

DIVREI TORAH BULLETIN

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Nach Yomi: Ruth 1

1847 Days of Captivity for Israeli MIA Gilad Shalit

We ended last week's Parsha in great discomfort amid the tragedy of a Jewish nation crying as quasi-leaders sinned publicly with Midianite women who had come into our camp at the behest of Bil'am and the Moabites. (Bamidbar 25:6.) We would have no rest from these Midianites, nor from their Moabite agitators. G-d ultimately would warn us to avoid such nations utterly – not even to wish Moabites or Ammonites well. (Devarim 23:7.) When David haMelekh nevertheless showed compassion to Chanun ben Nachash of Ammon, sending emissaries to express condolence when King Nachash died (II Shmuel 10:2), that kindness was reciprocated with hate as King Chanun ordered David's representatives humiliated by forcibly shaving off half the beards of each delegate and ripping off half their upper clothes (v. 4). War followed.

The Moabites and Ammonites stemmed from Lot. (Breishit 19:37-38.) The Midianites were our "cousins," descended directly from Avraham Avinu (Breishit 25:2) and Keturah, whom R. Yehudah identifies as Hagar, mother of Yishmael. (Breishit Rabbah 61:4; cf. Shoftim 8:24, describing Midianites as Yishmaelites.) Although Yitro, high priest of Midian, had proven himself a friend, opening his home to Moshe and even giving his daughter Tziporah to be Moshe's wife, Yitro had been unique, a theological dissident alienating his people by rejecting their avodah zarah. (Shemot Rabbah 1:32). Yitro in fact may have been deposed from his ministry, evidenced when brazen locals brutalized his daughters at the well. (Rav Avigdor Miller, A Nation Is Born, on 2:16.)

Our problems with our "cousins" among the nomadic Midianites, the Ammonites, and the Moabites continued

through the generations. In the Age of Judges, Ehud had to save us from Moav (Shoftim 3:12 ff.), Gideon was sent to save us from Midianite persecution (Shoftim 6), and Yiftach later came to save us from Ammon. (Shoftim 11.) Thus it continued through the era of the Kings: Shaul's wars with Moav and Ammon (I Shmuel 14:47), David's (II Shmuel 8:2-3, 23:20), and through the books of Kings. There was no simple accord or clever peace plan that could solve the interminable and insoluble problem that has defined Jewish destiny from time immemorial: being surrounded by nations sworn to uproot Jews from the Land of Israel.

We saw last week that standing around, crying, wringing hands, solved nothing. It never does. Still, the crying proved that most people knew right from wrong. They just did not know what to do or lacked the courage to get involved. Even Moshe Rabbeinu had been neutralized. (Shmot Rabbah 33:5) In the face of national paralysis, Pinchas emerged and, seeing catastrophe consume the camp, acted boldly. For that courage he was awarded an eternal covenant of the Kehunah. (Bamidbar 25:13).

Every generation sees leaders emerge, and every Jewish community has devoted rabbinic leaders. We all see the need for action in the face of compromised Torah values, assimilation, Jews joining flotillas to Gaza, elected Jewish representatives shamelessly parading non-Jewish wives while campaigning amid large Jewish constituencies. And we cry. Only a very few emerge as Rabbonim to lead, to devote their souls for klal Yisrael.

And yet the congregational Jewish leader's role often is difficult. Jewish history is replete with stories of Rabbonim standing alone when the hora'at sha'ah, the demand of the hour, fell on them to lead. In America, for example, an association of kosher butchers tried to run a young, newly arrived Rav Yosef Ber Soloveitchik out of Boston. And, even as many proudly stand by the rabbinic leader who fights their battle, others remain quiet, knowing he is right, grateful for his presence. But remaining silent, afraid to lose friends or business associates.

The Chofetz Chaim shares his father's parable of a merchant, about to travel the seas in search of wealth, who asks others to accompany him. None accepts except one guy. They depart, and no one hears from them again. Until one day, years later, when they both return with precious gems, wealth beyond description. From that day forward, others live with regret that they had not journeyed, too.

The Vilna Gaon brings that the Kehunah is dynastic, as is Malkhut – if dad is not a Kohen or King, you cannot be. But the crown of Torah is available to everyone. In our Parsha, G-d instructs that Moshe should begin the leadership transition by publicly transferring some of his glory to Yehoshua. The Chofetz Chaim (Bamidbar 27:20), bringing the Gemara in Baba Batra 75a, which says that Moshe's face soon was like the sun, Yehoshua's face like the moon – while the Elders of Israel lamented the shame and disgrace – explains that the disgrace was that, while individual Elders knew they never could have been like Moshe – reared in the palace, chosen uniquely to ascend Chorev and witness the burning bush, called to lead – they each could have reached Yehoshua's heights. Yehoshua had been a regular person, just as they. But he strove for greatness, attaining the face of the moon, reflecting Moshe's glory – something no one else among them had ventured to attain.

We all have a holy spirit within us. Yet Yehoshua searched deeper within his everyday roots, amplifying his spirit (Ibn Ezra on 27:18), devoting himself as a model for public and private life. Through such living, his spirit influenced others to live righteously. (Rav S.R. Hirsch, citing Hoshea 9:7)

Although some Rabbinic families are multi-generational, the American rabbinate is not dynastic. Most everyone has the opportunity to enter yeshiva, to learn in kollel, to attain Torah greatness. In Breishit 46:21 and 23, Dan numbers only one son (and very hard of hearing, at that – Sotah 13a) compared to Binyamin's ten sons. Even so, by this week's parsha (Bamidbar 26) Binyamin numbers 45,600 (v. 41) while Dan numbers 64,400 (v.43). Yesterday's numbers are not today's. Today's realities are not tomorrow's. Yeshiva doors are open to new future leaders.

R. Elazar says in R. Chanina's name that Pinchas actually had not been designated a Kohen until he killed Zimri (Zevachim 101b on 25:13). The Midrash Tanchuma adds on the pasuk that one who kills evil, as Pinchas did, is deemed as though he offered a korbon. Yet the "late-blooming" Pinchas ultimately is progenitor of the Kohen Gadol dynasty. (I Divrei HaYomim 5:30-41; RaDaK on v.27.) He merited greatness because he opted to risk life, not merely to wring hands. By acting, he brought atonement to the entire Jewish people. (25:11,13.) Sforno explains that G-d forgave everyone else because at least they did not criticize Pinchas.

He saved the nation even though, as Rav S.R. Hirsch observes (25:11-12), he was but one man, performing but one deed. As HaRav Hirsch writes, true peace comes only when we are at peace with G-d. A true peace advocate fights against the enemies of goodness and truth. Others, claiming the mantle of "peace-loving," may condemn him as "disturber of the peace." But he who, for the sake of an imagined peace, quietly leaves the field to people who really are at variance with G-d, "that man's 'love of peace' is in league with the enemies of G-d's Covenant of Peace on earth." It is the paradox of history that peace often comes only when – amid hand-wringing, a fear to speak out or to lose friends or business associates – the courageous few risk their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. For those few, the risks are great, but they are the men of spirit to whom we owe all.

Shabbat Shalom