

## **Shabbat Shalom with a Side of Torah – Pinkhas**

One of the requirements for ordination at Hebrew Union College (HUC, the Reform Jewish Seminary) is that each student serves an internship or student pulpit. The idea is that we should have experiences in a “Rabbinical type” position before being unleashed on the world. Many of these positions require students to travel as far as two connecting flights from HUC. Positions were assigned through a lottery system where seniors pick first while second year students returning from their first year in Israel are left to select from whatever has been left by the upper classes. Each person draws a number and that determines the order of your pick. If you really liked your placement (and they liked you), you could continue to serve the following year. I was one of the lucky ones who landed a local internship that kept me from having to leave my family every other weekend. Otherwise, I would have been subject to the lottery. Most of us really enjoyed our experiences and accepted the reality that where air travel was necessary, one could always count on the frequent flyer miles. Even if one did not like the rest of the weekend, with few exceptions, we all had good placements, still the number of disgruntled students remained a constant subject for conversation. The reality was that some of us made more of our placements than others did. We determined the blessing or value of our placement, not our lottery number. The purpose of the lottery was simply to provide order to the process of how we were to share the blessings.

This week, we read about how Israel divides up the land, as the tribes prepare to enter the promised land. According to the text, there is a lottery. The land divides according to the size and nature of the tribes. Traditionally commentators argue that there is actually two methods for division. The land is first divided into twelve equal pieces. Each tribe got its full equal share, then the portions are adjusted based on current tribal membership and that respective tribe’s desire for land near the sea, hills, or other geographical desires. The second division is intra-tribe, the varying clans divide the land more or less based on numbers, as well.

The books of Joshua and Judges detail inter-tribal wars over land and the access certain parcels have to valuable resources. As Moses divides the land, the Reubenites choose to stay on the other side of the Jordan and not actually take land in Israel. As a response to Moses’ concern that they are rebelling, they pledge to first establish their homes and then join their “brothers” and help establish them in their apportioned lands. They honor this pledge in the first generation, but thereafter, it is every tribe for itself. Not all view the lottery commanded in this week’s Torah portion as a blessing. For some, the division of land merely provides them the launch pad for their quest for more power and control. Throughout history, numerous wars were fought over control of this land. Many of the stories detailing these struggles describe a unified people defending themselves against the outside enemy. The struggles that continue today are not just external. They exist now even between Jews for equality in governance and rights amongst each other.

The land at issue is the land flowing with milk and honey; the “Promised land” -- the land that is meant to be a blessing for all people. Given our religious and historical traditions, it is clear that defining the current state of Israel is not the purpose or focus of the Biblical text. It does however teach us a more valuable lesson - Blessings are not just about what we get, but about what we do with what we get.

Even the purest gift of this sacred land has throughout time been perverted by group after group, all claiming entitlement to absolute and exclusive control over a land that was intended to be shared equally. The story detailing the dividing of the land breaks all the existing rules. There is no reference to the law of primogenitor. No one gets a double portion as the oldest son, and no oldest is cheated out of his double inheritance for the sake of a more favored younger son. In fact, in this text, even the women (the daughters of Zelophekhad) inherit equally. The blessings are tied to the intent that we need to share it equally, not the just the land itself.

As I look at the relationships we share (or should share), I am saddened by how many of us cannot see the opportunities for the blessings we should feel for each other. We too often seem only able to focus on how we can impose our own will on others. We withhold love and support -- taking our toys and going home -- when we don't get our way, even when our way may not be in the best interest of the rest of the community and is exclusive of each other. Perhaps if we really want to be faithful people, we need to understand faith more as a challenge to see the blessings available to us and less as an entitlement to defining these blessings to meet our desires. The word "Israel" is best defined as "to wrestle with God -- to be faithful." It is in the struggle that we learn what is sacred not just to ourselves but to those around us. Let's spend time in this struggle ... and let's share and build upon what we learn. Shabbat Shalom.