

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Pinchas
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Pinchas – The power of consistency

In this week's Parsha of Pinchas, we read about a number of events. Let's explore two of them.

Event 1 – Pinchas' reward

At the end of last week's Parsha, Bnei Yisrael were in trouble. After failing miserably in his attempt to curse Bnei Yisrael, Bilaam advised Balak how he could succeed with his wicked plans. He told Balak that Hashem despises immorality. Balak therefore sent Midianite and Moabite women to entice the Jewish men and convince them to worship idols. The plan worked. 24,000 members of Bnei Yisrael died in a plague as Divine retribution for their sins of immorality and idol worship. Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, took Cozbi, a Midianite princess, into his tent in full view of all the people. Everyone, including Moshe himself, was powerless to stop him. There was weeping in the camp. It was a tragic time.

Pinchas came to the rescue. He took a spear in his hand, marched into Zimri's tent, and killed both Zimri and Cozbi. Zimri was the prince of the tribe of Shimon but Pinchas didn't care that the tribe of Shimon might take revenge. Pinchas was zealous for Hashem's honour and wanted to put an end to the terrible sinning. Pinchas' bravery and zealous defence of Hashem caused the plague to stop.

In the beginning of this week's Parsha Hashem rewards Pinchas for his brave act. He is given a “covenant of peace” and elevated to the status of Kohen.

Event 2 – The appointment of Moshe's successor

Hashem reminds Moshe that he will not be allowed to enter the Land of Israel. Instead, Moshe is told that he will be able to see the Land from the top of the mountain before he dies. The quintessential leader, Moshe is concerned about Bnei Yisrael and who will lead them after Moshe's death. He does not want the assembly of Hashem to be like a sheep that has no shepherd.

The most common pasuk in the Torah is: “*Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe Laimor*” – “*Hashem said to Moshe saying*”. The word “Laimor” means that a response is required. In most cases, that response is that Moshe is required to pass on Hashem's word to Bnei Yisrael. Here we have the opposite pasuk: “*Vayedaber Moshe el Hashem Laimor*” – “*Moshe said to Hashem saying*” (Bamidbar 27:15). Moshe asked Hashem to appoint a leader to replace him. Rashi explains that the word “Laimor” in this context means that Moshe requested a response from Hashem. Moshe wanted to know whether Hashem would respond to his request. He could not rest until he was satisfied that the needs of the people would be met.

Based on the Midrash, Rashi¹ explains that Moshe was hoping that his own son would be appointed as leader. However, Hashem instructs Moshe that Yehoshua Bin Nun would be his successor.

The obvious question that many commentators ask is why Pinchas was not chosen to replace Moshe as leader. Pinchas had just proved himself in a very difficult situation and he single-handedly saved the people of Israel. Surely he demonstrated appropriate character traits required for a leader?

¹ Rashi to Bamidbar 27:16.

However, Rashi explains why Yehoshua was selected: “*Yehoshua deserves to be rewarded for his service, for he would not depart from the tent.*” (Rashi to Bamidbar 27:16)

This pasuk reveals that Yehoshua had the traits needed to be a leader, including consistency and loyalty. He was constantly in Moshe’s tent learning Torah (see Shmot 33:11). The Midrash teaches that Yehoshua was always the first one to arrive in the morning, to set up the benches and the last to leave at night, after he had tidied up.

Pinchas was certainly brave and valiant. His action was the right response at the right time, and he was rewarded for that. However, Hashem chose Yehoshua to be leader, with his traits of consistency and loyalty.

How can we apply this message to our own growth?

One of our most important tasks in this world is to improve our middot. We need to be the leader over our middot and not be governed by our instincts and desires. To maximise our chance of success, we should try to adopt the approach of consistency. Small, regular changes (i.e., the Yehoshua approach) have more chance of long-term success than a one-off big push (i.e., the Pinchas approach).

From Pinchas we can learn that even the negative trait of anger can be channelled into a positive action. We can use righteous anger to follow the Torah and ensure that others are not causing a chillul Hashem. Certainly, there are times when, like Pinchas, it is appropriate to make a one-off big effort. However, on the other hand, it is the traits of consistency, loyalty and stability that epitomise great leadership. As Yehoshua demonstrates, the slow and consistent approach will usually meet with more success.

It’s like the difference between studying a half hour every day for a big exam, versus cramming all of the material in the night before. The cramming approach might allow us to pass the exam, but we will probably forget most of the material as soon as we walk out of the exam room.

Let’s say that we are working on anger. A sensible and achievable goal might be as follows: “For the next month, every time that I feel angry I will try to take a deep breath and count to ten before I open my mouth”.

The Yetzer Hara is an expert on human psychology. It tries to encourage us to take on much bigger goals. It says to us: “Why settle for such an easy goal. You’re much greater than that. Why not resolve to never get angry again! You can do it!”

When we inevitably fail to achieve such an unrealistic goal, the Yetzer Hara knows that we will become despondent and will probably give up on changing at all. In contrast, if we take on small and realistic goals and try to consistently achieve them, we can slowly and surely make real and long-lasting changes to our character. Once we accomplish each minor victory, we can raise the bar slightly and try to accomplish the next goal. Though not as quick or exciting, it has a much greater chance of lasting success. This approach can be used in all areas where we need to work on ourselves.

There is a phrase that appears in the Gemara – “Tefasta meruba lo tefasta, tefasta ketuna tefasta”. Loosely translated, this means that if you try to grab too much you will end up with nothing. If you try to take a more modest amount you will at least end up with something.

Let’s try something this week:

1. Let’s pick an area of our character that needs improvement and set ourselves small and achievable goals, and try to stick to them over time. Some psychologists have suggested that 21 days of consistent behaviour is a realistic amount of time to change habits.
2. If we do feel anger, try to channel that anger in a positive way, like Pinchas did.