

A Lasting Legacy

Food for Thought for Parshat Pinchas

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Last week I officiated at the wedding of an old classmate from grade school. It was great to participate in his wedding, and I enjoyed being a part of their simcha. During the dinner, his mother and I were talking, and she said something that stuck in my mind. She said, "You know, no matter what you do in your profession, no matter how great your accomplishments, the bottom line is that your greatest legacy is your children."

The conversation was about her, so I didn't tell her what I was thinking, but what crossed my mind is, "And that's why I now live in Israel." Twice this week I've seen people from the States, both of whom asked me whether I miss the rabbinate. (I won't answer the question now - that's an entirely different post.) But it was very hard - gut-wrenchingly hard - to leave our shul and congregational life. It was, without a doubt, the hardest decision we ever made, because while we loved leading the membership of the shul and playing a role in our community, we knew that no matter how good Detroit or the rabbinate was for us, Israel would be better for our children. And we were right on so many different levels. The schools are an order of magnitude higher than comparable schools in the States (at least for us). Life has much greater meaning. Children are freer, and yet given more responsibility. My children already have a sense of devotion to Am Yisrael that it would have been difficult, if not impossible to convey to them in the States.

I thought of this notion of legacy in light of a rather tragic section in Parshat Pinchas. After God instructs Moshe to climb Mount Avarim and gaze upon the Land of Israel before his death, Moshe asks God to appoint a new leader for the Jewish people. Rashi wonders: why does he wait this long? After all, he knew that he was going to die long before, so why does he only ask God to appoint a new leader at this point. Rashi's answer always makes me a little sad:

כיון ששמע משה שאמר לו המקום תן נחלת צלפחד לבנותיו
אמר הגיע שעה שאתבע צרכי שיירשו בני את גדולתי. אמר לו
הקב"ה לא כך עלתה במחשבה לפני, כדאי הוא יהושע ליטול
שכר שמושו שלא מש מתוך האהל

When Moshe heard God's instructions regarding Tzafchad's inheritance that went to his daughters he said, "The time has arrived for me to make my own request - that my sons should inherit my greatness. Said God, "That did not enter into consideration before Me. Yehoshua is worthy to receive the reward for his service, for he did not stray from within your tent."

After everything Moshe had done for God and the Jewish people; after all his hard work and dedication; after giving up his nice life in Midyan to save the Jewish nation, separating from his wife, suffering through the forty years in the desert - after everything, all he wants is one thing. הגיע שעה שאתבע

צרכי - "the time has come for me to claim my needs." For all that he had done: rescuing a nation, transmitting the Torah to them, remaking world history single-handedly; none of that was enough. He wanted his legacy to be his children. And that he could not have.

I listen regularly to a podcast called "This American Life." A recent episode called "Origin Stories" contained a story about advertising executive Julian Koenig, who made up famous ad campaigns like the "Think Small" campaign for the VW Beetle. Apparently, a former colleague claimed credit for much of his work, and Julian Koenig has spent a ton of time trying to retake credit for his work. But why, his daughter asked him, did he care that much about who got credit? After all, no one really knows about this stuff or cares, and anyone who does care already knows the truth? His daughter Sarah, who narrates the story says,

He's eighty eight years old now, so his legacy is understandably on his mind. And even though he did famous campaigns: for all sorts of good causes: gun control, nuclear proliferation, Robert Kennedy's senatorial and presidential campaign, my father's not really satisfied with his work.

Said Julian:

Advertising is built on puffery, and on deception, and I don't think that anyone can go proudly into the next world with a career built on deception, no matter how well they do.

On one hand, it's impressive to see a person capable of looking back at his life's work with honesty and candor. But from another perspective, all I can think is: How sad. How many people will look back at a life of work spent sitting at a desk in front of a computer at an office, knowing that they helped corporations grow and prosper, or computers talk to one another, but spent less time on our true legacies - the values and principles they passed to their children; the energy they spent on their people, or their relationship with God?

