

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

Our tradition is filled with stories of great sages. Some of these stories appear in the Biblical text. We know about the dispute between Moses and Pharaoh, of Deborah's defeat of the great General Sisera, or Elijah's victory over the prophets of Ba-al from the words of the Bible. Other stories come from stories that teach lessons spread over centuries of education. From this body of midrash, we know the stories wherein Abraham smashes the idols, where Moses ends up in Rabbi Akiva's study, or where the Ba-al Shem Tov battles the Devil (really interesting given that Jews don't believe in the devil).

Some of these stories aggrandize our leaders, while others give us perspective about leadership. The above stories tell us of the merits of the people to whom we look for answers. Many such stories teach us more about leadership and about our roles in community, than about any individual in the story itself. One of my favorite of the sages, Rabbi Joshua usually appears in this latter type of teaching. One of my favorite such midrashim deals with the kosher status of an oven, the oven of Aknai. He is the protagonist of the commentary, but it is really not about him. The midrash teaches us that God answers to many voices, not just one. A similar story tells of his pre-mature visit to his portion in Gan Eden (the world of peace to come). In the Talmud we read that Elijah the prophet was giving him the tour, shouting to all in the way, that they should clear a path for the great sage. As they made their way through the garden, they came across another great scholar, the famous student of Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai immediately challenged Rabbi Joshua, asking him whether or not he was really a great sage. He asked if there ever appeared a rainbow during Joshua's life. If there had been one, he continued then Rabbi Joshua could not have been as great as was his potential. There is a tradition that rainbows only need appear when there is not someone righteous enough to hold up the entire world. The promise to Noah was that it would appear to remind God that there was not perfection in the world. Where it was not needed, it would not appear. Rabbi Joshua was to be one of the greatest of rabbis, but alas, he had known rainbows to exist. In fact, there are rainbows in every generation.

At the end of last week's Torah portion, Pinkhas (Phineas in English) takes it upon himself to fix the world. He impales a Simeon prince and Midianite princess for associating with each other. He is a priest that acts in a way that even Moses and Aaron (his father) acted. There are commentators throughout time who have heralded his bravery and his passion in honoring what he perceived to be God's command not to associate with the enemy. The text goes on to say that in response, God promised Pinkhas a legacy of peace. Some maintain that this is a blessing. I think of it more as a warning. It is odd that we would celebrate this and denounce Moses and Aaron as having failed. Turning our enemy to our friend is the greater good. Handling even matters of transgression in civil ways is the greater good. But Pinkhas, seeing the two people together did not investigate, and did not ask questions – he just attacked them, taking their lives. God's promise of peace is an admission that something went wrong. In the same sense that the rainbow is a reminder of our imperfection, this promise is a reminder, as well.

How many of us act first and ask questions later – or never ask questions, at all. Are we not charged – all of us -- with creating a world that makes sense for all of us? It is not the Pinkhas' of the world that will bring healing. It cannot be the person who believes that he has all the answers. I am sure that Pinkhas

knew rainbows, as well. Rather, what we learn from this text – and the story of Rabbi Joshua is that this work is for all of us, not some of us. We take from this the reminder that no one person can fix the world. Even in religions where a messianic figure is believed to exist, that figure still needs the world's participation and faith to accomplish the great task of healing the world. Not one of us is that strong, nor can anyone sit back and rely on someone else to do the work for us. Our tradition teaches that while none of us are expected to accomplish the task, none of us are allowed to not work toward its completion. I look forward to the time and energy we can share along the path of making this real. Shabbat Shalom.