

VAEIRA (EXODUS 6:2-9:35)

Answering the Call of Puti

2007 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

In this week's Torah Portion we are introduced to Pinchas, the grandson of Putiel. He is better known, later on in the Torah, as *Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest*. (Numbers, 25:11)

In listing the family lines of Moses and Aaron, the Torah tells us:

Elazar, the son of Aaron, took one of the daughters of Putiel as a wife, and she bore to him Pinchas... (Exodus, 6:25)

Who was this Putiel? It's not at all clear. Some commentaries say he was a well-known person in his day. It seems from other commentaries that he didn't exist at all; that he was a "composite."

The Talmud (Sotah 43a) indicates that the name "Putiel" is a reference to Joseph. "Putiel" is a play on words for "*pit-peit = conquered*" because Joseph conquered his Evil Inclination when his master's wife tried to seduce him. (See "Nowhere Man".) As well, it is a reference to Moses' father-in-law Jethro, who, in his earlier days as a Midianite Priest, used to "*piteim = fatten*" calves to be sacrificed to idols.

So who was Pinchas' grandfather? The Talmud concludes that Elazar married a daughter of "Putiel," a man who descended from Joseph ("*pit-peit*") on one side and Jethro ("*piteim*") on the other.

What's with the nicknames? Why doesn't the Torah simply tell us the man's name?!! Before we answer this question, let's look a little more closely at his grandson, Pinchas.

Pinchas was a man who was reviled by his contemporaries. Unlike others in Aaron's family, he was not a Kohain -- Priest. That honor was reserved for Aaron, his four sons, and any of their future sons. Pinchas was born earlier; therefore he was a regular Levite. When a Tribal leader engaged in illicit behavior with a Midianite prostitute, Pinchas killed him. His quick thinking ended a plague that G-d had sent against Israel. (See "A Covenant of *Pieces*".)

The victim's relatives were unimpressed; in fact, they were livid. "Who does he think he is?! This 'ben-Puti', this descendent of Jethro, who fattened calves for idol worship, dares to lift a spear against a prince of Israel?!"

Now was not the time to push the Jethro connection:

"G-d spoke to Moses, saying, Pinchas, son of Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest turned My anger away from the Israelites when he zealously took up My cause among them, so that I did not destroy the Israelites in My jealousy. Therefore, tell him that I have given him My Covenant of Peace." (Numbers, 25:10-12)

*"Pinchas, **son of Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest.**"* G-d wanted to emphasize that Pinchas was a descendant of Aaron the Priest. He had acted in a holy fashion. As a result, he too became a Priest, and most of the High Priests descended from him.

But, in one respect, his critics were right. He was "ben-Puti", a descendant of "Putiel." Where they were wrong was in their assumption that being coming from Putiel was something to be ashamed of.

There was a plague going on. On the advice of the evil prophet Bilam, the Moabites and Midianites sent prostitutes into the holy Camp of Israel to entice them to commit the sins of idolatry and promiscuity. Bilam understood that the G-d of Israel would never tolerate such decadence, and that He would turn against His People. And how right he was! The orgy went on, and people were dying in droves. After consulting with Moses, (see "Righteous Indignation vs. Abortion Clinics") Pinchas picked up a spear and killed two of the culprits.

Where did Pinchas find the strength of character to defy the mob and sanctify G-d's name with this controversial act? He got it by being a "ben-Puti."

Pinchas was a descendent of Joseph. All alone, a slave in a foreign country, Joseph was set upon by a snake. His wife's master set her eyes upon him, and repeatedly tried to weaken his resolve. It would have been so easy. Yet, he "*pit-peit = conquered*" his Evil Inclination and maintained his dedication to Torah values. He knew that to give in to this woman was wrong, and he just wouldn't do it, no matter what.

Pinchas was a descendent of Jethro. He had been the High Priest of the national religion. However, he came to terms with his beliefs, and decided that they didn't make sense. He quit. As a result, he was hated in his own country. His daughters were harassed. (See Exodus, 2:16-17) What a difficult decision! He plunged from the pinnacle of Midianite society to the bottom. (Imagine if the Pope suddenly announced to his followers that he was trading in his white "Yarmulke" for a black one and becoming Jewish!) It would have been so easy to go with the flow; to continue to "*piteim*", fatten those calves for the dominant religion. But he wouldn't do it. He knew that idol worship was wrong, and he just wouldn't do it, no matter what.

Rabbi Zalman Sorotzkin says that the reason the Torah introduces Pinchas in this week's Torah Portion is to show us what Pinchas was made of. His father had married a daughter of Putiel. Pinchas truly was a ben-Puti. He was the descendent of two towers of strength. These two men overcame the pressures of society and did what is right. Joseph overcame the urge to engage in immoral intimate behavior. Jethro overcame the urge to engage in idolatrous behavior. Their grandson Pinchas, armed with the strength of character of his forbears, had to fight against both urges.

Israel was in trouble. Its moral fiber was unraveling. The twin sins that Joseph and Jethro had defeated were now threatening to defeat Israel. Pinchas "ben-Puti" to the rescue! He saved Israel from G-d's anger by putting into practice what he had learned from those who came before him.

What would have happened had Joseph succumbed? Would it really have mattered? Would it really have made that much of a difference if Jethro hadn't resigned his position as a calf-fattener?

It would have made all the difference in the world. Pinchas would not have had the tools he needed to save Israel from the plague.

You and I are who we are because of what has been passed down to us by our ancestors. Abraham was hospitable and kind. Isaac was self-sacrificing. Jacob was the epitome of truth. We have those attributes in our DNA; sometimes we don't let it show, but it's there.

When we do Mitzvahs and act with integrity, we produce a spiritual legacy that we pass on to our offspring. When we act inappropriately, we do the same.

Let's remember that the next time we're faced with a dilemma to overcome. We can be great because we come from great people. We have the power to make our children great.

It's time to stop "puttering" around!

Have a great Shabbos.

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