

Pinchas 20 - "It's Not So Bad"

Good Shabbos. Shabbat Shalom, First, I'd like to thank everyone who has attended our restarted weekday morning minyan. I know it has not been easy, and these are just baby steps, but we're very grateful that we can resume some activities in person. Our reopening will continue in stages, and the next stage will probably wait until Philadelphia has entered the full green phase.

When I think about our reopening in stages, it brings to mind the way the narrative about Pinchas is presented in 2 parts. At the end of last week's parsha, we are introduced to this new story in which Pinchas kills the Jewish prince Zimri and the Midianite princess Kozbi, who engaged in illicit activity in public, but then the narrative ends abruptly. We're left in suspense about what will happen to Pinchas after his act of zealotry. We don't learn about God's verdict and reward of Pinchas until this week's Parsha. Why is the story of Pinchas split up? Why not just tell the entire story in this week's parsha, which after all, is entitled *Pinchas*?

I think we can find the answer by considering the fast day of Tammuz that we just observed, a day which begins the period known as *Bein Hametzarim or the 3 weeks*.

The primary cause for commemoration of this date is that at the end of the second temple era, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem. While this episode ultimately led to the destruction of the Beit Hamikdash, it is difficult to understand why we hold a fast for an incident that was only one step toward that tragic event.

It's intriguing that the Mishna in Mesechet Ta'anit identifies the original event that occurred on Shiva asar b'tamuz as *nishtabru haluchot, the tablets of the ten commandments were shattered*. The Mishna makes no mention of the tragic episode that caused Moshe to shatter the tablets - the infamous sin of the golden calf. Why was that part of the story omitted from the description?

The Sefer HaKuzari, in his discussion about idolatry, explains that the Golden Calf was not actually idol worship. The people were trying to replace Moshe; they tried to create an intermediary between the Jews and God. This is why the command for the Mishkan was given at that time, because it served as a legal intermediary between the Jewish people and God and in that way replaced the egel.

Certainly, the golden calf was not an admirable event, but it was understandable – the people were immature and needed a buffer between them and God – whether it be Moshe, the mishkan or the egel hazahav. From this point of view, the egel was not such a terrible mistake.

However, I think the Torah is teaching that it's precisely that kind of reasoning which poses a problem. Although the golden calf was not so serious in and of itself, it **was** the catalyst for an indisputably tragic event, the breaking of the Luchot, which uniquely represented the relationship between the Jewish people and God. The ultimate outcome of the egel is a vivid example of how dangerous it can be to rationalize “tolerable” negative behavior and ignore its longer-term consequences.

Similarly, the breach of Jerusalem warrants its own fast day because it ultimately led to the downfall of Jerusalem and Israel. Shiva asar b'Tamuz reminds us of the slippery slope we face if we glibly discount harmful events that seem relatively minor.

This message is also essential to the story of Pinchas. Even though there was a plague which ended when he killed the couple, and their behavior was clearly abhorrent, the Sages tell us that the Jewish people relied on technicalities and rationalization to argue that Pinchas' zealotry was unwarranted, to the extent that they wanted to kill him in response for daring to murder the pair. It would seem obvious from an outsider's perspective that God would decide Pinchas was right, but it is telling how rationalization of the brazen illicit act blinded the Jews at the time to blatantly bad behavior.

I think **that** is why we split up the story – the parsha structure encourages us to pause and think while we wait for the dramatic denouement (day Noo Mah), to recreate the emotional turmoil that surrounded that event and the level of rationalization it took to vilify Pinchas' act of valor. *What the couple did was not so bad that they deserved to die at the hands of a zealot - we need to be tolerant of this behavior.*

This brings to mind the Mishna in Pirkei Avot 4:2, which cautions *aveira goreret aveira, one sin begets another sin*. The message here is not simply that a sin could lead to another sin; the message is that even a **small** transgression that is “not so bad” can create a domino effect, leading to dire consequences.

As many of you know, I’m a big proponent of leniencies in halacha, but I think there are 2 very different approaches to accepting leniencies. The difference between the two approaches is **not** the specific type of leniency, but rather, the **motivation** behind it.

One approach is that in this day and age, we have a multitude of important responsibilities, for example, to our family and career, and oftentimes these burdens cause us to feel overwhelmed. In that case, we should not feel compelled to make an artificial distinction between religion on the one hand, and our so-called regular life on the other. Torah and our life are one and the same. If we allow stringent religious practices to get in the way of priorities in other spheres of life, then religion becomes in a sense anti-life. It is very appropriate to rely on legitimate leniencies in order to carry out other critical responsibilities in our lives.

The second approach is simply based on the attitude that *I'll do the minimum*. The only question is, *what can I get away with?* But even though we rationalize that certain objectionable behaviors are not egregious, we must realize that they can lead down a path of increasing desensitization. We may ultimately find ourselves violating principles in a way we never thought we were capable of.

And I think we should take this lesson to heart, as we proceed through the time of *Bein Hametzarim*, the 3-weeks period on the Jewish calendar, particularly during this time of Covid. There are many legitimate reasons why we can't practice rituals and Torah study right now in the way that's ideal. But our attitude should not be that we're relieved we can get away with less. Instead, we should remind ourselves that the reason we're changing our level of practice is that circumstances require it.

With that kind of honest appraisal, we can feel confident that we are doing our very best, and that our commitment to God and Torah, as well as the commitment to our individual lives and responsibilities, remain undiminished. Shabbat shalom.