

Reaching for a Covenant of Peace - July 11, 2014

Us.

Them.

A part of the human brain was hard-wired long ago to be prepared for an immediate threat to our existence or for impending danger. Another part of our brain has the ability to take our thinking to a higher level, far above the fear that could cause us to expect doom at every turn, to compete with others in most situations, or to see life in terms of conquests and defeats rather than as a series of opportunities for thoughtful cooperation, productive partnership and constructive compromise.

The Torah portion for this week, Pinchas, begins with God offering a covenant of peace and friendship to Aaron's grandson, Pinchas the priest.

At the end of the previous Torah reading, Pinchas' spear had pierced through an Israelite man and a Midianite woman (by his own hand) as they worshiped a foreign god that was not responsible for their liberation from Egypt.

Some say the covenant was a reward to Pinchas for his act that stilled God's anger at the people's backsliding into idolatry.

Perhaps the covenant was really God's way of telling him that he could express his zealotry for his faith and his people through a violent act only once.

It may appear that it wasn't until the time of the prophets that the Israelites were able to look at a situation with a fresh approach, what we would call "outside the box," moving beyond narrow ways of thinking about situations and about people.

Enter the daughters of Zelophehad – Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah – who came forward in this Torah reading with a radical idea.

Their father had no sons, and they believed that they deserved to have their father's inheritance transferred to them.

Moses took the case to God, who declared that "the plea of the daughters is just."

For the Israelites, this decision transcended, if only for a moment, the "us/them" of rights based on gender. There was only one community, which included both men and woman, who could be seen as equal.

That decision reflected creativity and openness.

It set the stage for Moses's request that God appoint his successor, a leader over the community who would "go out before them and come in before them,

who shall take them out and bring them in, so that the community of the Eternal will not be like a sheep that have no shepherd.”

It was the leader’s task to direct the people, to assure that they had food and drink, to guide them in battle, and to continue to teach them about the meaning of freedom.

It was Joshua who was chosen to succeed Moses, the man with the name meaning “salvation.”

Salvation had a unique significance for the Israelites, and, later, for the Jewish people, as they faced challenges from without and within.

The notion of “us/them” persisted over the centuries as a world was unable to understand a people that was few in number but mighty in spirit and study, a people that believed that salvation ultimately applied to all humanity.

And so we come to today – now – this week.

As rockets fired to perpetuate the “us/them” approach targeted Israeli cities, necessitating a response in self-defense, families mourning their murdered children on both sides extended hearts towards one another.

Even a particularistic sense of peoplehood does not preclude holding onto faith in God as Creator of all humanity, a belief that has led some, in their sadness, to rise above a perspective of “us/them” to see themselves as part of yet another specific community, defined as “we human beings who desire to live in peace so that no one else will need to experience the pain of grieving for a murdered child.”

Such a community needs a shepherd – a leader. Psalm 23, which a number of us studied at Temple this week, speaks of a Shepherd, with a capital “S,” who would provide for the people, lead them through green pastures and by still waters, revive their very lives amid their despair, direct them along pathways of justice, and remind them that goodness and kindness are always running after them, pursuing them, as if those two calming qualities of character were calling out to us, “Slow down so that we can catch up with you and be an integral part of your lives.”

May that Shepherd in whose house we yearn to dwell forever lift our vision to the heights, so that communities and their leaders can see that the peace that is created in the highest heavens has the potential to bring benefit and serenity to the world below. May the violence of some give way to the wisdom of others that will make peace a reality that will bring light and hope to the dark corners of the world. So may it be –and let us say amen.