

Naso

Write this song for yourselves and teach it to the Children of Israel, and place it in their mouths (Deut. 31:19). Torah is not a catechism or a body of dry legislation to be learnt by heart. It is a veritable ‘song,’ a joyful celebration of the fact that God ‘chose us from among all other peoples to grant us His law.’ The manner in which we *leyen* the Torah, to a lively and joyful melody (*nigun* or *trop*), reflects the spirit of that divine instruction.

Beha’alotkha

Significantly, Moses was instructed to choose his seventy elders, forerunners of Israel’s later supreme legislature, from the ranks of the ordinary Israelites (Nu.11:16) and not from among the priests and Levites, the existing spiritual leaders and ministers of the Sanctuary. This comprehensive and democratic representation exposes the falsehood of Korach’s imminent charge that Moses and Aaron had arrogated leadership to themselves alone.

Shelach Lekha

The last letter of the first word of the Shema (*ayin*) and the last letter of the last word (*dalet*) are prescribed to be written large, so that they make up the word *eid*, ‘testimony’. It is not sufficient for Jews merely to ‘hear,’ and be convinced, that their ‘God is the One God.’ We have also *to testify* to it by our unswerving faith, our values and our exemplary behaviour.

Korach

The Deputy President of the ruling ANC party in South Africa is but the latest in an interminable list of leaders and politicians to use their influence for fraudulent purposes. It is axiomatic that ‘power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.’ This explains why Moses rebuts Korach’s attempt to discredit his leadership by the assertion “I haven’t taken a single ass from any of them, neither have I hurt one of them” (Nu.16:15). Moses used his authority exclusively for the benefit of Israel and the glory of God.

Chukat

Zot chukkat ha-Torah, “This is a *statute* of the Torah.” Maimonides’ definition of a *chok* is ‘a law (such as the Red Heifer) whose reason is unknown.” On that basis, Maimonides affirms that every single mitzvah does possess a rationale, and that we may therefore legitimately seek out the reason even for the *chukkim*. The maxim, *Men tor nisht fregen*, ‘We daren’t ask,’ has no basis in Judaism. Spiritual exploration should have no fetters and no boundaries.

Balak

The Moabite king, Balak, had to explain to his hired Mesopotamian sorcerer, Bilaam, that Israel was ‘a nation that had come out of Egypt.’ The latter had clearly never heard of, or had contact with, Israel. Already in biblical times there existed terrorists who were prepared to bring about the destruction of innocent people – indeed of an entire nation – that had done them absolutely no harm.

We wish a *refuah sheleimah* to the wounded, maimed and traumatised victims of the recent atrocities in London and Netanya.

Pinchas

While Moses stood by, unable to deal with the public act of indecency and idolatry perpetrated by the Israelite prince and the Midianite woman, Pinchas rushed forward and took the law into his own hands. His reward, ironically, was ‘a covenant of peace.’

Peace only follows when a society refuses to tolerate evil and violence in its midst, and instead takes resolute and even extreme action for the moral and physical protection of its members.

Mattot

Israel is holy unto the Lord,
The firstfruits of His harvest;
No one who devoured her went unpunished,
Evil always overtook them.. (Jeremiah 2:3)

These sentiments represent both a challenge and a boast. We should not feel constrained, in the interest of ‘political correctness,’ to deny the former, or, through lack of conviction, to affirm the latter.

Massei

The Sidrah enumerates the forty two stops that the Israelites made in the course of their forty years of wandering in the desert. What an incredible coincidence it is that we should read this itinerary of exile and displacement just at the period when we commemorate the destruction of the Temple (70CE) which initiated 2000 years of exile, displacement and restlessness.