill other human beings, most writings, from Psalms to Ezra, Ben Sira, Maccabees, Josephus, Philo, and the classical commentators see Pinchas as a role

model of moral courage for taking action against wrongdoing. It appears self-evident to them that Pinchas has done the right thing; after all, his action saves the Israelites from extinction, and his reward demonstrates God's approval.

I find myself uncomfortably ambivalent about what Pinchas did. It's not just that I have trouble identifying with someone who spears two lovers to death, or with the idea of human beings being commanded to kill in order to cool God's destructive wrath. What gets under my skin right now, three days after the 4th of July in the United States of America in 2018, at this time of breaching of walls, when families seeking asylum in this great country are wrenched apart--what gets under my skin is the tension between wanting to reject zealotry and my own struggle to remember what it feels like to exercise my holy chutzpah--my moral outrage-- with hopes of making a difference.

Rabbi Shlomo ben Elazar Rokeach of Belz (1779-1855) taught: There are three types of exiles, and they are of increasing severity: the first is when Jews are in exile among other nations. The second is when Jews are in exile among other Jews. And the third and most severe is when a Jew is alien to himself or herself, for then he or she is both captor and captive." With the imminent exile of the Jewish people as an historical backdrop, this is a time for us to see how we hold our own selves captive by not exercising the full power of our humanity as responsible, Jewish world citizens. We exile our souls when we lose sight of how we are meant to live in this world as moral human beings and as Jews.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel taught: "Who is a Jew?--A person whose integrity decays when unmoved by the knowledge of wrong done to other people. And he also said: The more deeply immersed I became in the thinking of the prophets, the more powerfully it became clear to me ...that morally speaking, there is no limit to the concern one must feel for the suffering of human beings, that indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, that in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible.

You will never hear me speak from a partisan perspective because, for better or worse, I have never been partisan. Remaining silent at this time could also be interpreted as a political move. I am speaking to you as your rabbi from what I believe is a human and deeply Jewish perspective, and

what I want to say is that as I peer into that void between the ideals of the Jewish People and the reality of life on the Mexican border of this beautiful country, I see morality hanging in the breach, and I cannot help but feel that part of me is suspended there, too.

Regardless of our views regarding immigration, separating families and detaining children apart from their parents fits squarely into the Jewish notion of wronging others. No fewer than 36 times--double *chai*--does the Torah command us to care for the disenfranchised--the widow, the orphan, the stranger in our midst. "Do not wrong or oppress the stranger, *ki geirim heyitem b'erezt mitzrayim*"--because you've been there. We carry a legacy of "otherness" in our *kishkes* and we are commanded never to put others in that position. From a Jewish perspective it is morally reprehensible to terrorize families and traumatize children as a way to deter immigration.

Consider this midrash from the *Yalkut Shimoni*: God gathered the dust [of the first human] from the four corners of the world...Why from the four corners of the earth? So that if one comes from the east to the west and arrives at the end of his life, as he nears departing from the world, it will not be said to him, 'This land is not the dust of your body, it's of mine. Go back to where you were created.'" Rather, every place that a person walks, from there she was created and from there she will return." (Remez, Parshat Bereshit, ch. 1, 13).

We, and our earth, all come from the same dust.

I have always loved this country, and that is why, with pictures of terrified children in my mind, of a three year old climbing on the courtroom table of the attorney representing him, of a child with Down Syndrome taken from her mother and incomprehensibly locked in a detention center, I found celebrating Independence Day deeply disturbing this year.

It is so easy not to think much about people we do not know, especially those who don't look or talk like us. We breach the walls of our humanity without realizing it until we find ourselves or people we know marching in the streets because enough people have come together to say "this has gone too far and we no longer can ignore it."

Maybe you see the current immigration situation differently. If so, then what is kicking up your moral outrage? What fears keep you up at night? What does the impending destruction of an ancient Temple represent for you at this time? What values and institutions do you hold dear, whose walls have been breached? Those are the questions we should be asking ourselves.

Increasingly, people tend to speak to those who already share their views. We need to speak with those who don't, and we also need to listen. The breaches in this country will continue to widen until we can let love and peace drive our rhetoric and--and this is really important--until we can begin to hear the other side.

I do not think that we should be like Pinchas. The Torah may even want to show us that we should not emulate him, by having God temper Pinchas's zealousness with the attribute of peace, in order that he may achieve a healthier inner balance, serve the nation with equanimity, and not be driven by anger, as some modern commentators suggest.

That is not to say that we don't need holy *chutzpah*. We do! Earlier this week, I had the pleasure of learning from Kathy Miner, one of our members, about an organization--they call themselves a disorganization--called the Raging Grannies. The Raging Grannies are "women of a certain age" who sing for social justice. Their protest takes the form of street theater, but make no mistake: despite silly aprons and other shtick, they are serious and they are a force. These people put their own words of protest to familiar tunes and get people woke.

Kathy told me:

"It's such a privilege to start a song that then involves 1000 people. At the Women's March we had a sea of people--there had to be thousands of people singing along. It really felt like 'this is a moment.' Sometimes you get moments when you feel like like that and they don't go anywhere---but there are *sheheheyanu* moments when I feel like "oh wow, I'm glad I got here." What a great feeling to get from being empowered by one's humanity, from turning one's moral outrage into community building and

using the human spirit as a force for good. Personally, I would rather emulate Kathy than Pinchas.

When she first told me about the Raging Grannies, Kathy quoted the Zen saying, “one does what one can.” Yes. She does.

You don’t need me to give you a list of ways to be a social activist. To Kathy’s example I will only add that coming to *shul* to pray and learn Torah together can also help, if what happens here gets inside us, reminds us of who we are, expands our spiritual consciousness, and exercises our empathy muscles. Hopefully the words we say here will grow hands and legs. As Heschel put it, “Prayer may not save us, but it can make us worthy of being saved.”

So here we are, between the straits, in the breach. This is a time to slow down, to allow ourselves to notice the cracks in our lives. Wherever you feel the breach, go there. Today is Shabbat, so be gentle. But during the next two weeks, lean in. Make time to sit uncomfortably in the space where your ideals fall short of your lived reality.

In this time between the *metzarim*, I pray for personal clarity and moral awakening. I pray that looking into that void now will help us to move ourselves, our world, and the Divine spirit toward compassion and repair.

Kein y’hi ratzon.