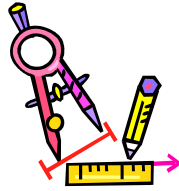


A Year of Encompassing Torah



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Parashat Pinchas

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This is how we shall accrue our mitzvah points:

**Barukh atah Adonai,
Eloheinu Melekh ha-Olam,
Asher kidishanu b'mitzvotav
v'tzivanu la'asok b'divrei torah...**

**Praised are You Adonai, our God,
The Sovereign of all worlds,
Who has made us holy with your mitzvot,
And commanded us to engage ourselves
with words of torah.**

***To be fully engaged with Torah
Is to wrestle with Torah –
To challenge our tradition while loving it,
To question it while celebrating it.***

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An Added Blessing For Spiritual Direction

*"Yihyu l'ratzon imrey fi v'higion libi
lifaneycha Hashem Tzuri v'Go'ali*

May the expressions of my mouth
and **the thoughts of my heart**
find favor before You, G-d,
my Rock and my Redeemer."



Sermon Parashat Pinchas 5768

As the summer days heat up, so do our passions, as well as our lack of patience. Our inability to tolerate certain things such as the heat and the humidity, fuels our inability to control our anger and our frustration. So it goes with Pinchas and his zealous act of piercing two individuals engaged in a wrongful act of defiance of community standards of behavior. Even though he took matters into his own hands, the community remains silent in their rebuke of what he did. Whether they agreed with the righteousness of his act, or were dumbfounded by his bravery to act in such a bold manner, is open to our interpretation. However, this is not the time for us to debate the merits of what he did. Rather, let us focus our attention on what takes place in the community immediately following his passionate act.

We are told by the Torah that a plague had taken the lives of a significant number of people, enough to warrant a new census, a new tally of how many men would be available to defend the nation when attacked. In the course of thirty-eight years there are several changes in the shift of balance between some tribes and others. Although there may be significant reasons for these individual differences over time, what concerns me on this Shabbat is the process of counting and what it enables us to do on both a communal and an individual level.

Next Shabbat we announce the beginning of the new month of Av, the month in which we remember the two Temples that once stood in Jerusalem and the exiling of her citizens into various corners of the world. In the Book of Lamentations we read how we wept by the River of Babylon, longing for the day of our return to Jerusalem and to Zion. We sing *Lekha Dodi*, the song that greets the Shabbat Bride, each *Kabbalat Shabbat* (Friday evening) with a melody that reflects our mournful mood, at times unconsolated by our grief and at other times

somewhat hopeful for the future and our longings to be reunited with our homeland. This is the path that sorrow takes whenever we mourn what was lost, believing that life cannot go on without what once was. However, we are instructed to let go of the past and stay with the present, and count upon the future to help us move forward with our emotional upheaval.

In taking a census after suffering a tragedy, we force ourselves to inventory our personal resources. Passions have a way about them to destroy and to destabilize an individual when allowed to rein without limits. Our spiritual challenge is to give our emotional outbursts room to roam but fenced into a confined space that gives them the liberty they need without causing harm to themselves nor to others. By acknowledging their presence we restrict their ability to take more control than they deserve. Rather than being destructive we harness the strength of the storm for purposes of healing our spirit. We find a way to build a fence composed of mercy, and compassion, and understanding, and tolerance to help us defend the human psyche, and to deflate our zealotry.

Another way of looking at the situation is by proclaiming that taking a census of our emotions allows us to refine the power that we possess, and to seek out ways to reinforce that which is missing in our arsenal. Certain parts of us have certainly become inflated by both the external heat as well as the heat of internal passions left unchecked. Still other parts of us have been driven away so that they have become invisible. Taking inventory allows us to restore that careful balance that we seek in our lives. And in some cases, it allows us to plant new seeds that challenge the status quo of what we have become. As the daughters of Tzelophechad have taught us in regard to the Biblical laws regarding inheritance, when a father has no sons, but has daughters, they have a right to continue their family's legacy without it passing to a distant relative or someone unrelated to them. Even Moses learns a valuable lesson regarding the limitations of his future in opposition to his expectations of entering the land promised to him and the Children of Israel. He, too, will die in the wilderness in the same way that his brother Aaron had been called unto death without completing the journey the two set out together forty years earlier.

How many of us actually realize our dreams, and see them to their fulfillment? Often, death robs us of that sense of completion. But it does not need to be that way. The Torah gives us an opportunity to stop and take a census of our lives so that we, too, can assess our strength, and determine what is in the arsenal of our personal psyches to do battle with the world that threatens our souls.

May this Shabbat become a time of personal reflection so that we can deflate the passions that are fueled by the heat or hate, and find ways to cool our emotions so that we can approach our lives with a greater sense of calm and peace.