

Shabbat Parashat Pinchas

Thoughts on Returning To Shul by Rabbi Wilkinson

In March the Va'ad wrote to everyone to say 'we have taken the very difficult decision not to hold any more services until b'eH we return to more normal times'. The last parasha that we read in shul was Ki Thisa. Now we are at Parasha Pinchas and planning our limited return to Shul.

With Parashat Pinchas," writes R' Moshe Zvi Neriya z"l, "we feel a refreshing breeze blowing." Rabbi Neriya was not considering our return to a well ventilated building but pointing out that not only are all the holidays mentioned here, but we are introduced to the new generation, the one that will enter Eretz Yisrael. In this parashah, continues R' Neriya, Yehoshua is named to succeed Moshe. Yehoshua never willingly left the tent where Moshe taught Torah, but he was nevertheless someone that Hashem and Moshe could trust to lead the Jews into war. Chazal say that the elders of the generation never let go of Moshe and Aharon (see Bava Batra 75a), but the youth were inspired by Yehoshua and Pinchas. Bnei Ysrael were still in the desert but change was imminent. There would be leadership, but it would be different to what everyone knew. They would all be moving out of their 'comfort zones'.

When Moshe actually asks Hashem to appoint an appropriate successor he says: "May Hashem, G-d of the spirits of all flesh, appoint a man over the assembly..." [Bamidbar 26:6]. Rashi alludes to the Medrash Tanchuma, which comments, "Just as the faces of no two people are alike, so too the thought processes of no two people are alike: everyone has a mind of his own." The Medrash wonders why Moshe refers to the Almighty here as "G-d of the spirits" (Elokai haRuchos). This is a rare expression for referring to the Master of the Universe. What does it mean?

The Medrash explains that Moshe, as the time of his death approached, turned to the Almighty and said "Master of the Universe it is known and revealed to You that everyone has a mind of his own, with different wants and needs. The Jewish people need a new leader, but You know as well as I do that they are a tough group. They are very opinionated, and everyone has their own philosophy. They need a leader who can relate to every single person, to each individual and to his or her own way of looking at life." This is why Moshe refers to G-d as Elokai haRuchos. You, who know the spirit of every person and how different they each are, please appoint a leader who can deal with the different spirits of people.

The Medrash began by saying "Just as their faces are not alike (so too their opinions are not alike)." Reb Bunim Eiger ztl asks: why does the Medrash start out like that? We all know that people do not look alike. Why not just come right to the point: "People's opinions are different from one another; their philosophies are different." Why do we need the preamble "Just like their faces are not alike...?"

Reb Bunim Eiger responds by saying: "Did it ever bother you that the person sitting next to you does not look like you?" Look around this room. No two people look the same. Does that bother anyone? The Gemara states that it is one of the wonders of creation that of all the billions of people born since the beginning of time, no two people look exactly alike. It does not bother anyone one iota.

The Medrash is saying "It does not (and it should not) bother anyone that his face is not like anyone else's face, so why when people think differently and look at life differently do people find it so bothersome?" Why is it that we feel 'If you do not see it my way, you are an idiot?' The Medrash is teaching that it should NOT bother us that people think differently from one another.

Thoughts on Returning To Shul by Rabbi Wilkinson (continues)

What is the relevance of these divrei Torah?

We are in 'more normal times' but many things about our Shul will be quite different to when we left in March. To borrow and adapt a phrase "It will be Shul, but not as we know it". Government guidelines and medical advice are constantly changing but for now, both medically and Halachically, there are significant restrictions in how we will run our services: There will be no Kiddush after davening and no opportunity to socialise. The davening will feel different as the room will be quite empty, some parts of the service will be omitted, fewer people will be actively involved in the service and only the Ba'al tefillah can sing; everyone else is required to join in far more quietly than usual.

We are all required to wear a face mask. Some people find them uncomfortable. I know I do. Some people (possibly those who didn't hear Professor Lovett speak on Sunday evening) may question whether face masks are actually essential. I wrote earlier that the Medrash is teaching that it should not bother us that people think differently from one another. We can think whatever we want about the face masks and the changes that we have had to institute. At the end of the day, however, everyone must follow the shul guidelines which are necessary for everyone's safety.

This week several Gedolim issued a joint statement about how we should be behaving: "We also have to remember that at a time like this, the binding mitzvah upon us is guarding our health," the Gedolim wrote. "Chamira sakanta mei'isura' [one must be more machmir to avoid danger to life than violating issurim] and chalilah to become lax in this."

"It is appropriate to guard [one's health by adhering to regulations] and be mechazeik in this for the zechut and the protection of Am Yisrael."

The Rosh Yeshiva of Slabodka Harav Dov Landau shlita added that "It's forbidden to relate to issues of pikuach nefesh like a type of game." "To do things in violation of the doctors' orders is a terrible avla (violation). Wearing a mask during these times is a total obligation on each and every person without any exceptions. It's a complete sin to refrain from wearing it."

Downing Street has also issued a reminder that face coverings should cover both the nose and the mouth if they are to help prevent the spread of covid-19. Boris Johnson's official spokesman stressed that masks are only effective if they cover the wearer's nose. He said: "Covid 19 is a respiratory disease. If someone has the virus, droplets can leave the nose and mouth and infect others when someone breathes, speaks, sneezes, laughs or coughs. Therefore, a face covering should cover both the nose and mouth to reduce the spread of coronavirus droplets, helping to protect others."

The Va'ad have worked extremely hard to ensure that we can resume davening in our shul. I am grateful to them for everything they have done over this challenging time. We all know that the arrangements are not ideal, but they are, we hope, a temporary, interim step giving us a chance to join together and daven in a meaningful way. It is exciting and progress for those of us who can attend but clearly there are those for whom medical advice will continue to direct that they do not attend. No one should feel pressured to return to shul if they feel concerned in so doing.

Whilst we are moving out of lockdown, coronavirus is still a threat. The words I wrote in March are still relevant: May it be the will of our Father in Heaven that in the merit of our fervent prayers, mitzvot, Torah study, and unity, that all of us and the entire world merit salvation and a complete recovery.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Alan Wilkinson

Shul COVID-19 Etiquette

We respectfully require shul attendees to:

- Use hand sanitizer every time you enter the shul
- Wear a face mask covering your mouth and nose at all times on the premises
- Remain seated at all times except as part of the davening
- DO NOT walk around the shul but remain in your designated seat
- DO NOT kiss tallitot, books mezzuzot or shake hands
- DO NOT SING
- Bring your own books or if using shul books replace in the marked box at the end of the service
- DISPOSE of used tissues immediately after use in the pedal bins provided
- KEEP DOORS OPEN AT ALL TIMES
- AFTER THE SERVICES EXIT SHUL AT A SOCIAL DISTANCE MEETING UP WITH FAMILY ON MANOR MARK CRESCENT

During the service please note:

- The service will commence at 9.30 am on Shabbat Morning at "Rabbi Yisrael"
- Only the Baal Tefillah/Baal Koreh will remove and put away the Sefer Torah
- DO NOT approach the Sefer Torah on removal from or return to the Aron
- There will not be Maftir. Leyning will end with Haftorah and Kaddish
- NO call ups except on a simcha
- At the end of Leyning the Gabbay will make Joint Meshiberas (please DO NOT come forward with names)
- Rabbi Wilkinson will say the Memorial Prayers and Prayer for Queen and the State of Israel

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