



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Pinchas 5772

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In Jewish mystical thought, there are said to be two polar expressions of God's relationship to the world: *chessed*—loving-kindness, and *gevurah*—strength and boundaries.¹ When we emulate God's quality of *chessed*, we forge open relationships and give of ourselves. In contrast, when we emulate *gevurah*, we set boundaries, turn away from the influence of others and strengthen our convictions. While many of us see loving-kindness as the optimal trait in social justice work, *Parshat Pinchas* can teach us a crucial lesson about the importance of setting boundaries in effecting social change.

Pinchas opens in the aftermath of a scandalous event in which Israelite men sleep with women from neighboring tribes. We are told of a particular coupling between Zimri, an Israelite prince, and Cozbi, a Midianite princess. Outraged, in an act of zealotry, Pinchas kills them with a spear. God rewards Pinchas for this action with a *Brit Shalom*—a Covenant of Peace.² Thereafter, God tells Moshe that the Israelite's relationship to the Midianites must change drastically. God says:

“Attack the Midianites and strike them, for they attacked you with their craftiness, with which they were crafty with you in the matter of Pe'or, in the matter of Kozbi daughter of the leader of Midian, their sister, the one struck dead at the time of the plague in the matter of Pe'or.”³

This story is shocking: Pinchas is rewarded for murdering a pair of ostensible lovers and the Israelites are told to wage war on a nation that seeks to intermix with them. Rather than embracing *chessed* toward the nation, God tells the Israelites to display *gevurah*: close their borders, set boundaries and cleave to sameness. What is especially puzzling is that this attitude is so different from other encounters with Midian in the Bible. In the Book of Exodus, Moses marries a Midianite—Zipporah—and welcomes her father Jethro, a Midianite Priest, into the camp as an adviser.

The text offers us clues as to why previous relationships were welcomed with *chessed* while this particular encounter requires a harsh display of *gevurah*. First, Cozbi and Zimri are described as a nameless man and woman who are cohabiting in the camp; only in the postscript to the story are their names revealed. The anonymity points to the impersonal quality of their relationship. Moreover, the word used to describe the sexual encounter here is *liznot*, from the Hebrew root *zayin-nun-hey*, which implies prostitution.⁴ Translator Everett Fox comments that this root is used interchangeably in the Bible for prostitution and idol-worship.⁵ The medieval commentator Rashi,⁶ observing the double mention of the word *pe'or* in God's command, comments that the Midianites prostituted their daughters in order to mislead the Israelites into worshipping their god, Ba'al-Pe'or.⁷

¹ Michaelson, J. *God in Your Body: Kabbalah, Mindfulness and Embodied Spiritual Practice*. (Woodstock: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2007)

² Numbers 25:12

³ Numbers 25: 16-18. Translation by Everett Fox

⁴ Numbers, 25: 1

⁵ Everett-Fox, *The Five Books of Moses: A New Translation with Introductions, Commentary and Notes* (New York, Schocken Books, 1995) p. 783.

⁶ Rashi, Numbers 25: 18

⁷ According to Robert Alter, Ba'al was one of the most significant gods in the region. In this case, he is Ba'al of the place Pe'or. Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (New York and London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004)

According to this read of the text, the Midianites are seducing the Israelites not for connection but for ownership, not for relationship but for ideological conquest—to undermine the Israelites’ core value: Monotheism. Perhaps this is why God describes the Midianites’ actions as a “crafty attack” and insists that this is a time for asserting boundaries—not for openness and *chessed*.

While this *parashah* takes the principle of *gevurah* to the extreme, there is a lesson to be learned about relationships that applies to the work of social justice today. There are relationships motivated by *chessed* and others motivated by self-interest, and it is important to recognize the difference and set boundaries against the latter.

One example of how *chessed* and self-interest have become blurred can be seen in the United States’ food aid policy. Sharing food with hungry people appears to be the consummate expression of *chessed*; however, many of the regulations that dictate U.S. food aid are primarily motivated by self-interest. Rules that restrict food aid to grain grown in the United States and shipped on American boats boost the American shipping and commercial agriculture sectors, but distributing food this way costs more and takes far longer than if the same funds were spent to purchase food locally in the developing world. Worse, pouring large amounts of free American grain into local markets can put local farmers out of business, reinforcing the cycle of dependence and poverty.

Haiti, for example, once exported rice, but free American rice sent as food aid over several decades has sunk so many Haitian farmers that the country is no longer able to grow enough rice to feed itself. Local activists such as AJWS grantee Haiti Advocacy Platform for an Alternative Development (PAPDA) have chosen to act with *gevurah* and speak out against U.S. Food Aid policies that prevent Haiti from building sustainable and independent food systems.

Perhaps this is why Pinchas receives the reward of a *Brit Shalom*. *Shalom*, while commonly translated as peace, is not simply about serenity and compliance. *Shalom* comes from the Hebrew root shin, lamed, mem, meaning wholeness. *Chessed* without *gevurah* can lead to vulnerability and abuse. *Gevurah* without *chessed* can be overly harsh and punitive. Expressed in a one-sided manner, the qualities become extreme. *Shalom* requires that we fine-tune our capacities for both *chessed* and *gevurah*, drawing on them as needed. As we strive for a balance between the two, we cultivate both in ourselves and in our activism the possibility of *sheleimut*—wholeness.



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