

PARSHAS PINCHAS 5777

As is usual in most years, this week we have both Parshas Pinchas and Shivah Osor Be'Tammuz. There is much overlap thematically between the two.

Parshas Pinchas begins with a recap of what took place at the end of last week's parsha. It is an amazing chain of events. Klal Yisroel had just miraculously triumphed over the kingdoms of Sichon and Og and were encamped in the plains of Moav. They were literally at the end of the journey, re-entering civilization after 40 years of wandering in the desert. Balak, the king of Moav was nervous that he too would be overrun by Klal Yisroel and hired Bilaam to curse them. Hashem prevented this and utterly foiled Bilaam's efforts in a very clear and open way, by turning the curses into blessings.

After this episode is finished, Bilaam turns to Balak and advises that there is only one way to destroy Klal Yisroel—get them to commit immorality with your women. Klal Yisroel fell right into this trap seemingly without any resistance. It is incredible. After spending 40 years surrounded by annanei kovod, eating miraculous manna, learning Torah from Moshe Rabbeinu himself, conquering all their enemies, it seems that Klal Yisroel are at the end of the journey and are impervious to outside attack. They can only destroy themselves. It began with zenus with the daughters of Moav which led to avodo zoro.

Pinchas was a slight outcast. While Moshe stood by in silence, Pinchas invoked the halacha of kano'im pogin bo and single-handedly killed the nasi of Shevet Shimon and a princess of Moav. One could just imagine the reaction this incident would have created in the Orthodox Jewish world had it took place in our times. You would hear shrill cries of "Chillul Hashem!" and "Where is Jewish unity?" and a fierce condemnation of such fanatic, violent behavior.

But how does Hashem respond to this action of Pinchas? "I am giving him My bris of Sholom". Pinchas was the one who restored sholom and deserves to be made a kohen, whose job is to maintain sholom between Hashem and Klal Yisroel.

Then Moshe commanded Klal Yisroel to wage war against Midian who also sent their daughters to seduce Klal Yisroel and destroy us. But Midian didn't wage a physical war. It was a spiritual war. Klal Yisroel were told to wipe out Midian because they were intent on destroying us spiritually.

What does all this have to do with Shivah Osor Be'Tammuz?

It is a fast day because we mourn over the five tragedies that occurred on that day. Klal Yisroel made the Eigel Hazohov and Moshe Rabbeinu was compelled to smash the Luchos in response. It was the day our enemies broke through the walls of Yerusholayim among other events connected to the churban.

Klal Yisroel dedicate many days of the calendar commemorating the churban. Why so much emphasis? The Rambam writes that churban and tragedy only happen to the Jewish people

because of our spiritual failures. We are supposed to use these days to take stock of ourselves and evaluate our behavior and see how we are perpetuating these failures today. We need to correct these failures and do teshuvoh for them—this includes the chet ho'egel and the breach of the walls of Yerusholayim. If we did a proper teshuvoh for all the causes of these tragedies, we would have a Beis Hamikdosh today. The responsibility for the churban lies with each generation that didn't correct the underlying causes—which still exist.

Klal Yisroel has a unique mission. Out of all the nations of the world, Hashem made a bris with us 3500 years ago which we are still bound to uphold. Hashem decided that all other nations have the job of physically developing the world and expanding civilization. They live in a physical world and struggle for mastery over the physical world, and their destiny is determined by certain laws of human history. It is a very physically oriented way of life, with certain dimensions of spirituality. But essentially, their lives are materialistic, their culture is materialistic and their goals and achievements are materialistic.

There is one nation which Hashem singled out to carry a different message and pursue a different agenda. Our identity is spiritual—to be a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh—nationally and individually on every level. That happened at Har Sinai.

Hashem gave us a very difficult task of remaining a spiritual nation in the midst of a very materialistic world, surrounded by very materialistic nations and cultures. We have to be focused on the hidden reality: It is all to serve Hashem's spiritual designs for the world. All physical causation is ultimately due to Hashem running this world.

Avodo zoro is a tremendous temptation. Hashem created all kinds of forces which He uses as tools for making the physical world run according to His plan. All the forces of nature seem to run by physical laws of automatic cause-and-effect. Human beings want to feel empowered—to think that they are in control of their destiny-- and therefore try to get control of these forces that run the world. There was an understanding in the ancient world that behind the laws of nature were spiritual forces and entities that were responsible for maintaining the physical aspects of the world. Paganism was the idea that we can deal with these spiritual forces and directly manipulate them instead of confronting Hashem Who stands at the top of this hierarchy of nature. We can control the sun and the moon and rain and the weather and thereby take back control over our lives.

We believe that these spiritual forces are simply tools used by Hashem with no autonomous power of their own. All the natural forces and spiritual entities are not the address for our worship. We have to go straight to Hashem Himself. We are a spiritual nation with a spiritual destiny and this requires that we go straight to the Source. The Rambam says the mitzvah of Anochi Hashem Elokechoh is the obligation to recognize that Hashem is

the only true power in the world and there is no way to control our destiny other than doing mitzvos and avoid doing aveiros. There is no recourse to worshipping the intermediate forces.

This isn't always easy for people. They would prefer to study the laws of economics and political science and feel that they have a way of shaping world events and mastering their own destiny. Everyone wants to be in control. Hashem tells us that He is really in control. For their last year in Mitzrayim, Klal Yisroel were taken on a spiritual journey to discover the deepest truths about the nature of reality. Avodo zoro is false and there is only one force with any true power—Hashem. We have to deal directly with this Force and live our lives in response to the demands of this Force. No physical representations are allowed to be made, because this can distract us and confuse us. We live our lives on a higher level—recognizing the true reality.

At Har Sinai, we clearly understood the truth, but after Moshe left for too long and we got a little nervous about what's going to be, we reverted to our old instincts to try to feel more secure by worshipping avodo zoro. We can't go straight to Hashem. That was the cheit ho'egel.

Klal Yisroel were in the Wilderness and Bilaam looked down upon us and was inspired to utter such beautiful descriptions of Klal Yisroel's superior moral and spiritual lifestyle. He realized that being engaged in this higher level of life makes us impervious to physical attack. There is only one thing that can be done—bring them down from this lofty level.

How can one do that? It would be by trying to convince them of the power of avodo zoro? They have been in the Wilderness for forty years eating manna and drinking water from a rock and supernaturally protected from all ills and dangers. There is no way to convince them avodo zoro is going to give them more power. Bilaam realized that when people don't want to stay on such a lofty lifestyle and want to loosen their high moral standards, they find a way to rationalize it by professing belief in avodo zoro. It is only a small percentage of Klal Yisroel who succumbed to this temptation. 4%.

What is so serious about a Jewish man living with a Jewish woman to warrant such an extreme violent response of kano'im pogin bo? Why is it more grave than any of the other arayos? The Rambam says that it is because it is a violation of the essential kedushah of the Jewish male. The product of such a relationship does not have kedushas Yisroel as it otherwise would have. Taking your kedushah and desecrating it means you don't have an appreciation of your spiritual essence and your spiritual identity as a member of the mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh. This is why such a chillul Hashem demands such an immediate and violent response.

In order for Midianite and Moabite women to make 24,000 Jews forget who they were, in order to justify it, they needed to also offer belief in avodo zoro. But at the core, these women are causing Klal Yisroel to abandon that mission that Hashem singled out for Klal Yisroel to fulfill.

Churban Beis Hamikdash was about a failure to control their passion for avodo zoro. Klal Yisroel were overly influenced by the nations living among them and they caved into that desire for control over the physical world. They didn't want to live on the level where everything in the world is determined by a spiritual cheshbon of mitzvos and aveiros. They wanted to live freely and naturally with physical cause-and-effect just like everyone else. It is too much to demand to directly with Hashem. They stopped appreciating what it means to be a different nation and live by a different set of rules of causation.

What is the Bais Hamikdash? It is a place where you are confronting Hashem and only Hashem. There is a palpable hashro'as hashechinah. We connect and bring korbonos and rise above the constraints of physical space and physical laws. When you connect directly to Hashem, you enter a whole different realm above the physical. But, this demands maintaining a certain high spiritual level. And when you don't want to maintain that level, you come up with all kinds of ideologies and theories of how the world works without Hashem controlling it. This is the attraction of avodo zoro.

The novi says about the churban: "If only my head was water so that I could cry."

We mourn over the tragic events themselves, and we mourn over the tragedy of our own lack of appreciation of what we lost. The novi asks for the ability to feel the tragedy of the churban acutely enough that it brings us to genuine tears and weeping. Because the real, ongoing tragedy, is that we lost the ability to live our lives on that higher, superior level which allowed us to experience the presence of the shechinah. It's a whole different type of life.

The midrash at the beginning of Eichah tells us that Yirmiyahu was sitting and crying over the churban and a Greek philosopher walked by and proclaimed his astonishment that such an intelligent man—who gave him the deepest wisdom—could think it is worthy to cry over a destroyed building of wood and stone. Yirmiyahu responded that the deep wisdom you so cherish came from that building of wood and stone. Yirmiyahu was telling the philosopher that when there is a Beis Hamikdash, we are living our lives connected to Hashem and that gives us insight to the Torah which contains all the wisdom of the creation. Our connection to Hashem uplifts our lives, and with the churban, our ability to connect on that level and receive that deep influence is seriously diminished.

The tragic events in our history happen for a reason. They happen when Klal Yisroel do not appreciate who they are and why they are different and what their unique mission in this world is. They want to be like everyone else and connect to the physical world and control it and not deal directly with Hashem. This is what happened to the 24,000 Jews who were compromised by the benos Moav and Midian, and Pinchas could not tolerate a public display of such abandonment of kedushas Yisroel. He said he cannot allow this person to bring us down to such a low level. I don't care if this man is a nasi of an entire shevet. I don't care if this woman is a member of royalty in Midian. They are bringing us down and they are trying to destroy us.

It is worse than trying to kill us.

Chazal learn from the obligation to wage war with Midian that we can pre-emptively kill the enemy first in self-defense. Even though Midian didn't try to physically kill us, attempting to diminish our spiritual level with zenus is even more dangerous and it warrants extreme reactions.

Klal Yisroel have to do everything possible to maintain their spiritual level in order to survive history. When we try to be like everyone and lose our level, there is immediate tragedy and churban.

The message of Pinchas and tzror es hamidyonim comes together with the beginning of our mourning over the churban. The message is that if we don't take great pains to preserve our spiritual level and remember who we are, we will suffer the fate of all great physical nations and empires that have passed from the scene. We don't fit into the patterns of

general human history. We live by different rules and a different destiny. We are a different nation and the normal rules don't apply. When we keep that awareness, there is geuloh. When we forget that level, there is churban.

People often fall into the trap of focusing exclusively on the minutiae of the technical halachos of aveilus without taking a step back and asking ourselves why we are in aveilus again this year. Why haven't we done teshuvoh and brought the geuloh? Instead, we ask if we have to turn down the volume on the radio when there is a commercial playing some silly jingle. We need to focus on the roots of churban and how to

correct it. It begins by understanding who a Jew is and what Klal Yisroel is.

How can we put into practice that higher level of existence that we are bound to strive for because we made a bris with Hashem 3500 years ago at the foot of Har Sinai? It is to be a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh. How does that idea translate into my world and my daily routine? How does that color and permeate my inner life and sense of self which makes me fundamentally different than the rest of the world?

That is our task during these three weeks between Shivah Osor be'Tammuz and Tish'a B'Av.