

RADIO PROGRAM - NUMBERS
Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

There is a very curious juxtaposition of different events in the Bible in Numbers in Chapter 27. In fact, if we look closely at this Chapter 27 and the preceding Chapter 26 and even if we go as far back as Chapter 25 starting with Verse 10, we will note that there is a curious juxtaposition of different happenings. In fact, in the synagogue this juxtaposition is stressed because all these chapters, starting from Verse 10 of Chapter 25 and 26 and 27, are read together as a unit in the synagogue. It seems to be a very curious juxtaposition because in this reading we have how Moses appoints Joshua, the son of Nun, to be the leader after him. The truth, of course, is that G-d tells Moses to appoint Joshua to be the leader. It seems very curious why these events are put together in one unit? Why, surrounding the appointment of Joshua as the new leader of the Jewish people, these events that are recounted in Chapter 25, 26, and 27 would be put together, why they should really be stressed in the reading in the synagogue, because they always are read together?

It seems to me that if we look at the events that are numerated in these chapters I think we can learn a lesson for today about what is required of a leader. After all, right now Moses is handing over the leadership of the Jewish people to Joshua. He starts out by saying in Chapter 27, "And Mosesspoke to G-d saying, 'Let the Lord, the G-d of the spirits of all flesh set a man over the congregation. Let the Lord, the G-d of the spirit 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 that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd.' And G-d said to Moshe, 'Take Joshua, the son of Nun, the man who has a spirit in him and you shall place your hand upon him.'" Thus, Joshua was chosen to be the

leader of the Jewish people. There is a tradition in Judaism which says that many of the elders at that time were really upset that Joshua was accepted to be the leader over the Jewish people, that, in effect, G-d appointed him to be the leader. They thought someone more worthy should be appointed to be the leader over the Jewish people. In fact, this tradition says that even Moses thought that this position should really go to his children. The elders thought, of course, that this position should go to them and not to Joshua. Why did they feel this way? They felt this way because Joshua had served under Moses' leadership as almost his servant to a certain extent. He had sat with him and saw how Moses made decisions, worked with him, been with him, had seen what he was doing. The rabbis say he even went so far as to straighten up his office when someone came in to make sure everything was right when visitors came and so forth. The elders thought this was not really a requirement for a leader. In fact, this was really a detriment and not a requirement. Joshua was a man who sat and watched Moses and watched how he did things. They thought this was really not proper, that a leader should have more respect than Joshua displayed.

If we look again at this unit read in the synagogue, we will notice some curious juxtaposition of events. We will notice that this Bible reading starts by telling us about the appointment of Phineas, the son of Aaron, to the perpetual high priesthood. It is interesting to note that he received this appointment of the high priesthood, that it would be in his family for many, many generations, after an act of zealotry, an act of zealotry which, the rabbis also explain, was frowned upon by most of the people. It seems that there was a licentious idol worship taking place right in front of Moses and the whole camp conducted by a prince of the House of Simeon with the daughter of a prince of Midian, and Phineas had taken the law, so to speak, into his

own hands and slew the two right in front of the whole congregation and, by so doing, had stopped the demoralization of the people, but, yet, he was thought to be liable because he had taken the law into his own hands. It was only through G-d's intervention, according to Jewish tradition, that his own life was spared, and he was appointed to the high priesthood.

After that we read how the Jewish people took a census of all the people. After this census we also learn how the daughters of Slochod came before Moses and asked that they be given an inheritance in Israel, because the Land of Israel was not to be allotted and their father had died, and they asked that they also be given an inheritance in Israel since their father left no sons. This, of course, looks at first glance to be a problem mainly of division since these girls were going to marry, and their husband would get a portion and they would have a portion and, thus, have a double portion over everyone else in Israel. Moses then thought he had to confer with G-d, which he did, and G-d said, "Give them their portion." Then we learn about the appointment of Joshua. This is a curious juxtaposition of events because what does one of these events have to do with the others?

It seems to me we are learning here about the requirements of a leader, because Phineas, although he was a zealot, was thought not to be a proper leader in Israel. This is what the rabbis emphasize when they say that Moses said, "And G-d should appoint a man who knows the spirits of all flesh", a man who can get along with everybody, a man who is able to understand the requirements of every person. Phineas, unfortunately, was not a man who could understand the requirements of every person. He many times got angry and thought the moral cause was in his hand and he was morally right, and then he did what he thought should be done. G-d said, "He may be fit to be a priest,

but he is not fit to be the leader of the Jewish people. He may be fit to be a minister, a person who teaches, who tries to instill in the people greater moral values, but he should not really be given authority over the people, because he does not really know how to handle his opponents. He acts too rashly, too quickly." Although he did act for the good of the people and, therefore, he, himself, was spared even though he had acted in a zealous fashion, and that did have something good to say and should always be heard, but because he was a zealot he should not be given authority over the Jewish people.

Immediately after this incident we have a census. The rabbis ask, why do we have a census immediately after the story recounting how Phineas was zealous? To teach us that the important thing is that everyone is counted to be a members of the Jewish people, even those people whose sin brought great trouble upon the Jewish people. They still are part of the Jewish people, that a leader of Phineas' stripe is really not good because he makes a distinction between "us" and "them". Anytime you have a leader who makes a distinction between "us" and "them" you have trouble, because then there is no longer a people. There is a "them" and a "we", an "us" and a "they". This, of course, becomes very difficult because there is no unity among the people. The people disintegrate and pretty soon there is only warring factions. There must always be a feeling that no matter how bad a person really is he is still part of your people and can still repent and do the right thing. This is something that Phineas, to a certain extent, lacked. He was a man who could see distinctions. He could see things that were wrong, but he really did not know how to draw the people together so that those people who were doing wrong could still be counted as part of the people.

That is, too, why the incident of the daughters of Slochod are mentioned in the same place in the Bible. Really, the problem was not one of inheritance (whether women should inherit who would marry and, therefore, their family would have a double portion), but that their father, it turned out, was a sinner. The reason he died was because he had committed a heinous sin. He was about the only one who was executed under Moses' leadership. He was executed because he had violated public morals. He had violated the public good and, therefore, he was executed. The question then arises, do these girls still have a portion in Israel? After all, look at their family, look what happened to them, look at all the trouble their father brought on the people. Are they still worthy to get a portion in Israel? Of course, G-d's answer was yes, they were worthy, because the important thing to remember is that we are all one people. You cannot divide a people into "them" and "us", into "we" and "they". We are all together. We are all one. Only when a leader really recognizes that the people are all one, those who act badly, those whose ideas differ, are all still a part of the Jewish people. I think this is a good lesson for us to remember, especially in this political year, too, when we are choosing our leadership, that we should always look for a leader that never divides the people into "you" and "us", into "they" and "we", but who always talks about a united people, a people who he realizes has faults, a people who he realizes can be better, but a people who can still be, so to speak, redeemed and can work together and can build a better world and can build a better country.