**Return – נ NUN and *Parshat Pinhas***

One of my favorite Saturday Night Live sketches begins in one of those exotic import stores, filled with incense holders, meditation bowls, handmade musical instruments and the like. A stoner-type guy who works there comes up to some customers and starts showing them all the crafty knick-knack imports: “This is a Senegalese lute carved from deer wood, used for fertility rituals… oh and you can put your weed in there!”

They move from one piece to another. Each time the stoner guy describes the intricacies and history of the item, he concludes by showing them some hole or little compartment in it and says, “Oh, can you can put your weed in there!” – and stuffs a baggy of marijuana into it.

Finally, a police officer comes into the store. When the stoner sees the cop, he anxiously tells his customers to say nothing about weed. The officer walks over to them and says, “How ya doing?” The stoner clenches his jaw, trying to restrain himself, and then bursts out uncontrollably: “WEED!! WEED!! WEED!!”

The police officer says, “Why are you yelling that?” He then examines the knick-knack he is holding, finds the weed and arrests him.

The Talmud says, “A person’s *yetzer* (drive, inclination, desire) grows stronger each day and desires his death” (Sukkah 52a). In the sketch, all the stoner guy has to do to not get caught is nothing. But he can’t help himself – he yells, “Weed! Weed!”

How often are we given the opportunity for life to go well and smoothly, and somehow we find ourselves messing the whole thing up? As I look back on my life, I can think of plenty of such times. In fact, I think it’s safe to say that the most dangerous person to me has been myself!

Why do we have this *yetzer hara* (the “bad inclination”) – this drive toward self-destruction?

In his introduction to *Pirkei Avot,* HaRav Yochanan Zweig proposes something I find very compelling. He says that the reason we tend to sabotage ourselves is actually because of our *enormous* *potential.* We know, on some level, how great our potential is, and this creates a kind of psychological pressure; we become terrified of not living up to our full potential.

So, to avoid the pain of not doing our best, we try to convince ourselves that we have no potential at all, that we are worthless; seen in this way, the purpose of our self-destructive behaviors are to prove our own worthlessness to ourselves and avoid the pain of failure.

**Parshat Pinhas**

The *parshah* begins in the aftermath of another self-destructive incident. The Israelites are on the threshold of entering the Promised Land; all they have to do keep focused and stay on track. But what happens? They are seduced into an idolatrous orgy by the Midianites! At the height of it, Pinhasgrabs a spear and kills an Israelite man and Midianite women in sexual embrace, thus appeasing “God’s wrath” and saving many Israelite lives. The end of *Parshat Balak* says:

וַיַּ֗רְא פִּֽינְחָס֙ בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָ֔ר בֶּֽן־אַהֲרֹ֖ן הַכֹּהֵ֑ן וַיָּ֙קׇם֙ מִתּ֣וֹךְ הָֽעֵדָ֔ה וַיִּקַּ֥ח רֹ֖מַח בְּיָדֽוֹ׃

*When Pinhas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he rose up from the assembly and took a spear in his hand.*

וַ֠יָּבֹ֠א אַחַ֨ר אִֽישׁ־יִשְׂרָאֵ֜ל אֶל־הַקֻּבָּ֗ה וַיִּדְקֹר֙ אֶת־שְׁנֵיהֶ֔ם אֵ֚ת אִ֣ישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁ֖ה אֶל־קֳבָתָ֑הּ וַתֵּֽעָצַר֙ הַמַּגֵּפָ֔ה מֵעַ֖ל בְּנֵ֥י יִשְׂרָאֵֽל׃

*He came after the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through her belly, and the plague against the Children of Israel was checked…*

*– BaMidbar* (Numbers) 25:7-8, *Parshat Balak*

*Parshat Pinhas* then begins with Pinhas being rewarded for his heroic murder by receiving a *Brit Shalom –* a “Covenant of Peace.” God says:

פִּֽינְחָ֨ס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָ֜ר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹ֣ן הַכֹּהֵ֗ן הֵשִׁ֤יב אֶת־חֲמָתִי֙ מֵעַ֣ל בְּנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל בְּקַנְא֥וֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִ֖י בְּתוֹכָ֑ם וְלֹא־כִלִּ֥יתִי אֶת־בְּנֵֽי־יִשְׂרָאֵ֖ל בְּקִנְאָתִֽי׃  
  
*“Pinhas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Children of Israel with his passion for My passion among them, so that I did not consume the Children of Israel in My passion.”*  
לָכֵ֖ן אֱמֹ֑ר הִנְנִ֨י נֹתֵ֥ן ל֛וֹ אֶת־בְּרִיתִ֖י שָׁלֽוֹם׃  
  
*“Therefore I say, behold! I grant him My covenant of peace!”*

*–* 25:11-12, *Parshat Pinhas*

For many, it’s hard to see anything positive in this story. Murder in the name of religious zealotry is an unfortunate and embarrassing part of humanity and of our religious history.

And yet, if we dig deeper into the underlying currents of the narrative, there is an urgent message: there is a powerful drive toward self-sabotage, toward self-destruction. It is seductive, sexy, exciting and relentless. It will disguise itself in all kinds of ways to trick us and lure us into its power.

But, you can overcome it, if you are aware of it!

In fact, when we are aware of it, it has not power at all. The Talmud says that in the future, the *yetzer hara* will be revealed for what it really is: when the wicked see the *yetzer hara*, it will appear as a thin hair. They will weep and say, “How were we ensnared by such a thin hair?”

The key to not being ensnared is being conscious of it, and clearly holding the *kavanah –* the intention – that we are notliving to serve our ego, but rather we are here to serve the Divine with the enormous potential that is our essence, our own Divine Nature. Yes, we may fall many times, but the key is to get back up again; it is to not merely *have* faith, but to *be faithful* to our deepest nature, to return again and again, to do *t’shuvah*.

This power to faithfully return, though we may repeatedly fall, is the path of נ *nun.*

*Nun* means “fish” in Aramaic, and the “fish” swims in the “water” – the endless flow of Reality in time, the non-solidity of all forms, the impermanence of all things. Fish don’t close their eyes, hinting that *nun* is about fully confronting the “water” – the temporary nature of things, not being in denial about death. Only the Divine, only Reality Itself, creating and manifesting all forms, is Eternal. *Nun* נ also begins the word נָפוּל *naful,* “fallen” – hinting that though we may “fall” from our open-eyed relationship with Reality, we always have the power to return.

**Fetishizing the Temporary**

There are many reasons we might fall from our deepest intentions, but they all point back to the basic psychological tendency to fixate on something, while ignoring the big picture. In the story, this is represented by the Children of Israel being seduced by the Midianites into idolatry.

After all, what is idolatry?

In the Zohar and in many other texts, idolatry is understood not primarily as the worship of statues, but as seeing sacredness as *separate from its Divine Source.*

For example, let’s say you recognize the sacredness of a particular flower. Good!

But then, a landscaper guy comes along and accidentally cuts it down with his weed-wacker, and so you murder the landscaper because he cut down your sacred flower. That would be idolatry, not because the flower isn’t sacred, but because in your mind you have cut off the sacredness of the flower from the sacredness of human life; you have fetishized the flower; you have made an “idol” out of it.

Similarly, when Pinhascomes along and pierces the couple with his spear, he is “piercing” through false separation; he is “killing” the seductive force of idolatry, the tendency to confine the Eternal to something finite. This is why he is given the *brit shalom –* the “covenant of peace” – for such a “violent” act. The “violence” is really the cutting away of attachment that usually comes from loss, from the suffering of clinging to things that are impermanent, and from having whatever is most beloved eventually torn away from us.

The suffering of loss – the loss of others, the loss of our success and status, the loss that comes from our own spiritual “falls,” the loss of our own faculties and ultimately of our own lives – this suffering is unavoidable; it is an aspect of our humanness. But when we open deeply to this suffering, when we allow it to “pierce our bellies,” so to speak, we too can win the *brit shalom* *–* the inner peace that comes from letting go of all separate forms of God, and returning again to the Eternal behind all forms; this is the path of נ *nun.*

A different Pinhas, the Hassidic Rabbi Pinhas, was once asked by a disciple: “Why should *Moshiakh,* (the Messiah) be born on *Tisha B’Av,* the anniversary of the destruction of the Temple, as tradition tells us?”

He answered: “The seed which is planted in the earth must disintegrate before the new life can sprout from it. That moment when an old form dissolves and a new one is born – this is the moment of *Ayin,* of No-Thingness. In the husk of forgetting, the power of memory grows – that is the power of redemption! On the day of destruction, power lies at the bottom of the depths, and grows from there. That is why, on *Tisha B’Av,* we sit on the floor and visit graves; that is why, on this day, *Moshiakh* is born.

**Food for Consciousness**

Pain and loss, then, are one side of an equation; the other side is the peace that comes from letting go, as well as the sprouting of new potential. These two sides are also reflected in two different types of pain:

The first type of pain is like when you stub your toe. It happens suddenly, and once it happens, you’re going to feel pain; there is no choice involved. The second is like when someone is talking too much at you, and you want to escape. The discomfort increases moment by moment, but you can leave the situation any time you choose.   
  
These two kinds of pain require two different responses. The first requires simple acceptance; there is no way to escape the intense pain once you stub your toe, for example. The second requires conscious choice about when to stay in the discomfort and keep listening to the person talk at you, and when to simply walk away.  
  
Yet for some reason, we often confuse these two situations. We can trick ourselves into thinking we're “trapped” by someone talking at us, and not realize that we have a choice. When we finally do escape, we might be angry at the person: “How could they keep talking at me like that! How insensitive!” And yet, we could have left any time; we don't take the power that is ours, and instead blame someone outside ourselves for our experience.   
  
Or, we lament and complain about some discomfort that we can’t control, when we should really just accept it; it has already happened – we have no control! So why be in conflict with it?  
  
צַ֚ו אֶת־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל וְאָֽמַרְתָּ֖ אֲלֵהֶ֑ם אֶת־קָרְבָּנִ֨י לַחְמִ֜י לְאִשַּׁ֗י רֵ֚יחַ נִֽיחֹחִ֔י תִּשְׁמְר֕וּ לְהַקְרִ֥יב לִ֖י בְּמֽוֹעֲדֽוֹ   
   
*Command the children of Israel and say to them, “My offerings, My food for My fires, My satisfying aroma, you shall take care to offer Me in its special time…*

*– BaMidbar* (Numbers) 28:2, *Parshat Pinhas*

When we draw awareness into our pain, it becomes לַחְמִי לְאִשַּׁי – *food for My fires* – that is, food for awareness, because awareness is strengthened through the practice of being fully present with whatever we feel the impulse to resist. This the first kind of pain, like stubbing your toe; it is the pain of what has already happened.  
   
That is why the offering is called קָרְבָּנִי – *My Korban* – because *korban* means to “draw near.” The magic is that even though we are drawing awareness into something unpleasant, the attitude of openness can transmute the pain into a connection with the Divine, with Reality, with our own being, which are all ultimately the same thing.   
  
The second type of pain, as in the example of someone talking at you, is the רֵיחַ נִֽיחֹחִי –*pleasing aroma*. That’s because there is a sweetness when we claim our own power to change our situation, and not blame others; we can choose to leave. This is the empowerment that arises from realizing our potential for choice.  
  
Our response to these different kinds of discomfort must be done בְּמֽוֹעֲדֽוֹ – it its special time – meaning, our response has to be in alignment with the reality of our situation. Is it time to simply accept the loss that has already happened, or is it time to act and “lose” whatever is holding us back?

Both of these – acceptance of suffering and rising out from suffering, falling and returning, are the path of נ *nun.* Through this path, we are reminded that *falling off the path is itself part of the path;* nothing is left out. That which we fear most, that which threatens to tear our most cherished away from us, leads us back to faith, to return.

There is a story that when Rabbi Dov Baer was five years old, his home was destroyed in a fire. When he saw his mother grieving and crying over their loss, he asked her, “Mother, should we really be so unhappy about losing a house?”

“I am not sad about the house,” said his mother, “but about our family tree which was burned up. It began with the Talmudic master, Rabbi Yohanan the sandal maker.”

“That’s okay mother,” said the boy, “I will begin a new family tree for you!”