

CONDITIONAL PEACE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Let's do a quick review of Sefer Bamidbar (Book of Numbers) from B'haloscha through Pinchus.

(B'Haloscha) Miriam and Aharon spoke Lashon Harah (slander) about Moshe and G-d confirmed Moshe as the humblest of all men and the most trusted in His home.

(Shelach) The Miraglim (spies) spoke Lashon Harah against Eretz Yisroel (land of Israel) and the generation of the Exodus was consigned to die in the desert.

(Korach) Korach rebelled against Moshe's divinely assigned office and was swallowed by the earth.

(Chukas) The laws of the Parah Adumah (red heifer) were recorded in the Torah followed by the deaths of Miriam and Aharon.

(Balak) Bilam failed to curse the nation but succeeded in compromising their sanctity with the daughters of Moav. G-d's aroused wrath resulted in the deaths of 24,000.

(Pinchus) Pinchus earned His Covenant of Peace for zealously killing Zimri and bringing the plague to a stop. Finally, this week's Parsha concludes by detailing the Musaf offerings for the various Yomim Tovim (holidays) during the year.

The events identified in the above review appear to be in chronological order except for the laws of Parah Adumah. Chazal tell us (Rashi, Shemos 15:25) that the laws of Parah Adumah were actually revealed to the Bnai Yisroel at the beginning of the 40 years in the desert before the giving of the Torah. However, our record of the Parah Adumah has it sandwiched between Korach's rebellion and Bilam's failed curses. According to all opinions that places it sometime after the inauguration of the Mishkan and the end of the 40 years. Why did Hashem (G-d) reserve the recording of Parah Adumah for the end of Sefer Bamidbar rather than record it earlier in the Torah?

I believe that the placement of the Parah Adumah was presented out of chronological order because it defines the essence of Sefer Bamidbar and humanities struggle with G-d's law.

When the Jews were asked if they would accept G-d's law they heroically answered, "Naaseh V'Nishmah, We will do as G-d comm attempt to understand the reason for His commandments". Their response was more than heroic it became the foundation for our relationship with G-d contrast we have often referenced Avraham Avinu's answer to Avimelech's accusation as to why he had lied about Sarah claiming that she was his sister rather than acknowledge that she was his wife. (Ber.

20:9-11) "How have I sinned against you that brought upon me and my kingdom such great sin? ...What did you see to do such a thing?" Avraham answered, "Because I said there is no fear of G-d in this place?"

Humanity, no matter how knowledgeable, intelligent, and wise is limited. Humans cannot be the final arbitrators of good and evil. Truth and falsehood cannot be a human determination. There must be criteria for right and wrong that transcends the human limits of time and space; otherwise, good and evil become as convenient as personal bias and power. However, the eternal Creator of the universe is an absolute not subject to the whims of time, circumstance, or human avarice. A society that believes in G-d and lives by His commands can be trusted to act in accordance with eternal truths of good and bad. However, a society that only depends on the value constructs of its leaders is not to be trusted. Who is to say that they won't change their minds and what was true today will be false tomorrow?

The statement, "Naaseh V'Nishmah" unambiguously proclaimed that the Jews accepted their human limitations and subjugated themselves to the absolute goodness and judiciousness of G-d's determination. In last week's Parsha the evil Bilam defined the international character of Am Yisroel as (23:9) "a nation that dwells alone and is not reckoned among the nations." As a nation we do not judge ourselves by the values of any other nation or society. The scale that determines the rights and wrongs of our lives is G- d's law, regardless of our comprehension, lack of comprehension, agreement or disagreement.

Parah Adumah is a mitzvah that the Torah presented as the quintessential Chok - decree. As the verse states, (19:2) "This is the decree of the Torah" It is a commandment that defies comprehension, yet we must nevertheless live by its limitations. It forces us to remember the courageousness of our forefathers who accepted the Torah with the words, "Naaseh V'Nishmah." "Yes, we will attempt to understand G-d's intentions; however, we humbly acknowledge that we are intellectually, emotionally, and physically limited. We proclaim for all time that we trust Hashem's determination of good and evil right and wrong to the extent that we subject ourselves and the destinies of our families and nation to His will."

In Sefer Bamidbar, G-d confirmed Moshe as the "humblest and most trustworthy of all humans" before detailing the selected account of the nation's trials and tribulations. The key to Moshe's trustworthiness was his humility. Hashem was able to trust Moshe to deliver and teach His word verbatim because Moshe had completely subjugated himself to G-d. Moshe suspended all independent action in relation to G-d. He only did that which G-d commanded him to do. Moshe became the true Man of G-d, the essential Servant of G-d. Despite Moshe's great intellect, despite Moshe's fundamental independence and courage, Moshe subjugated himself to G-d's will. Therefore, G-d could trust him. In other words, Moshe was gifted with a level of Nishmah/understanding unequal history, yet, he lived on the level of Naaseh/doing as he was told necessarily that which he understood. For Moshe all of the Torah was no different than the Parah

Adumah. Regardless of how much he knew and understood, regardless of the fact that Moshe knew and understood more than anyone else who ever lived or would ever live, Moshe accepted as an absolute truth that relative to G-d Himself Moshe knew and understood nothing. He was truly the "humblest of all humans."

The episode with Miriam, the Miraglim and Korach highlighted humility as the essential criteria for acceptance of G-d's law. Miriam, with all her good intentions and love for G-d, Moshe, and the Jewish people did not understand the level of her brother's humility. As a prophet in her own right Miriam thought that she understood what it took to be G-d's First Teacher, but she was wrong. The totality of Moshe's willful subjugation to G-d rendered him as One In All Of History.

The Spies worried that the reality they perceived during their reconnaissance of the Promised Land was different than G-d's promises to the Forefathers. Rather than rise above the reality based fears of their human perceptions and trust that G-d's promises defined reality, not the other way around, the Spies trusted their own conclusions, not G-d's. They were unwilling to function within the framework of Naaseh and therefore failed because of their limited Nishmah.

Korach challenged Moshe in the most direct way possible. He claimed that G-d's desire was for humanity to function within the realm of Nishmah, human comprehension, and not be limited to the constraints of Naaseh, doing. The Torah was given to humans so that they would struggle to unlock its secrets to the extent of their abilities. G-d could not hold them responsible for anything more than that. Korach failed because his greatest challenge was his own ego and arrogance. The fact that he disguised it behind a cloak intellectual honesty and challenge didn't fool anyone. He was arrogant in contrast to Moshe's humility. He was unwilling to accept the limitations of physicality in contrast to the divine radiance of Moshe's countenance.

Korach was punished in the most exacting way possible. Earth itself, the essence of all physicality, (Ber. 3:19 "until you which you were taken") responded in absolute obedience to t "in a new manifestation of G-d's opened its mouth and swallowed Korach alive." (16:31) The measure for a measure of Korach's punishment was that Korach who limited G-d's will to the extents of human understanding died in a manner that miraculously defied all human comprehension.

The laws of Parah Adumah and the removal of impurity associated with death underscored humility as the foundation for serving Hashem. Parah Adumah is a decree that never left the category of Naaseh. It is a Mitzvah that we can never comprehend yet we must nevertheless do as told. It is a commandment that Nishmah cannot encompass. Just as the human is limited by the inevitability of death so too is he limited by the inevitability of being human. Nishmah would suggest that we attempt to beat death back and try to live forever. It is the stuff of fantasy and fiction since time and memorial; however, death is inevitable and the limitations of human comprehension are inevitable. To serve Hashem is to trust Hashem. To trust Hashem is to be humble. To be humble is to accept and do Naaseh regardless of Nishmah.

Bilam refused to live with the limitations of Naaseh. Even though he was a prophet of extraordinary prowess, Bilam could not accept the fact that he served G-d, the Jews, and humanity - but not himself. He refused to find nobility, purpose, and fulfillment through humble service and subjugation. He refused to accept that diminution creates greatness. Instead, Bilam sought to control G-d and control His world. Chazal tell us that even as he spoke the blessings that G-d placed in his mouth his mind meant them as curses. Bilam gave in order to take whereas Am Yisroel gave in order to be. Naaseh doing is an act. Regardless of intention the action accomplishes the intent of the deed.

Bilam was punished a measure for a measure. Because he desired to not do as he was told he was forced against his will to do as he was told. Bilam hated to be controlled. Bilam hated doing for anyone else but himself. In the end G-d used him no differently than he had used Bilam's donkey, to do G-d's will regardless of Bilam's true intentions. While Bilam screamed "no" within the confines of his own skull, Bilam blessed the Jews and guaranteed their destiny as G-d's chosen children. He guaranteed that he and all the other nations could only attain purpose and fulfillment by subjugating themselves to the will of G-d as defined by the Torah and Moshe.

Pinchus (and the daughters of Tzaphchad) is the final example. Confronted by a nation gone crazy, Pinchus witnessed the desecration of G-d's name by those sworn to uphold its sanctity. The Jews had accepted the conditions of their covenant with G-d and had proclaimed that they would do G-d's law regardless of any other human limitations including intellectual, emotional, or physical. Even the great Zimri, prince of Shimon, somehow rationalized consorting with a Moabite princess. Moshe and the rest of the Sanhedrin seemed frozen. The plague raged uncontrollably taking the lives of thousands. Pinchus decided not to question, think, analyze, argue, or seek rationalization. Pinchus reacted in a fit of zealous jealousy for the sake of G-d and His glory. Immersing himself in single-minded Naaseh action, Pinchus killed Zimri and stopped the thought about it, the chances are that he would not have done so. Had Pinchus taken the time to confer, debate, argue, or defend, the chances are that thousands more would have died in the plague of G-d's wrath. Instead, Pinchus accepted that just as it was G-d's will that he not be chosen as a Kohain, so too there could not be any excuse or rationalization to justify and allow the public and private desecration of G-d's name. Instead, it was G-d's will that he be jealous for G-d's sake. Suspending all attempts at Nishmah Pinchus entered the realm of Naaseh.

His reward was G-d's Covenant of Peace. Pinchus was elevated to the status of Kohain. Peace reflects on the eternity of the Jewish people and fulfillment of G-d's promise to the Avos and Imahos. G-d promised them that they would be Kohanim to the World. G-d promised them that they would serve G-d and serve humanity. G-d promised them that their children would find blessedness in blessing others. However, their children would have to first trust Hashem and subject themselves to His omnipotent reality. Their children would have to be humble.

Pinchus proved that he was willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of truth and goodness with no thought other than serving G-d. Pinchus willingly suspended Nishmah and accomplished the

ultimate in Naaseh.

Humanness and physicality exists in the two dimensions of time and space. G-d, on the other hand, exists beyond the limitations of both time and space. The Talmud in Bava Basra describes the Aron Hakodesh (holy ark) and the Keruvim (cherubim) that adorned it as "not occupying space." The Talmud is actually stating that the physical box containing the Luchos (tablets) and the Torah as well as the golden Keruvim that adorned it, miraculously did not occupy physical space. Impossible you say! Of course it's impossible but that's the point! The Torah that we lovingly cherish and study and pride ourselves in our intellectual insights and understanding is actually a reality that defies human comprehension. Just as we cannot possibly conceive of an actual physical box constructed from wood and gold that does not occupy space, so too we must accept that our comprehension of any part of the Torah is an illusion of Nishmah that in no way modifies the enormity of the Naaseh. In essence we play at comprehension and are obligated to do so to the extents of our inescapable intellectual limitations; however, we must always remember that in the end we are merely playing.

At the end of Parshas Pinchas the Torah again presents us with a set of laws that appear to be out of place. The details of the Musaf offerings would be better served in Vayikra (Leviticus) rather than at the end of Bamidbar. Why now? The service in the Bais Hamikdash was highlighted on the holidays by the specific Musaf offerings that were unique to that holiday. Special days such as Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh, Pesach, Shavuoth, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Succos, and Shimini Atzeres, are imposed on us regardless of personal convenience or preference. The days listed at the end of Pinchas present the degree of our subjectivity to G-d's time schedule rather than our own. Just as G-d is not bound by space, "His honor fills the universe," so too He is not bound by time.

The lesson of Pinchas is that although we proclaimed, "Nishmah - we would attempt to comprehend G-d's law," it was conditional on the first proclamation, "Naaseh we will accept the limits of our mortality and sub the absolute authority of G-d's law." By accepting the conditions of Naaseh we become like Pinchas, able to do the work of bringing G-d's Covenant of Peace to the entire nation and the entire world.

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