

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Bamidbar 5769

And with you will be one man for every tribe, each man a leader of his family. (1:4)

The Kli Yakar explains that the Torah is coming to praise each of these leaders as a leader even to his own tribe and even to his own family. They did not fear their people and they did not shy away from criticizing their families. This is similar to the blessing Yaakov Avinu gave to Dan, “Dan will judge his people like one of the tribes of Israel” (Bereishis 49:16). Dan would not be partial or cover up for the transgressions of his own tribe. Rather he would judge them with the same fairness as any other tribe.

The Gemara (Avodah Zarah 4a) teaches us that leaders who do not rebuke and criticize their people will be punished along with those people. The Gemara poses a contradiction between two verses. When Avraham prayed for the city of Sodom, he said, “Will you destroy the righteous together with the wicked?” (Bereishis 18:23) G-d agreed to his prayer and rescued whoever was righteous from Sodom. (However, to spare the entire city there needed to be ten righteous people.) But Yechezkel, describing the destruction of Jerusalem (21:8), says, “And I will cut off from you righteous and wicked.” The Gemara answers that Avraham was discussing perfectly righteous people whereas Yechezkel is discussing people are not perfectly righteous. But, asks the Gemara, Yechezkel in another place (9:4-6) describes how G-d commanded His angels to destroy Jerusalem, and He tells Gavriel to write the letter tav on the forehead of every righteous person who cries over the evils committed in the city. The tav symbolizes that they kept the entire Torah, from alef to tav. At first He tells the angels not to touch the people with the tav on them, but then the Attribute of Justice speaks up and says, “They should have protested.” G-d says, “I know that the other Jews would not have listened to them.” The Attribute of Justice says, “Master of the Universe, You know that, but do they know that?” G-d agrees with this argument and instructs the angels to begin killing these righteous Jews as well (Shabbos 55a). So we see, argues the Gemara in Avodah Zara 4a, that even completely righteous people are punished along with the wicked. The Gemara answers that their failure to protest was considered a sin and so they were not considered to be completely righteous. In the case of Sodom, on the other hand, Avraham Avinu was praying only for righteous people who did protest; only they would be saved.

Sometimes, even being totally righteous and protesting is not enough. In order to be saved, the righteous have to remain separate from the wicked. When the Jews worshipped the golden calf, the Levites protested, and even carried out punishment when Moshe commanded them to do so, without

partiality to their own family members. “He said to his father and mother, ‘I have not seen him;’ his brothers he did not recognize, and his children he did not know” (Devarim 33:9). Yet the Torah says in this week’s parsha, “But the tribe of Levi you shall not count, nor take their head-count, in the midst of the children of Israel” (Bamidbar 1:49). Rashi says: “The Holy One, blessed is He, knew that He would later decree that every Jew twenty years old and up would have to die in the wilderness. So He said: Let these Levites not be included in the census, for they are Mine, since they did not go astray after the golden calf.” Despite their protest, the Levites would have been punished along with everyone else, had they not been counted separately.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 19a) tells a terrifying story about Shimon ben Shetach and the Sages of his time. King Yannai’s slave committed murder, and the Sanhedrin called him to stand before them. Yannai sent the slave, but the Sanhedrin was not satisfied – they wanted Yannai himself to come and stand before them, as the Torah says “And it will be established with testimony in the presence of its owner” (Shemos 21:29). So Yannai came to the Sanhedrin, and he sat down. Shimon ben Shetach commanded, “King Yannai, stand on your feet and let the witnesses speak against you! Not before us do you stand, but before the Creator of the World!” Yannai said, “What do your fellow sages say?” Shimon ben Shetach turned to his right, but the sages buried their faces in the earth. He turned to his left, but the sages buried their faces in the earth. Shimon ben Shetach said to them, “You are thinkers! Let the Master of Thoughts come and punish you!” Immediately, the angel Gavriel came and beat them into the ground, and they died.

When Yannai refused to recognize the authority of the Sanhedrin, only Shimon ben Shetach had the courage to confront him. Similarly, today, there are few Jews, even among those who are opposed to the existence of the Zionist state, who have the courage to confront it openly. The Zionists, echoing Yannai, ask, “Where are all your supporters? Let them come out and confront us too, if they really oppose us!” We hope that our generation will not fail in this challenge, as did the sages at the time of Shimon ben Shetach.

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