

## Dvar Torah on Parashat Pinchas by Nahum Gordon – Shabbat, 23 July 2022

Tis the season of political skulduggery. Conspiracies abound. A conspiracy runs right through the Tenach, which I used to describe as the undermining of mankind's social and historical conventions on primogeniture. This can be defined as the right, by law or custom, of the firstborn legitimate child (usually male) to inherit a parent's estate in preference to all other children. However, the narrators of the Tenach are really worried about the right of succession - who among the siblings will lead the family, the tribe and the nation? Invariably, the oldest child loses out. And pulling the strings is God, either overtly or by letting events unfold and take their course without having to intervene at all. This is pertinent for our questionable star of the week, one impulsive Pinchas.

So, let me demonstrate, briefly, how the oldest son fails to succeed his father as the leader of the pack:

1. Cain murders his younger sibling, Abel. Cain is jealous of Abel's intuition to bring the firstlings of his flock as a sacrifice to God. Cain is exiled by God and Adam's and Eve's family continues through a new child, Seth.
2. Ishmael, Abraham's firstborn, is exiled at the insistence of Sarah. God urges Abraham to listen to his wife. Had Ishmael sinned? His only crime seems to be that his mother was Hagar. The family line continues with Isaac.
3. Esau, Isaac's firstborn, gives up his birthright for a bowl of soup. Maybe, that is why he is cheated out of the blessing reserved for the first son. God does not intervene. Esau is guilty of "intermarriage", a taboo which upsets both of his parents. The Hebrew line continues with Jacob, who has sought asylum with his family's relatives in Haran, and unexpectedly ends up with two wives. Esau moves out of Eretz Canaan. One of Esau's grandsons is Amalek.
4. On seeing Joseph's sons, Jacob predicts that the younger, Ephraim, will produce a greater dynasty than his older brother, Manasseh. Joseph is most displeased, even though he, the eleventh son, was Jacob's favourite!
5. Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, is cursed by his father on his deathbed for crassly reminding him that he still has a wife, Leah, after his beloved Rachel had died. Leah is Reuben's mother and Jacob's first wife. Datan and Aviram, two Reubenites, are the principal co-conspirators with Korach of the rebellion against Moses (and hence God). All three die in an earthquake created by God. The Judge, Deborah, roundly condemns the tribe of Reuben for not coming to her aid in the war against the Canaanite, Sisera. The tribe disappears, presumably by assimilating into the surrounding cultures.
6. Shimon and Levi, Jacob's second and third sons, are also cursed by their father for potentially bringing trouble on the entire family because they had murdered all the men in the city of Shechem in order to recover their sister Dinah. As I will demonstrate in a minute, the tribe of Shimon seems to be blamed for the disaster at the end of last week's sidrah and in Eretz Canaan, it appears to be absorbed into its neighbour, the much larger tribe of Judah. Levi should also have been consigned to the dustbin but too many of the narrators had a priestly and a Jerusalem Temple bias.
7. Jacob's deathbed speech focuses on two sons – his fourth, Judah, and his eleventh, Joseph.
8. Amram and Yochebed have three children – Aaron, Miriam and Moses, but the youngest is selected by God to lead the Israelites back to Eretz Canaan.
9. After returning from a reconnoitre of Canaan, only two of the 12 spies, Joshua and Calev, believe that the land can be conquered with God's help. Joshua is from Ephraim (Joseph's younger son) and Calev is

from Judah (Jacob's fourth son). An alliance of Jacob's two favoured sons. God appoints Joshua as Moses' successor. Of those who left Egypt, only Joshua and Calev will enter Eretz Canaan from the over-20s eligible for military duty.

10. Look at the Judges and the early kings. All are chosen by God: Deborah, Gideon and Samuel can trace their lineage back to Joseph, Jacob's 11<sup>th</sup> son. Saul is a descendant of Benjamin, Jacob's 12<sup>th</sup> and youngest boy, and David comes from Judah, Jacob's fourth child. No judge or king comes from Reuben, Shimon or Levi.

11. David, the youngest of eight brothers, is chosen by God. Only when he becomes king does a direct descendant of Leah, Jacob's hated/unloved wife, assume a leadership role. The Mashiach will be one of his descendants.

12. Solomon, the youngest of David's many children, becomes his successor. Amnon, the oldest of David's sons, is murdered on the orders of Absalom, his half-brother, for raping Tamar, Absalom's full sister. Absalom, David's favourite son, is executed by Yoav, David's nephew and general, for staging a coup d'état. And Adoniyah is executed at the behest of Solomon for allegedly plotting to usurp Solomon's throne.

The editors of the Jewish Study Bible suggest that the writers' disdain for the oldest son becoming the next leader might have something to do with meritocracy, but it might have more to do with God's preference. The best clue we have is probably what God says when He sends the last of the Judges, Samuel, to anoint King Saul's successor: "**Look not upon his appearance, or the height of his stature, for I have rejected him. For not as man sees (does God see). For man sees with the eyes, but God sees into the heart.**" Abel's offering of the firstborn lambs gives us another clue – the firstborn belong to God, not man, a principle enshrined in Bamidbar 3:13, where God says, "**For all the firstborn belong to Me; on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I made holy to Me all the firstborn in Israel, from man to beast; they will be Mine. I am YHVH (God).**"

Now, let us review the story that ended last week's sidrah and opened today's leyning. After God had prevented Bilaam from cursing Israel, the Hebrew men succumb to the beauty of the Moabite and Midianite women and sacrifice to their gods. God is outraged by these acts of immorality and idolatry and sends a deadly plague. 24,000 Israelites will die before Pinchas impales Zimri and Cozbi with a lance, bringing their coitus (and the plague) to an abrupt end. Who were these people and what was their role in the subterfuge around the right of succession?

Cozbi was a daughter of a Midianite chief who enters the Israelite camp. Zimri, the son of one of the chieftains of the tribe of Shimon, was so smitten by her that he proceeded brazenly to sexual intimacy. Pinchas, the son of the Cohen Gadol, Elazar, was so outraged that, without consulting his father or his great-uncle Moses, he murdered the couple and was blessed with God's covenant of peace! - that needs another Dvar Torah. In next week's sidrah, we learn that Bilaam concocted the plan to use Midianite/Moabite women to tempt the Israelite men to abandon their God. Bilaam's reward is death at the hands of the Israelites when they seek vengeance on Midian.

In Sefer Bamidbar, Moses is ordered twice to take a census of the men who are 20 and over, i.e., those who are eligible for military duty. In Chapter 1, the tribe of Shimon can muster 59,300 men. The second census takes place in this week's sidrah after the plague has abated. Now, the tribe of Shimon can only call on 22,200 men. Four other tribes – Reuben, Gad, Naphtali and Ephraim - sustain depletions, but none on the scale of Shimon. Shimon seems to have taken the brunt of the plague. Was this just because of

Zimri's behaviour or was the whole tribe of Shimon implicated? What is curious is that Shimon, Reuben and Gad formed the armed guard on the south side of the Israelite encampment. Were they the principal targets of the Midianites who lived to the south of the Bnei Yisrael?

Having discarded Shimon, let's examine the ascendancy of Pinchas. Aaron, the first Cohen Gadol, had four sons: Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. The first two are incinerated by God for daring to offer strange fire. That clears the way for Elazar to succeed Aaron and for Pinchas to succeed Elazar. Nadav and Avihu had to die to enable Pinchas to become Cohen Gadol. Pinchas demonstrates his zeal publicly on behalf of God and is duly rewarded. Pinchas will lead the Israelites into battle next week against the Midianites accompanied by the Ark. And, in the Book of Joshua, the people choose him to lead a team to investigate why Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh had built an altar in Trans-Jordan. Pinchas averts a catastrophic civil war. Incidentally, no Pinchas - no Zadok, Solomon's High Priest. The Zadokites run the Temple until it is destroyed by the Babylonians. No Pinchas - no Ezra, who zealously forces the Jewish men who were not taken to Babylonia to banish their non-Jewish wives and children.

Let me leave you with two observations: i) the murder of Zimri by Pinchas is laced with irony. How so? In the Dinah story, Shimon and Levi combine their murderous temperaments to rescue their sister from the clutches of Prince Shechem. In the Joseph story, Joseph takes Shimon as a hostage to encourage his father Jacob to let Benjamin come down to Egypt. Why does Joseph select Shimon? Probably because Shimon was the brother most keen to murder Joseph. In the Zimri story, the murderous nature of the tribe of Levi, as represented by Pinchas, is turned on Levi's co-conspirator in the Dinah rescue, the tribe of Shimon, as represented by Zimri. Now, violence and justifiable homicide are committed in the name of God on a fellow Jew. This leads neatly to my final point: ii) you may recall my story about being at a haredi wedding where the best man implored his audience to emulate Pinchas and wage war on today's Midianites – Reform Jews. If Pinchas can execute another Jew, so the ultra-observant keepers of the faith must deal zealously with the latest defilers. I am appalled that any Jew can advocate the death of other Jews, not least at a wedding, but my distaste for fundamentalism and zealotry has not dampened my enthusiasm for a good conspiracy theory.

Shabbat Shalom