

## Unequal Exchange, Incomparable Values

### Parshat Pinchas 5768

By Rabbi Reuven Spolter

My son bases his daily life on his own personal “fairness doctrine.” No, I refer not to the requirement that broadcasters give equal time to liberals and conservatives. Rather, he feels that every decision in our family – every treat and privilege, chore and responsibility – should be doled out in an equal and impartial manner among the various members of our family. So, when things don’t seem to happen that way; when one child enjoys a treat that others do not; or more often – when he feels overly burdened by the taxing demands of his parents (“Clean your room.”; “Please set the table for dinner.”) – he will immediately wonder aloud why the responsibility falls upon him and not a sibling. (“Why do I have to do it?” “Why does she get that treat?”) If the answer does not meet to his satisfaction (Usually I simply say, tongue firmly in cheek, “Because I like him better.”), I get the immediate response, “But that’s not fair.” Indeed it’s not. Life’s not fair. Things are not always equal. We don’t treat our children the same, because they have different needs, wants and attitudes. But still, to a child, it sometimes seems that it really is “not fair.”

This week I feel like my son. It’s not fair. Why should we have to give up five living prisoners, among them a notorious, brutal, unrepentant murderer, in exchange for the bodies of soldiers killed over two years ago? Shouldn’t we exchange live prisoners for living soldiers and dead bodies for dead terrorists? Why do we give two hundred bodies back, and get only two in return? In my family vernacular, “It’s not fair!”

No, it’s not. But the events that played themselves out in Israel this week highlight the stark contrast between Israel and her enemies. And to my mind, rather than highlight the weakness of Israel, this week’s exchange emphasizes the strength of the Jewish State, and the reason why we will prevail in the end.

In Parshat Pinchas Moshe finally realizes that he has reached the end of the line. God tells him to climb Mount Avarim, gaze upon the beauty of splendor of the Promised Land, and cross over into the World to Come. Moshe worries not about himself, of course, but about the people he leads. “What about them?” he asks God. “Who will succeed me as their leader?” So he proceeds to give God some advice about who to choose to lead the Jewish nation, telling God,

יְפַקֵּד ה' אֱלֹקֵי הַרוּחֹת לְכָל בֶּשָׂר אִישׁ עַל הָעֵדָה: אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא לִפְנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יָבֵא לִפְנֵיהֶם וְאֲשֶׁר יוֹצֵאֵם וְאֲשֶׁר יִבְיָאֵם וְלֹא תִהְיֶה עֵדוּת ה' כְּצֵאֵן אֲשֶׁר אֵין לָהֶם רֹעֵה:

Let the LORD, the God of the spirits of all flesh, set a man over the congregation, who may go out before them, and who may come in before them, and who may lead them out, and who may bring them in; that the congregation of the LORD be not as sheep which have no shepherd.

Aside from the astounding nature of Moshe’s concern for his people, even in the face of his own death, we wonder about the qualities that he describes as crucial to lead the Nation of Israel. Why does he refer to God as אֱלֹקֵי הַרוּחֹת – “the God of the spirits of all flesh”? Why does he mean that the new leader should “go out before them”? Rashi’s comments enlighten us not just about Moshe’s nature, but about our expectations of all Jewish leaders. Why call God אֱלֹקֵי הַרוּחֹת? Rashi tells us that,

אמר לפניו רבש"ע גלוי וידוע לפניך דעתו של כל אחד ואחד ואין דומין זה לזה, מנה עליהם מנהיג שיהא סובל כל אחד ואחד לפי דעתו [Moshe] said before Him, Master of the World, it is revealed and known before you that the attitudes of each one of them is unique. Appoint over them a leader who will exhibit patience for each one of them according to their understanding.

What does Moshe mean that a leader should “go out before them”? Rashi explains this phrase in the context of military leadership:

לא כדרך מלכי האומות שיושבים בבתיהם ומשלחין את חיילותיהם למלחמה, אלא כמו שעשיתי אני שנלחמתי בסיוחן ועוג, שנאמר (במדבר כא, לד) אל תירא אותו. וכדרך שעשה יהושע, שנאמר (יהושע ה, יג) וילך יהושע אליו ויאמר לו הלנו אתה וגו'. וכן בודד הוא אומר (ש"א יח, כ) כי הוא יוצא ובא לפניהם, יוצא בראש ונכנס בראש

Not in the manner of the kings of the nations of the world, who sit in their houses and send their soldiers to war. Rather, [they should do] like I myself did, that I personally fought against Sichon and God, as it is written, “Do not fear him.” (Bamidbar 21:34) And [he should follow] in the manner of Yehoshua, as it is written, “and Yehoshua

went out to him and he said, are you with us...” (Yehoshua 5:13) And regarding David is says, “For he goes out before them and returns before them,” (Shmuel I 18:16) – he leaves at the head and returns at the head.

In reality, both comments of Rashi highlight the uniqueness of Jewish leadership and how our leaders relate to their soldiers. Sending soldiers into battle requires courage, fortitude and judgment. But even more significantly, a Jewish leader must also care more about his soldiers than he does himself. Steven Ambrose writes in D-Day,

In North Africa in 1943 General Eisenhower had reprimanded a general officer who had built an elaborate, bombproof underground HQ for himself, where he stayed during the Katterine Pass battle. Eisenhower told him to go on a front-line inspection tour and explained to the reluctant warrior the simplest truth of war: “Generals are expendable, just as is any other item in an army.”

The troops of World War II loved Eisenhower for the simple reason that he never took them for granted. He would spend hours touring the barracks of ordinary soldiers, asking many about their hometowns, giving them encouragement and thanks. And while he remained by necessity behind the front lines and sent them into battle, many to their deaths, they knew that he thought about each of them, and took none of them for granted.

Eisenhower modeled precisely the ethic for Jewish leaders sending their soldiers into battle. Leading soldiers into battle conveys the unmistakable message that his life carries no more importance than theirs, and that he shares the dangers of battle together with them. And, even if he remains behind the battlefield, Jewish leadership requires consideration of the welfare of each and every soldier. A leader must convey to his subordinates that he will always consider and protect them to the best of his ability. Moshe tells God, that H, the אֱלֹקֵי הַרוּחֹת – who truly appreciates the unique nature of each and every Jew, must select a leader than can exhibit the very same level of appreciation. That person must understand that because of the true significance and importance of each Jew, he may never send his soldiers out en masse – as a group to the slaughter, but instead must lead himself, exposing himself to the same dangers and concerns that they face in the ultimate test of battle.

Jewish soldiers are not expendable. Each and every one carries with him the worries and concerns not only of Jewish leaders, but of the entire nation of Israel. We worry about every tank crew, every man in the infantry, every air force pilot. Our soldiers are not numbers, but picture and people. We think about our missing in action; pray for them and work hard for their safe return. And that’s why life is not fair. It’s not fair because we worry, and they don’t. Rashi’s comments from centuries ago resonate so strongly today: “Not in the manner of the kings of the nations of the world, who sit in their houses and send their soldiers to war.” While we worry, the leaders of the terrorist groups send their boys not just to kill, but to kill themselves in the goal of murdering innocent civilians. They engage in brutal tactics, killing their own people (both in Gaza and Lebanon) to solidify their holds over their territories. And they send out others to fight while they cower in protected bunkers, fearful for their own lives, but perfectly willing to sacrifice the lives of those they deem more expendable than their own. So it’s not fair. It’s not fair because we play by a different set of rules; because we truly do value our own dead soldiers more than they value their living children. But our values – instead of demonstrating our weakness, serves as a testament to our strength. The children of Israel are not sheep without a shepherd. Every soldier – whether dead or alive – has great value and importance.

Shlomo Goldwasser, Ehud's father said, "If Nasrallah's great achievement was to conceal the fate of our sons, then I pity him and the Lebanese people. If Hizbullah's great achievement is the release of Kuntar, who is nothing but a repulsive murderer, then I pity them." Because Israel appreciates that value and upholds the ethical, moral and spiritual principles that guide her, Israel will continue to have the strength, courage and perseverance to prevail in its struggle with Islamic terror and bring security to her people, and peace to the Middle East.

May the memories of Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Reggev be a source of strength and pride, and always remind us of the unique and holy nature of the Children of Israel.