

# SEPHARDIC INSTITUTE

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בס"ד

## Parashat Phinehas Part I Covenant, Priesthood and Responsibility

### 1. Backdrop

Phinehas' zealous act turned G-d's anger away from the Israelites and deterred Him from destroying them in His zeal (Num. 25:11). Twenty-four thousand had already died in a plague, the manifestation of His anger, but the sinning had continued while the plague was occurring. Did temptation so becloud the Israelites' thinking that they did not make the connection? Obviously G-d did not inflict His visitation upon them in a manner that overwhelmed their free will – that is not His way. But Phinehas' courageous act against a flagrantly transgressing Israelite chieftain brought the people back to their senses and terminated the sinning and the plague.

One wonders at the contrast with the other case of apostasy in the Torah, that of the golden calf thirty-nine years earlier. Then, G-d had expressed the intent to destroy the Israelites and start a new nation with Moses but He hinted that prayer could prompt Him to refrain from such a course of action. Moses prayed and G-d relented. Here, however, He did not provide any such opening. Of course it is understood that prayer is always of value and Moses had the precedent of that previous episode (as well as other instances when prayer had been effective, such as that associated with the sin of the scouts). Undoubtedly he prayed.

But it appears that in this case, dealing with a new generation and taking into account the forty-year experience with the nation, G-d deemed it appropriate to take a different approach. Relating to the people in the same manner as He did previously might lead to the same unsatisfactory results. This time He insisted that action had to be taken, particularly against the negligent leadership, and He had so informed Moses (Num. 25:4: "Take all the heads of the nation and impale them to Hashem"). The fact that we only know of the plague through a "flashback" device, that G-d

had initiated it and it was taking its toll without any mention of it in the text, may support this view. Moses' inaction illustrates how G-d's choice of punishment for his transgression of striking the rock, that he will not lead the nation into the promised land, fit the new context. Moses was no longer the ideal leader for the new generation of Israelites.

As a result of Phinehas' act, G-d granted him "My covenant of shalom (בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם), that shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of eternal priesthood (בְּרִית כֹּהֲנֵת עוֹלָם) [25:12-13]. What do these two covenant clauses denote? Is there a substantive association between the two? Do they possess thematic linkage with his heroic act?

### 2. "My Covenant of Shalom"

Rashi's comments on the first of these covenant clauses do not include any explanation as to the specific nature of the *shalom*. He states: "As a person is grateful and gracious to one who did him a good turn, the Holy One, blessed be He, expressed שְׁלוֹמוֹתָי ('His facets of peace') to him."

Sforno, following several midrashim, takes *shalom* to refer to longevity. He primarily bases himself on a verse that appears in a narrative near the end of the book of Judges that on the surface seems to indicate that Phinehas was alive many years after the nation's entry into the land. In the war fought against the tribe of Benjamin a question was asked of G-d through the high priest and we are told that it was "Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron [who] stood before Him in those days" (Judg. 20:28).

However, as R. Yeshaya Di Trani (13<sup>th</sup> century) maintains, that event may very well have occurred at the beginning of the period of the Judges, despite the story being placed at the end of the book, which would "normalize" Phinehas' age at the time. Other

commentators view that high priest as another Phinehas (consistent with the custom of naming children after forebears) who was of the progeny of the original Eleazar son of Aaron, directly linking a descendant with his illustrious ancestor while skipping the intermediate generations. For example, in Joshua 7:18 we read of Achan son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerah, while in Joshua 22:20 that individual is termed Achan son of Zerah.

It may also be that the name “Phinehas son of Eleazar son of Aaron” was the designation of the office of high priest regardless of the particular name of the contemporary incumbent. An office or role that had been distinguished by a previous occupant may be called by that individual’s name, at least on certain occasions. In any event, midrashim that speak of extraordinary ages should not be relevant to our discussion because such midrashim have been shown to invariably have a pedagogical agenda and do not reflect the actual historical reality.

Finally, the various attestations of *shalom* do not seem to include longevity as a basic meaning.

Ibn Ezra understands *shalom* in the traditional manner, in this case connoting G-d’s assurance that Phinehas need not fear revenge from the relatives of the slain Zimri. Normally, in at least the ancient Near East (as in some regions of today’s world), and especially when a prince was slain, family and followers would strive to avenge his death, often ignoring all arguments in the assassin’s defense. Indeed, there was a widespread belief that human blood shed independently of an official judicial proceeding had to be redeemed by the shedding of the blood of the perpetrator. However, since Phinehas’ act brought the people back to their senses and terminated the plague, and since G-d profusely praised him, it has been thought that Ibn Ezra is employing too much “realism” in his sociological explanation. But we cannot be sure. Redeeming the blood of a slain family or clan member was a matter of honor and responsibility. We will return to the basic concept to which Ibn Ezra alludes.

The Netziv interprets *shalom* as a blessing of inner peace and tranquility. When a sensitive individual is forced to kill a human being, even with full justification, there often arise within him subtle negative emotions and/or harmful gnawing

aftereffects. Phinehas received divine assurance that this would not be the case with him. Here too, we must demur. Since his act was so necessary and its consequences so unequivocally positive, and moreover, he was so profusely praised by G-d, it does not seem that it could have been thought that it would leave such inner repercussions.

Before proceeding, we will review some of the major opinions regarding the other aspect of the reward, that concerning the covenant of eternal priesthood.

### 3. “A Covenant of Eternal Priesthood”

Rashi, following some sages, defines *kehunut ‘olam* to mean that G-d then consecrated Phinehas as a priest. This view is based on the laws that membership in the priesthood is transmitted from father to son and that such transmission proceeds only through birth. Accordingly, membership of children in the priesthood only came into effect for progeny born after consecration of the first priests. When Aaron with his four sons were consecrated into the priesthood, Aaron’s grandsons who were already born were not included as priests. Phinehas was in that group. Since they were not consecrated with their parents and since at the time of their birth their fathers were not yet priests, there was no way for them to have become priests (*b. Zebah*. 101b).

Ibn Ezra, following other sages, assumes that when Aaron and his sons were consecrated, the sons’ sons – including Phinehas – were automatically incorporated into the priesthood. The system that was established was that all the sons of priests were priests; the fact that Aaron’s sons were anointed with him was because they were then adults and taught the sanctuary service at that time. In Ibn Ezra’s view, G-d now granted Phinehas the high priesthood.

Perhaps a support may be brought to this latter view from a 1 Chronicles passage that traces Aaron’s progeny. After mentioning his four sons it continues with the genealogy of just his one son Eleazar who we know had been a high priest. The genealogy continues with Eleazar’s son Phinehas and cites only single son after single son (perhaps some are grandsons) until Jehozadak, the twenty-first from Phinehas, who was part of the exiled community of Judah and Jerusalem (1 Chron. 5:30-41). Such a listing is most compatible with being a registry of high priests. However,

elsewhere in Chronicles, in describing priestly assignments, it appears that the progeny of both of Aaron's surviving sons, Eleazar and Ithamar, served equally in the sanctuary (1 Chron. 24:1 ff.).

The Ramban also presumes that Phinehas is here being selected for high priesthood. But he points out that there is much more involved than merely being granted *kehunat 'olam*, a designation that, with a slight variation, had previously been employed in reference to Aaron and his sons (Exod. 29:9). Here, it is *berit kehunat 'olam*, a *covenant* of eternal priesthood, clearly specifying that there is an additional element associated with the grant. Similarly, Phinehas was not only granted *shalom* but *beriti shalom*, a covenant with *shalom* attached to it. Although the Ramban explains this with a cryptic comment that veers from a straightforward interpretation, some of his insights in parsing the verse are valid as *peshat* and set us in another direction.

#### 4. Interpretation

The natural translation of the verse appears to be that “G-d’s covenant of shalom” that He was granting to Phinehas was to be for him and his descendants [connected with] a “covenant of eternal priesthood.” This implies that a covenant of shalom will henceforth suffuse the priesthood, thus creating a more meaningful covenant of eternal priesthood. That Phinehas was already a priest does not seem to have been an issue, nor does the high priesthood, in and of itself, necessarily enter the picture. The “reward” is not to be understood in a conventional sense of granting dignity and status. Rather, it seems that the covenants of *shalom* and *kehuna* should be understood as similar to the concepts expressed in Malachi 2, a passage that appears to be related to our verse, whether directly or indirectly.

The context there is one of motivating the priests to assume their true responsibility, the neglect of which they had been censured for in the previous verses. G-d describes His covenant that he had established with a true practitioner of the priesthood, who is termed Levi. (Since all priests are descendants of Aaron, who stems from the tribe of Levi, a particular priest could be called Levi.\*) G-d informs Malachi: *כִּרְתִּי הַיְהוָה אִתּוֹ* (‘My covenant was with him, *hahayyim* and *hashalom*, and I granted

them to him, *morah* and he feared Me” [Mal. 2:5]). The phrase *hahayyim* and *hashalom*, defining G-d’s covenant, best translates as “life and well being.” It refers to G-d’s commitment to protect his dutiful servant from harm, undoubtedly from evildoers.

As a covenant, both sides have responsibilities. The priest is required to provide faithful leadership, always conscious of serving G-d, as described in the two following verses there: “Truthful teachings were in his mouth, iniquity could not be found on his lips, with wholeheartedness and righteousness he walked with Me and the many he turned back from sin. For the priest’s lips guard knowledge, and the teaching [Torah] they seek from his mouth, for the messenger of the Lord of Hosts is he” (Mal. 2:6-7). The phrase “and the many he turned back from sin” ( *וְרַבִּים הֵשִׁיב* ) ( *מִעֲוֹן* ) seems to correspond to G-d’s statement “turned back My anger” ( *הֵשִׁיב אֶת הַמַּחֲתִי* ) in the Phinehas context; in one case the priest turned back G-d’s anger while in the other case he turned back the many from sin.

In the closing words of that section of Malachi, G-d accuses the priests of *אֵינְכֶם שֹׁמְרִים אֶת דְּרָכַי וְנִשְׁאָאִים פְּנִים* ( “You have not kept My ways and you show partiality in your teachings” [2:9]). “G-d’s ways” are basically defined in Genesis 18:18 as doing *צְדָקָה וּמִשְׁפָּט* ( “righteousness and justice”; also see Jer. 9:23). “Partiality in teachings” is most applicable to rulings in cases of law.

Service of G-d involves the promotion of justice with righteousness. The priests are required to fulfill their responsibility in these areas with integrity. Such commitment requires courage to stand firm in the face of ever-present pressure from powerful interests to compromise and overlook values as well as discipline to stand in awe of G-d’s name, qualities that work in tandem. It must be borne in mind that besides their ritual duties and educational and exhortative obligations, priests had significant juridical responsibilities. We will review the main scriptural sources explicitly mentioning this function.

- In instructing local judges, the Torah states: “When a legal matter is beyond your competence, whether in a case of homicide, civil law or assault – matters of dispute in your local courts (lit.: “your gates”) – you shall arise and go to the place Hashem your G-d chooses. And you shall come to

the *kohanim leviyim* or the magistrate that shall be in charge at that time...and do according to the verdict they announce to you.” (Deut. 17:8-9). The priests and magistrates are mentioned together.

- In describing the responsibilities of the priests, the Torah states, “According to their ruling (lit.: “by their mouths”) shall be settled all disputes and cases of assault” (Deut. 21:5b).
- In Ezekiel’s prophecy regarding the priests, G-d states: “And they shall teach My people to differentiate between sacred and profane, regarding what is pure and impure they shall inform them, and in disputes they shall serve for judgment, in accordance with My laws shall they judge them” (Ezek. 44:23-24). Also see 2 Chronicles 19:8-11.

It is often dangerous to preach against the practice of evildoers, let alone exhort them or stand up to them in court or in public. The evil is often subtle with a facade of respectability and the perpetrators are often wealthy and influential, with high standing in the community. The temptation to “show partiality in teachings” is surely great, for the evildoers usually have their explanations. To facilitate justice and proper behavior, G-d promises to do His part and protect His fearless covenant-partner from harm.

Indeed, the much-disputed Malachi 2:5 phrase, מוֹרָא וַיִּירָאֵנִי\*\* may likely be addressing this very point. Hashem may be saying that in addition to bestowing “life and well-being” upon his faithful disciple, He also grants him מוֹרָא, the capacity to “stand fearlessly” or, alternatively, to “strike fear” into the evildoers.\*\*\* This is support given him when he stands courageously for righteousness and G-d’s word. In covenantal response, the recipient of G-d’s gift exercises awe for Him, וַיִּירָאֵנִי. This is comparable to the mutual responsibilities G-d articulated to Jeremiah: “Gird up your loins, rise and speak to them all that I shall command you. Do not break because of them, lest I break you before them. I have designated you this day a fortified city and a pillar of iron and walls of bronze...to the kings of Judah, to its officers, to its priests and to the people of the land. They will battle against you but will not prevail against you, for

I am with you – declares Hashem – to rescue you” (Jer. 1:17-19).

Thus, in our Numbers passage, the two covenants of *shalom* and *kehuna* are part of the same dynamic. By standing up to evil despite having to subject himself to mortal danger, Phinehas prompted G-d to make a commitment to be actively supportive of him and those who courageously stand for implementing His will. Perhaps after the impact of Phinehas’ act of killing Zimri was fully realized, special divine protection was not necessary. But the possibility of potential blood avengers as well as the risk of Zimri acting in self-defense, would have been unpredictable. Surely it was a life-threatening situation. In any event, G-d’s commitment to Phinehas and to those who would follow in his position of leadership who were dedicated to a just and righteous society, was to be of immense benefit when it was necessary for them to stand against the diverse evildoers that arise in all generations.

## Endnotes

\* Rabbi S. D. Sassoon thought Malachi was referring to Jeremiah, a *kohen*, whose biography much more than anyone else in Scripture manifests the concepts expressed in the context.

\*\* The proximate Malachi phrases הָיְתָה אִתּוֹ (‘‘was with him’’) and וְאָתַנְּם לוֹ (‘‘I granted them to him’’ [Mal. 2:5]) parallel similar usage in the Phinehas context: נָתַן לוֹ (‘‘am granting him’’) and וְהָיְתָה לוֹ (‘‘and is shall be for him’’ [Num. 25:12-13]).

\*\*\* NJPS translates these two words ‘‘and of reverence, which he showed Me.’’ But after mentioning the covenant of life and well-being which G-d granted him, how does ‘‘and of reverence’’ fit in? The latter is a quality manifested by the priest, not one granted to him, as the syntax seems to require. JPS translates these words ‘‘and of fear, and he feared Me.’’ Again, we have the same problem. M. Zerkavod, in the Mossad Harav Kook commentary on Malachi, interprets the two words as if reversed: וַיִּירָאֵנִי מוֹרָא, but obviously that is a strained interpretation.