

Torah Talk – מאמרי תורה



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Parashat Pinchas
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פרשת פנחס
כ"ד בתמוז תשע"ח

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 25:10-30:1

In this *parasha*, Hashem gives Pinchas, the grandson of Aharon, a covenant of peace; Hashem explains to Moshe the distribution of the Land of Israel to male heirs in their respective tribes; the daughters of Tzelophchad successfully petition to inherit their father's portion; and Moshe appoints Yehoshua (Joshua) as his successor.

The *parasha* opens with a continuation of the final episode from last week's *parasha*. Various members of Bnei Yisrael begin to worship the idol Baal Peor and join themselves to Moabite and Midianite partners in such worship. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon the Kohen, rises up and kills two of these participants in an act of zealotry in protection of Hashem. In response, Hashem blesses him with "ברית שלום – a covenant of peace." In *Tehillim* (Psalms) 106, the psalmist paints a poetic picture of this story:

וַיִּצְמְדוּ, לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר; וַיֹּאכְלוּ, זִבְחֵי מֵתִים.
וַיִּכְעִסוּ, בְּמַעַלְלֵיהֶם; וַתִּפְרֹץ-בָּם, מַגֵּפָה.
וַיַּעֲמֵד פִּינְחָס, וַיִּפְלֵל; וַתִּעָצֵר, הַמַּגֵּפָה.
וַתִּחַשֵּׁב לוֹ, לְצַדִּיקָה; לְדֹר וָדֹר, עַד-עוֹלָם.

28 They joined themselves also to Baal Peor,
and ate the sacrifices of the dead.

29 Thus they provoked Him with their doings,
and the plague broke in upon them.

30 Then stood up Pinchas, and wrought
judgment, and so the plague was stayed.

31 And that was counted to him as
righteousness, for all generations forever.

In the third verse, we encounter the word וַיִּפְּלֵל – *vayipallel*, translated as “wrought judgment.” The root פלל always denotes judgment. Many of us are familiar with the term להתפלל – *l’hitpallel*, meaning “to pray.” This word, too, derives from the root of פלל, and gives us insight into how we view the meaning of prayer.

In Hebrew grammar, להתפלל is a reflexive construct; that is, it indicates something I do to myself or something I do in concert with another single entity. For example, the root word לבש denotes donning clothing, but the reflexive construct להתלבש – *l’hitlabesh* means “to dress myself.” Similarly, the root word כתב denotes writing, but the reflexive construct להתכתב – *l’hitkatev* means “to correspond,” that is, to write back and forth with another person.

Thus להתפלל – *l’hitpallel* must indicate a reflexive judgment. Either I am judging myself, or I am judging another entity. Many believe that these are the two bases for prayer. When we pray, we place ourselves properly within the sphere of the universe: Who am I? Have I treated others correctly? Do I need a particular item, or perhaps do I just want that item? In addition, we are judging God when we pray, in a sense. We deem God to be the Sovereign, the Almighty, the Merciful, the One. We may also be angry with God and deem the Divine to acting less than Divine.

The root of the Hebrew word for prayer deepens our understanding that prayer is not simply mumbling a bunch of words either in the vernacular or in an arcane Hebrew language. It is much more than that: it is an actual judgment of ourselves and of the Creator who has given us permission to judge even the Creator. What power that gives us to improve on ourselves and on the world!

In interesting thought to keep in mind the next time we attend synagogue or open a *siddur* (prayerbook).

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- If you were to write a prayer, what would be the theme of that prayer? Would it be about praise, request, or thanksgiving? What might it say?
- Take a moment להתפלל – *l’hitpallel*, to literally judge yourself. Name at least two things that you are really good at or happy about in terms of yourself, and at least one thing you would like to improve in yourself.

- God gives Pinchas, who kills two people, a “covenant of peace,” indicating that Hashem is in agreement with those killings. Is it ever okay to harm or kill another human being? If so, under what circumstances?