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Parshat Pinchas: In the Shadow of Trauma

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How long does trauma trail us? How many lifetimes must re-live the foundational wounds that shape us? What are some of the ways that traumas form and de-form the lives of those who come into contact with it? Is there a way out of inherited losses? These are some of the questions that this week's parsha subtly surfaces.

Parshat Pinchas begins in the middle of a rather disturbing tale. The very end of last week's parsha, parshat Balak, recounted the sexual and spiritual mingling of Israelite men and Moabite women in general, and one pairing in particular, with disastrous consequences:

1 While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, 2 who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. 3 So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them. 4 The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of these people, hang them and expose them in broad daylight before the Lord, so that the Lord's fierce anger may turn away from Israel." 5 So Moses said to Israel's judges, "Each of you must put to death those of your people who have yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor." 6 Then an Israelite man brought into the camp a Midianite woman right before the eyes of Moses and the whole assembly of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the tent of meeting. (Numbers 25:1-6)

א וַיָּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֵׁטִים וַיַּחַל הָעָם לְזָנוֹת
אֶל-בְּנוֹת מוֹאָב: ב וַתִּקְרְאוּן לָעָם לְזַבְחֵי
אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכְל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲוּוּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן: ג
וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּחֲרֹ-אֶף ה'
בַּיִשְׂרָאֵל: ד וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה קַח
אֶת-כָּל-רָאשֵׁי הָעָם וְהוֹקֵעַ אוֹתָם לְה' נֶגֶד
הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אַפֵּי-ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל: ה
וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרֹגוּ אִישׁ
אֶנְשֵׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר: ו וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ
מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל-אֶחָיו
אֶת-הַמִּדְיָאִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְעֵינֵי כָל-עֵדֵת
בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִמָּה בָכִים פָּתַח אֶהָל מוֹעֵד:
(במדבר כה:א-ו)

The scene is wild and orgiastic. The response of God is wrathful and brutal. The Israelite people, so blessed only moments ago in the text that they could not be cursed by the prophet Bilam, are now subject to God's curse. The idolaters must be put to death at the hands of their own leaders.

In the face of this condemnation, uncowed by the curse, one Israelite man provocatively beds a Midianite woman in public, for all to see. The Talmud tells a story not unlike Korach's, where this act challenges not God's punishment, but Moshe's own authority to execute it. Was he not married to a Midianite woman himself? (See BT Sanhedrin 82a.) This question silences Moshe and paralyzes him, leaving room for someone else to respond to this blasphemous insult.

7 Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the kohen saw this, arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand. 8 He went after the Israelite man into the chamber and drove [it through] both of them; the Israelite man, and the woman through her stomach, and the plague ceased from the children of Israel. (Num. 25: 7-8)

ז וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקָּם
מֵתוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ: ח וַיָּבֵא אַחַר
אִישׁ-יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל-הַקְּבֵה וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת-שֵׁנֵיהֶם אֶת
אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת-הָאִשָּׁה אֶל-קְבֻתָּהּ וַתִּעְצַר
הַמִּגֶּפֶה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: (במדבר כה:ז-ח)

Perhaps as a matter of family pride, perhaps motivated by some other primal passion, Pinchas, the grandson of Aharon, the great-nephew of Moshe, lifts up his spear and drives it through the offending couple.

It is on the other side of this climactic moment that our parsha actually begins.

10 The Lord said to Moses, 11 “Phinehas son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron, the priest, has turned my anger away from the Israelites. Since he was as zealous for my honor among them as I am, I did not put an end to them in my zeal. 12 Therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him ... 14 The name of the Israelite who was killed with the Midianite woman was Zimri son of Salu, the leader of a Simeonite family. 15 And the name of the Midianite woman who was put to death was Kozbi daughter of Zur, a tribal chief of a Midianite family. (Num. 25: 10-15)

י וַיִּדְבֹר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: יֵאָמְרוּ
בְּנֵי־אֱלֶעָזָר בְּנֵי־אֶהֱרֹן הַלֵּהֶן הַשִּׁיב אֶת־הַמַּתִּי
מֵעַל בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאוֹתֵי בְּתוּכֶם
וְלֹא־כִלִּיתִי אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹתֵי: יֵב לָכֵן
אָמַר הַגִּבִּי נָתַן לוֹ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹמִ: ... יֵד וְשָׁמַ
אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמִּקְהָ אֲשֶׁר הִקְהָ אֶת־הַמִּדְיָנִית
זִמְרִי בֶן־סָלוּא נְשִׂיא בִּית־אָב לְשִׁמְעוֹנִי: טו וְשָׁמַ
הָאִשָּׁה הַמִּקְהָ הַמִּדְיָנִית קְזָבִי בַת־צוּר רֹאשׁ
אֲמוֹת בֵּית־אָב בְּמִדְיָן הוּא: (במדבר כה: י-טו)

Note that the events that precipitate this divine response are originally told without naming the characters involved. The couple is identified only now, as they lay dead, as Zimri ben Salu, head of the tribe of Shimon, and Kozbi bat Zur, also of elevated status among the Midianites. It seems that while parshat Balak recounted the facts of the unfolding drama between the Israelite and Moabite nations, parshat Pinchas, with its use of names, testifies to an altogether different drama--one internal to the Jewish story, that began generations ago, and that involves these very same Israelite tribes of Shimon (Zimri) and Levi (Pinchas). In a fine marriage of form and content, parshat Pinchas starts in the middle of a story, and then localizes it, to announce that Pinchas's tale is just that: a personalized unit in the midst of a much, much larger story. In so doing it asks us to consider just how long generational narratives live, and in what forms.

The pairing of Shimon and Levi, sons of Leah and Yaacov, dates back most famously to their intensely violent outburst, in Genesis 34, in response to the rape of their sister Dinah by Shechem son of Chamor. Traumatized once by the shaming of their family member, and arguably again by their father's silence in its wake, they take premeditated revenge against Shechem's hometown, killing all of its men (while they lay vulnerable post-circumcision) and plundering all of their wares.

25 Three days later, while all of them were still in pain, two of Jacob's sons, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and attacked the unsuspecting city, killing every male. 26 They put Hamor and his son Shechem to the sword and took Dinah from Shechem's house and left. 27 The sons of Jacob came upon the dead bodies and looted the city where their sister had been defiled. 28 They seized their flocks and herds and donkeys and everything else of theirs in the city and out in the fields. 29 They carried off all their wealth and all their women and children, taking as plunder everything in the houses. (Genesis 34:25-29)

כֹּה וַיְהִי בַיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי בְּהִיוֹתָם לְאָבִים וַיִּקְחוּ
שְׁנֵי־בְנֵי־יַעֲקֹב שְׁמֹעוֹן וְלֵוִי אֶחָי דִּינָה אִישׁ חֶרְבֹּ
וַיָּבֹאוּ עַל־הָעִיר בְּטַח וַיַּהַרְגוּ כָּל־זָכָר: כו
וְאֶת־חַמּוֹר וְאֶת־שָׁכֶם בְּנוֹ הָרָגוּ לְפִי־חֶרֶב וַיִּקְחוּ
אֶת־דִּינָה מִבֵּית שָׁכֶם וַיֵּצְאוּ: כז בְּנֵי יַעֲקֹב בָּאוּ
עַל־הַחֲלָלִים וַיִּבְזּוּ הָעִיר אֲשֶׁר טָמְאוּ אַחֲוָתָם: כח
אֶת־צֹאנָם וְאֶת־בְּקָרָם וְאֶת־חֲמֹרֵיהֶם וְאֶת
אֲשֶׁר־בְּעִיר וְאֶת־אֲשֶׁר בַּשָּׂדֶה לָקְחוּ: כט
וְאֶת־כָּל־חֵילָם וְאֶת־כָּל־טָפְסָם וְאֶת־נְשֵׂיהֶם שָׁבוּ
וַיִּבְזּוּ וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר בַּבַּיִת: (בראשית לד:כה-כט)

Full of seething rage, these brothers unleash massive destruction on the perceived aggressors and their allies. The response of Shimon and Levi to trauma is to enact a trauma on others. Shaming must yield shaming. Aggression must yield aggression.

In disgust, Yaacov condemns their actions immediately and he later curses them for all time. On his deathbed, rather than offer them a blessing, as he does his other children, he castigates them:

5 Simeon and Levi are brethren; weapons of violence their kinship. 6 Let my soul not come into their council; unto their assembly let my glory not be united; for in their anger they slew men, and in their self-will they houghed oxen. 7 Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel; I will divide them in Jacob, and scatter them in Israel. (Gen. 49:5-7)

ה שמעון וְלֵוִי אֶחָיִים כָּלִי חֲמֵס מִכֹּחֵיהֶם: וּבְסוּדָם אֶל-תְּבֹא נַפְשִׁי בְקִהְלָם אֶל-תַּחַד כְּבֹדִי כִּי בְאַפָם הִרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרִצְנָם עָקְרוּ-שׁוֹר: ז אָרוּר אָפָם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קָשְׁתָה אַחֲלָקָם בְּיַעֲקֹב וּפְיָצִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל: (בראשית מט:ה-ז)

There is no redemption to be had for these two, and no stability to be found. They and their progeny are to be doomed to lives of landlessness on account of their vicious lawlessness. Some sins, it seems, are destined to accompany generations to come.

And some have seeds that are laid in generations prior. Consider the circumstances of these boys' births. Their mother was only accidentally married to Yaacov and was unloved by him. The arrival of their first children marked not a deepening of their bond, but a widening divide between them. Each one was an occasion for Leah to reflect on the devastation of her circumstances, to air her disappointments just a bit more.

31 When the Lord saw that Leah was not loved, he enabled her to conceive, but Rachel remained childless. 32 Leah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. She named him Reuben, for she said, "It is because the Lord has seen my misery. Surely my husband will love me now." 33 She conceived again, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Because the Lord heard that I am not loved, he gave me this one too." So she named him Simeon. 34 Again she conceived, and when she gave birth to a son she said, "Now at last my husband will become attached to me, because I have borne him three sons." So he was named Levi. (Gen. 29: 31-34)

לֹא וַיֵּרָא ה' כִּי-שָׁנוּאָה לְאֵהָ וַיִּפְתַּח-אֶת-רַחְמָהּ וַיַּחַל עֲקָרָהּ: לֵב וַתֵּהָרֵא לְאֵהָ וַתֵּלֵד בֵּן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ רְאוּבֵן כִּי אָמְרָה כִּי-רָאָה ה' בְּעַנְיִי כִּי עָתָה יֶאֱהַבֵנִי אִישִׁי: לֵג וַתֵּהָרֵא עוֹד וַתֵּלֵד בֵּן וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי-שָׁמְעָה כִּי-שָׁנוּאָה אֲנֹכִי וַיִּתֵּן-לִי גַם-אֶת-זֶה וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ שִׁמְעוֹן: לַד וַתֵּהָרֵא עוֹד וַתֵּלֵד בֵּן וַתֹּאמֶר עָתָה הִפְעַם יִלְוֶה אִישִׁי אֵלַי כִּי-יִלְדֵתִי לוֹ שְׁלֹשָׁה בָּנִים עַל-כֵּן קָרָא שְׁמוֹ לְוִי: (בראשית פרק כט:לא-לד)

Leaving Reuven aside for now, both Shimon and Levi were clearly born into anger and resentment. Shimon was literally a mark of his mother's hated condition. Levi indicated a slight hope that that condition might lift, but it is from a very sad and pathetic station that that aspiration rises. In their very names, these boys carried the weight of their mother's tears, her foundational trauma of being dishonestly "acquired," of being humiliated and unloved. When the next woman in their lives, their sister, experiences some similar tropes, is it that surprising that they react with such emotion? The memory of a wounded woman is etched deeply into their psyches, and it gnaws at them and animates them.

Let us return now to the story of our parsha. We begin in the middle because we readers are in the middle of a very long saga detailing the lives of Shimon and Levi. So many years after their birth into hatred; and their untamed expression of hatred against Chamor and his people; and Yaacov's condemnation of their hateful ways, Shimon and Levi meet again. Only this time their paths diverge. This time their legacy of trauma and concomitant resentment yields two different responses.

Zimri, head of the house of Shimon, reenacts the early trauma of sexual impulsivity and immorality. Stuck in the muck of his inheritance, he repeats it. He pays it forward. Conscious of his history or not, he cannot help but violate social norms and women's bodies, in a manner that echoes back to the ordeal of his ancestor Dinah. That is, after all, what it means to be of the lineage of Shimon, the hated one.



Pinchas, however, of the house of Levi, deploys a different tactic as he mediates his inheritance: sublimation. He is still full of violent energy. He still brandishes a sword. But he does so not to create chaos, but to restore order; not to aggrandize himself, but to aggrandize God. He transmutes trauma into a certain kind of piety and for this he is rewarded.

The reward is telling though. God offers Pinchas a "brit shalom," "a covenant of peace" (Num. 25:12). While many commentators view this as measure-for-measure compensation--Pinchas restored peace, so God promises him peace--a convincing minority view it instead as an aspiration. (See HaEmek Davar on Num. 25:12, for example). In other words, Pinchas, inheritor of the fiery legacy of Levi, must be given what he does not yet have. He needs to be tamed, quieted, spiritualized. His journey toward sublimation is hardly complete. His traumatic roots still need to find healthful expression not in violence for the sake of God, but in non-violence, in shalom.

The development of the tribe of Levi in this regard has a long history that continues in the Torah and in the midrashic imagination (particularly in the character of Eliyahu), but we shall stop here. For like parshat Pinchas itself, we can only tell a slice of a story at a time, but what a slice this is. This iteration of the encounter between Shimon and Levi tells us so very much about the stubborn staying-power of trauma and about its potential to be slowly, carefully, sometimes gradually, sometimes violently, undone. The possibility of a "brit shalom" means that, even after generations of woundedness, healing might yet come.



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