

Naso

The Torah recognised that most adulterous affairs start innocuously, with both parties spending just a little more time than necessary or appropriate in a situation of privacy and compromise. Hence the biblical prohibition is couched in terms of her having ‘secluded herself’ with another man (Nu. 5:13), When human emotions are involved, one harmless step accelerates inexorably to many irreversible leaps.

Beha’alotcha

Eldad and Medad were possessed of such humility that they refused to assemble at the Tent of Meeting to be selected as elders (Nu. 11:26). Nevertheless, God’s spirit descended upon them ‘in the camp.’ Judaism is not a cleric-led religion, neither is high office a precondition for spiritual authority. Many of the greatest sages of talmudic times earned their livelihood through menial work and their illustrious status by piety, scholarship and self-sacrifice.

Shelach Lecha

Ten of the spies brought back a critical report of Israel; only two gave it their whole-hearted support. Sadly, in our own day, the proportion seem hardly to have changed!

Korach

The divine choice of Aaron as High Priest was demonstrated by a contest of staffs (Nu.17:16ff.). The pretenders to his position placed their staffs, as did Aaron, in the Tent of Meeting. The next morning, Aaron’s sprouted blossoms, buds and almonds, while theirs remained unchanged. True leadership is demonstrable not by the wielding of the staff, but by the fruits and benefits that it bestows.

Chukkat

The Red Heifer ritual of purification is described as a “statute,” namely a religious prescription that has a higher and hidden spiritual rationale. How apt that the act of purification, and emotional release, after contact with the dead should be as inscrutable as death itself.

Balak

How strange that Bilaam, the prophet called upon to defy God’s will and curse His people, should acknowledge that he “cannot transgress the word of the Lord, *my* God, in any minor or major manner” (Nu. 22:18). But perhaps not so strange: Throughout history, nations have been execrating, pillaging and murdering brethren who profess the same God. Tragically the brotherhood of man is hardly a corollary of the fatherhood of God.

Pinchas

“Be among the disciples of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing it” (*Avot*). How ironical that the hereditary priesthood was conferred on Aaron’s offspring only as a reward for an act of impulsive execution on the part of Aaron’s grandson, Pinchas. Ignoring the due process of law, he plunged a sword through a prince of Israel and his idolatrous Midianite consort. Peace and pacifism are, more often than not, conflicting concepts.

Mattot-Massei

Whatever enters the fire you shall put through fire, and it shall be pure (Nu.31:23).

A fundamental principle of ‘kashering’ is derived from this verse, namely that in order to purge a utensil of the flavour it has absorbed we employ the identical element that was the original medium of absorption. Hence, if the flavour was imparted through boiling, we boil the pan in hot water to kasher it. If its flavour was imparted through roasting on fire, we ‘kasher’ it by the direct application of fire.