



Pinchas: What is Truly Most Important?

Rabbi Shmuel Silber

“The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Pinchas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them, so that I did not destroy the children of Israel because of My zeal. Therefore, say, ‘I hereby give him My covenant of peace.’” (Bamidbar 25:10-12)

“In a place where there is no man, try to be the man.” (Ethics of Our Fathers 2:6). Pinchas saw a terrible wrong being committed and decided to act. We had fallen into the abyss of immorality with the nation of Midyan, a terrible *Chillul Hashem* (Desecration of God’s name) was occurring and no one was taking a stand. Pinchas became the man and sprang into action. His actions were not motivated by anger or resentment; they were a manifestation of his love, care, and concern for his people. For his spiritual heroism, God rewarded him with the covenant of peace, *bris shalom*.

Pinchas was fortunate in that he was gifted the covenant of peace, as peace is often exceptionally elusive. We too must work to create this *bris shalom* for ourselves. It is during this period of the Three Weeks that we must try to right our historical wrongs. Our current 2,000+ year diaspora came about as a result of *sinas chinam* (unwarranted hatred). Our greatest threat has never been the Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and Romans; our greatest threat is often ourselves. Our inability to love each other as we should is often at the root of many national issues.

Our Torah is filled with many beautiful and meaningful *mitzvos* (commandments). These *mitzvos* teach us how to create and sustain a relationship with God and with one another. Imagine for a moment if you were to be asked, which is the most important of all of God’s commandments? Which mitzvah do you think outweighs the rest? Perhaps, it is *Shabbos* or *Bris Milah* (circumcision) both of which are referred to as an *Os* (sign) between God and His nation. Perhaps, it is not any one particular *mitzvah* but a unit of *mitzvos* like the *Aseres HaDibros* (Ten Commandments) which are the spiritual centerpiece of our Torah. Long before you and I pondered this question, the great rabbinic sages were having this very discussion.

“You shall love your neighbor as you love yourself (Leviticus 19:18); Rabbi Akiva said, ‘This is an important principle of the Torah.’ Ben Azai said, ‘This is the narrative of the generations of man on the day that God created man, in the likeness of God He created him’ (Genesis 5:1), is even more important.” (Sifra, Kedoshim)

Rabbi Akiva and his disciple Ben Azai were trying to figure out what is the most important, core principle we have in our Torah. Rabbi Akiva explains that everything flows from loving the other. This is reminiscent of the story of the gentile who approached the great sage Hillel and said, “I want to convert on the condition that you (Hillel) teach me the entire Torah standing on one foot.” To which Hillel responded, “That which is despicable to you, do not visit upon the other.” Rabbi Akiva continues this tradition and explains that the mitzvah of *V’Ahavta L’Reyacha Kamocha*, (Love your fellow as you love yourself) is the most important tenet of our belief. If you cannot love another how can you love God? If you cannot love someone who you can see, touch and experience, how can you love that which is amorphous and beyond the scope of human comprehension? If you work to love your fellow Jew, you will come to love God.

Ben Azai, Rabbi Akiva’s trusted disciple disagreed with his rebbe (teacher). However, at first glance we do not understand Ben Azai’s statement. There is no *mitzvah* contained in the verse he quoted. This verse, from the fifth chapter of *Bereishis* (Genesis) begins a list of individual and generational lifespans beginning with Adam. What is the nature of Ben Azai’s disagreement with Rabbi Akiva? Rav Asher Weiss advances a beautiful insight. Ben Azai says, “My great teacher, Rabbi Akiva if only we could be as pure as you. It would be wonderful to think that we could love each other as we love ourselves. But this aspiration is fraught with so



many challenges. There are people who have wronged me, and it is difficult for me to forgive, let alone love them. There are people who do bad things and who is to say they deserve my love. There are people who are simply not “loveable” as a result of their temperament and disposition. And therefore, I would like to suggest something else. There is something greater and more important than love – respect. We cannot love every other Jew, but we can learn to respect every Jew. “This is the narrative of the generations of man on the day that God created man, **in the likeness of God He created him** (Genesis 5:1).” Every Jew is made in the image of God and for that alone (s)he deserves my respect. To require us to love one another is a tall order, but to respect each other; this is attainable.”

Such a powerful lesson. Perhaps, it is not possible to love everyone, but I must work on my ability to respect the other. There is a societal trend to vilify anyone who does not share “my” views. This is true on an individual and national level. Even the most “open minded” of people often lack tolerance for opinions and views that may differ from their own. The Jewish people are comprised of multiple streams. I identify as a Torah Jew who tries (I admit that I must try harder) to adhere to the laws of the Torah as they have been handed down for thousands of years. I vehemently disagree with other interpretations of Judaism and am fiercely protective of my faith. I will not compromise in matters of *Halacha* (Jewish Law) and I will resist those who try to tell me that Judaism must consistently adapt or cater to contemporary sensitivities or various types of “isms.” Yet at the same time, I respect the right of my fellow Orthodox, Conservative and Reform brothers and sisters to have their views. Even within the big tent of Orthodox Judaism we have many different streams. I often find it difficult to figure out my place. Maybe it is because deep down I wish it were not this way. No matter what I agree or disagree with, I pledge to my fellow Jews that our dialogue will be with respect. This is the Ben Azai way.

It is true, at the end of the day decisions must be made, action must be taken, and someone’s opinion will not be accepted. But if we hear the other and validate the other in the course of a dialogical process, perhaps, we can emerge from the most difficult of discussions as brothers.

This past week we observed the fast of the 17th of Tammuz. It was on this day thousands of years ago that the walls of Jerusalem were breached. Three weeks later our beloved *Beis HaMikdash* (Temple) was set ablaze. So much of the hardship, so many of the heartbreaking difficulties were the result of infighting, factionalism, and indifference to the other. We do not have to agree, we just have to respect. We can do better; we can be better.

What is the most important mitzvah of the Torah? I am not sure – much greater men have pondered this question and the answer still seems far from reach. But here is what I do know: The path forward must be lined with love for our fellow Jew. But before we can love we must learn to respect. Some think that the way to demonstrate allegiance to one’s beliefs and ideologies is to disparage those who believe differently. If I can knock down your belief – then mine must be stronger. We can disagree. And if we feel there are problems and religious or intellectual inconsistencies within other approaches to Judaism we should vigorously discuss and debate. We need not compromise our beliefs and values we hold dear in order to make someone else feel happy, accepted, or validated. But we must respect the other no matter how deep the divide or disagreement. Why? “...for in the likeness of God, He created him;” we are each a beautiful *Tzelem Elokim* (image of God). May we be privileged to see this Divine identity within ourselves and may we be courageous enough to see it within one another.