

Parshat Pinchas

“Light Through the Darkness of Transition”

Rabba Claudia Marbach - Class of 2018

Subversive attacks, plagues, extrajudicial executions, an unusual peace deal, a census — sound familiar? What do we make of Parashat Pinchas this year? It feels raw, too close to the bone. We live in a time of upheaval and transition. Bnei Yisrael, too, in this parasha, were at a point of transition between the generation who left Egypt and those born in the desert. Life in the desert was characterized by dependence upon God, while life in the Land of Israel would be a more independent existence, with less day to day contact with God.

The Netziv (19th Century Lithuania), in his Torah commentary on Bamidbar, says that transformation is the theme of the whole book. The people who left Egypt had the experience of the immediacy of God’s revelation. “Not so for those entering the Land of Israel; as for them the Divine Providence was concealed. Only one searching with a piercing eye could perceive [God’s providence] similar to ... walking in pitch darkness. Sometimes, however, the Divine Providence was apparent to all, similar to how the [fleeting] glow of light punctuates the night’s darkness.”

Transitions often feel like walking in the dark. We try different ways to move forward and see which work. Sometimes we go smoothly and sometimes we lurch. Three stories in our parasha shed light on the movement forward: Pinchas acting in the face of Moshe’s inability to act, the Daughters of Zelophchad serving as thought changers, and Moshe transferring leadership and power to Yehoshua.

Pinchas himself lurches forward. In last week’s parasha, Pinchas killed Zimri ben Salu and Kazbi bat Tzur, the woman with whom Zimri was consorting right in front of the Mishkan. Judge, jury and executioner in one fell swoop in front of the leadership, who seemed paralysed at that moment — in the dark. The plague ends with his action and everyone holds their breath. Is this the way to the next generation? Are we not a people of laws with a criminal code, with witnesses and warnings, developed just to prevent such extrajudicial killings?

In response, God decrees that Pinchas has done God’s work and saved Bnei Yisrael, in this case only. But how can we move on from this act of violence in the name of God? Instead of violence, God offers the legacy of Pinchas’ grandfather Aharon, the man known to all as the *אוהב שלום ורודף שלום* — the lover of peace and the pursuer of peace. God gives Pinchas a *brit shalom*. A *brit* — a covenant or a reminder, like the rainbow after the Flood. This will not, must not, happen again. Be on guard. From now on be a man of peace. If you are going to be a *rodef*, be a *rodef* of peace, not violence. Don’t be like your ancestor Levi, who slaughtered an entire city in anger and revenge. Rather, walk in the footsteps of your grandfather Aharon. To the Jewish people, God was saying, the future is not through violence. Make the transition.

The midrash Yalkut Shimoni (Torah, 771) says that Pinchas never dies but rather becomes Eliyahu, the person who witnesses every brit milah and Pesach seder and who shows up when we need him the most. He is also given a *בְּרִית כְּהֵנֶת עוֹלָם*, a pact of eternal priesthood. The job of the *Kohanim* is to be the facilitators of atonement. The leadership of Pinchas in the time of transition was to be witness to, and to atone for, revenge and violence. One way through the transition is to be a witness.

B’not Zelophchad, too, are part of the transition. They approach the leaders at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. A brave act. They said (Bamidbar 27:4):

לֵמָּה יִגְרַע שֵׁם־אָבִינוּ מִתּוֹךְ מִשְׁפַּחְתּוֹ כִּי אֵין לוֹ בֶן תִּנְהַלְנוּ אַחֲזָה בְּתוֹךְ אַחֵי אָבִינוּ.
“Let not our father’s name be lost to his clan just because he had no son!”

Count us, the daughters, as part of the Jewish people. The Gemara (Bava Batra 119b) situates this discussion not at the Mishkan, but in the Beit Midrash. The *shiur* (lecture) that day was about the laws of *yibbum* (levirate marriages). The daughters of Zelophchad inferred that the law was in their favor and raised their question to Moshe. This *aggadeta* changes B'not Zelophchad from land claimants to thought leaders. From impetuous demanders of fairness to *talmidot chachamot* who reason deliberately, from within the tradition. Another way through transition is through education and innovation in law and culture.

The last act of transition in our parasha is Moshe's ascent to הַר הָעֵבְרִים, literally the mountain of passing over or transitioning — to look at the Land, but not to enter. Moshe's focus is not personal, but on the quality of future leadership. Moshe worries that his flock will have no shepherd despite knowing that Yehoshua will take over. Moshe calls God אֱ-לֹהֵי הָרוּחַ לְכָל-בָּשָׂר ("God, source of the breath of all flesh") (Bamidbar 27:16). Why this unique name? Rashi quotes the Midrash Tanchuma:

He said to Him: 'The personality of each person is revealed to You, and no two are alike. Appoint over them a leader who will tolerate each person according to his individual character.'

Transition needs leadership that can see each individual person.

We have just entered the period of the Three Weeks or *Bein haMetzarim*, the time of narrow straits. Let us use this time to think about how we navigate this time of transition which has no road map. Let us try to find light in the darkness through working towards peace, through witnessing history, through changing culture, and through valuing each individual. Let us help see God's light even when God seems hidden.



Rabba Claudia Marbach received semikha from Maharat in 2018. Rabba Claudia is the director of Teen Beit Midrash, a pluralistic and inclusive place for teens to explore their identity and deepen their knowledge through the serious study of Talmud. She also runs a pop-up beit midrash for women in Boston called One Night Shtender, and co-runs a partnership minyan called Yedid Nefesh in Newton, MA. Rabba Claudia served as a middle school teacher at JCDS Boston, a pluralistic Jewish Day School, for fifteen years, where she developed the Rabbinics curriculum, and taught tefillah and moral dilemmas. Rabba Claudia received her AB in English from Barnard College, and JD from Boston University. She studied at Michlala, Drisha and Pardes.