

PINCHAS (NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)

Why Don't You Just...um, uh... Speak Nicely?

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

“Shut up!”

“You can just go __ ____!”

“Drop ____!”

Isn't it terrible what we sometimes allow ourselves to say to people? It's a good thing we don't mean it, right? Right?

Last week we read of a devastating plague that wiped out 24,000 people. How many survivors were left?

It was after the plague that G-d spoke to Moses and to Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest, saying, “Take a census of the entire Israelite community by paternal lines...” (Numbers, 26:1-2)

The Torah records, by tribe, the names of the major family groups. After listing the family groups of each tribe, the Torah gives a population total for that tribe.

For example:

Reuben was Israel's first-born. The descendants of Reuben were the Enochite family from Enoch, the Paluite family from Palu, the Chetzronite family from Chetzron, and the Karmite family from Karmi. These were the Reubenite families, and their tally was 43,730. (Ibid, verses 5-7)

The Torah identifies families through the fathers. (Jewish status is determined based upon matrilineal descent. The child of a Jewish mother is Jewish, regardless of whom the father is. Family status, however, is determined by patrilineal descent. The son of a Kohain is a Kohain, regardless of the mother's tribe. The son of a Levite is a Levite, etc.)

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Torah lists the families based upon the sons of the heads of the tribes. In the example above, Enoch, Palu, Chetzron, and Karmi were the sons of Reuben. They were, therefore, the fathers of their respective family groups within the tribe.

There are a few exceptions in this method of listing. One of those exceptions is the Tribe of Asher. The list starts off typically, mentioning Asher's sons and their families. Then we see some grandsons. (Still typical.) Suddenly, the Torah throws in a "token" daughter:

The name of Asher's daughter was Serach. (Verse 46)

That's it. A brief mention of Serach, and no mention of her descendants. Who was she and what is she doing in this list?!

Serach was an old lady. A very old lady. From the time Jacob came to Egypt with his family (including his granddaughter Serach) until Moses led the nation, (including Serach) out of Egypt was a period of 210 years. This census, shortly before Moses' death, took place some 40 years later. While we don't know her age when she came to Egypt, Serach was, at the absolute least, 250 years old!

Rashi explains that Serach is mentioned here, although she was not a "family father," simply out of deference to the fact that she was still around after all those years. She was, presumably, the only "survivor" of the Israelite descent to Egypt. And now, in the not-too-distant future, she'd be returning home with her people!

How did Serach manage to get so old? How much older did she get? How old was she when she finally succumbed?

She didn't! Serach never died. Targum Yonasan tells us that Serach was one of the few people who never died. Like Elijah the Prophet, she eventually entered the Garden of Eden without ever experiencing the taste of death.

What did Serach do to deserve this special treatment?

It all goes back to Jacob's journey to Egypt. Jacob was sitting in perpetual mourning over the presumed death of his beloved son Joseph. His other sons had now discovered that Joseph was very much alive and well in Egypt. Now the question was how do we gently give this news over to this frail and very old man? How do we tell Jacob that his long-lost son is alive? How do we break this wonderful news to Jacob without shocking him?

That was Serach's job. She went into her grandfather's tent with a harp and started singing. Along with her beautiful melody she included lyrics that stated that her Uncle Joseph was still alive.

Jacob enjoyed the song. So much so that he blessed her. So much so that he bestowed upon her a blessing that would change her life forever. His blessing was that she should live forever.

And so, she did.

Jacob was a powerful man. When Jacob spoke, G-d listened.

But it worked both ways.

Rachel objected to the fact that her father worshipped idols. Therefore she stole them and hid them away. Her father confronted Jacob:

“Why did you steal my gods?” (Genesis, 31:30)

Jacob, who didn’t know that Rachel had taken them, was indignant:

“If you find your gods with anyone here, may he not live!” (Ibid, verse 31)

Shortly afterward, Rachel died in childbirth. When Jacob says that someone should live, G-d listens. When Jacob says that someone should die, G-d hears that too.

And it’s not just Jacob. Judah and his brothers tried to convince Jacob to let them bring Benjamin to Egypt. He adamantly refused. Judah took the ultimate responsibility:

“Send the boy with me.... If I do not bring him back and have him stand here before you, I will have sinned against you for all time.” (Ibid, 43:8-9)

As a result of Judah’s statement of having sinned for all time, he was condemned to have no rest in the next world. It was only Moses’ prayers that averted this eternal decree.

Judah had cursed himself conditionally. (“... **If** I do not bring him back...”) The condition wasn’t fulfilled, so the curse shouldn’t have been fulfilled either. Yet, it was. When Jacob or his son says something, G-d listens.

We, too, are Jacob’s children. We, too, need to be careful with our words. G-d is listening.

We often say mean things without really meaning it. Sometimes we’ll throw a good natured insult as a joke. It’s no joke. Just because we really don’t mean to curse someone doesn’t mean that we’re not cursing them. Words have meaning. We can’t use our mouths to say evil things and just pretend we didn’t do anything.

Our words are a very powerful tool. We must use them carefully. We must only bless our fellow men. G-d is listening.

Let me try this one. May G-d bless you all with good health, and long and meaningful, prosperous lives. May you enjoy true Yiddishe Nachas from your children, grand children, and great-grandchildren. May you merit seeing, in the very near future, the arrival of the Messiah, the rebuilding of the Temple, and a time of true peace and harmony in the world.

Have a great Shabbos.

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