

Parshat Pinchas is definitely a torah portion for our day. It's a long portion and in addition to mandating the dates and required sacrifices for all the major holidays and festivals, it also manages to include 3 of the hottest issues facing us now: plague, equity, and leadership transition.

1 Plague: the parsha gets its name from Pinchas who has just killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who are probably/possibly engaged in something immoral (the previous parshat leaves us with many Israelites involved in similar unacceptable behaviour). Apparently, this flagrant defiance has led to a plague and with the slaying of the final pair of perpetrators, the plague ceases. I do not think COVID 19 is the result of rampant immorality and violence will not make it disappear, but it is certainly continuing as a result of extreme stupidity and we have yet to find the solution to that! However, the plague of the Torah has left the Israelites tense and uncertain and that can certainly be said of all of us at this time as we navigate COVID 19 and struggle with what we should be doing when and as the pandemic subsides.

#2 Equity: This parsha highlights 5 pioneering women who forever changed the laws of Israel. These women, each is named, an important way to recognize them as persons and individuals, are the 5 daughters of Zelophehad. I've spoken about them before. Briefly, Moses is commanded to take a census and divide up the land giving a portion to the descendants, meaning sons, of the various tribes according to their numbers. To be fair, the land will be chosen by lots and the amount of land will reflect the size of each family. Unfortunately, Zelophehad has left no sons, only his 5 daughters. They request their rightful portion from Moses and the leadership of Israel and God tells Moses their request is just. And so they are granted their family's portion of land. What makes this so truly revolutionary is that this is not a one-time thing only for this instance; it results in a permanent change to the laws of inheritance to recognize that property is to be transferred to daughters when there are no sons. Was the law perfect? No! If any of the women married outside the tribe, they lost their property which reverted to other relatives of Zelophehad. But it was a major advance in its time and forever changed who had the right to inherit and own property. Hopefully, each of us sees the inequities that previous generations have left in areas such women's rights, gender equality and racial and religious intolerance and work to take steps to erase them. However, as Rabbi Tarfon says in Pirke Avot (2:21), "It is not your responsibility to finish the work of perfecting the world, but you are not free to desist from it either." We will not solve all of today's problems, nor find perfect solutions to them, neither will we see the problems our descendants will. There will still be lots for our children and their children and their children's children to do.

#3 Leadership Transition: We are at a critical time in leadership transition in the democratic world. This is a time when, more than ever, we need leaders who are ethical and wise; who choose and heed the brightest and most knowledgeable advisors; who are understanding and empathetic; who put others before themselves; who see that everyone deserves fair and equitable treatment in life. Moses was one of those leaders. He managed a stressed and sometimes rebellious nation for 40 years! Was he perfect, no but he had all those qualities needed to be great and come out the other end of crisis after crisis. Who could fill his shoes? Could it have been Pinchas? He just ended a time of immorality and ended a plague. But he was too passionate and hot headed. The Israelites needed another person with similar traits to Moses who could see the Israelites into the promised land and most importantly, who could guide them in setting up a nation that would uphold the values they had been developing over all the years. Pinchas was not that person; Joshua, son of Nun, was appointed to lead the Israelites forward and establish them in the promised land.

Moses had understood what leadership entailed and why equity among the people mattered to him and to the new nation that was forming. The story of Zelophehad's daughters is just one instance; we do need to wonder what would have become of them and many others, then and after, had the decision gone the other way and they were left with nothing and there had been no lasting change. As summarized in the words of Rabbi Jonathan Sacks: "A world in which the few prosper, and many starve, offends our deepest sense of fairness and human solidarity...Disparities ...of vast concentrated wealth alongside widespread suffering [are] intolerable." These disparities lead to unrest and undermine justice, democracy and peace. Plagues including COVID 19 stress us all and magnify the disparities in our midst. They point out the need more than ever for leaders with insight and wisdom and for each of us to continue the unfinished work of tikkun olam in our own way.