Often when we read the Torah as plain text we come across passages that make us ask ourselves, “Why is it that there is so much cruelty in the Torah?”

There are many examples of cruelty, ranging from the plagues that the Egyptians endured because of Pharaoh’s stubbornness to the mention of severe punishments for sins, such as death by stoning, which can be imposed for transgressions such as the desecration of Shabbat, idol worshipping, murder, and even disobeying parents.

Just three weeks ago we were told in the Torah portion Korach that Korach, Datan and Aviram started plotting against Moses and Aaron. As a punishment, God opened the earth and it swallowed all three of these men with their families – a total of 250 people. As we read, “The earth beneath them opened its mouth and swallowed them and their houses, and all the men who were with Korah and all the property. They, and all they possessed, descended alive into the grave; the earth covered them up, and they were lost to the assembly.” (Numbers chapter 16 verses 32,33)

Although in this week’s Torah portion, Pinchas, we learn that Korah’s sons didn’t die, because, according to Rashi, they contemplated repentance.

This is a very disturbing text!

The previous week’s Torah portion, Balak, ends with an encounter with the man Pinchas, Aaron’s grandson, who killed an Israelite man by the name of Zimri, son of Salu and a Medianite woman by the name Cozby, daughter of one of the chieftains of Median Zur.

Pinchas killed them because he believed that the plague, which claimed 24 thousand Israelites, was sent by God as a punishment because of the ways the Israelites were interacting with the Medianite women. It is written, “Pinchas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the kohen saw this, arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand. He went after the Israelite man into the chamber and drove (it through) both of them; the Israelite man, and the woman through her stomach, and the plague ceased from the children of Israel.” (Numbers 24:7,8).

And so this week’s Torah portion opens with God praising Pinchas for his bloody actions which were a “zealous avenge of Me (God)”.

In the commentaries we certainly find various reasons and explanations for the series of cruel events that take place. There are examples, such as the one involving Korach’s sons who were considering repentance. With regards to the death penalty, the Mishnah states that a religious law that executed someone once in 70 years was considered destructive. That gap between principle and practice is often cited as evidence that Judaism is deeply uncomfortable with capital punishment.

Still, it is hard to wrap our mind around all these difficult Torah stories. At the same time as we try to understand and respond to the messages, we can learn about ourselves and the complexities of being human.

The solutions and reactions cover a wide range of emotions. Some may feel an urge to reject the Torah all together because they see God only as jealous and angry. Others may look passed the dark images and seek out the “good” stories that provide us with ethical teachings.

Actually I do not think either approach is the best solution to the way we deal with the Torah text because both the negative and the positive “stories” are included in order to initiate a meaningful conversation for us. Just as we learn from the good, so too we can learn from the challenges and obstacles. It helps us to acknowledge that we have both a compassionate and loving side, as well as a shadowy and distrustful side. Both are presented in the Torah precisely because we, too, embody both perspectives.

As for those who question God, that too is a part of being Jewish! Even Moses questioned God, especially toward the end of his life.

In this week’s Torah portion Moses is told that he will soon die and he will not have the opportunity to lead the people into The Promised Land. Can you imagine how painful it must have been for him? After all he did, he would not get to see Israel! How could this happen to Moses, out of all people?!

This is Moses’ fate because throughout their journey, there were times when he could not contain his anger against the Israelites. One notable moment came when the people demanded water, and he impatiently struck the rock instead of waiting for God to provide the water. I bet when Moses understood the true price he would pay for that rash act, he could not reconcile the cruel punishment coming as a result of one moment of anger that he couldn’t contain.

But that’s why Joshua was given the role of the new leader. It wasn’t Moses and not Pinchus, who “saved” the Israelites from the plague. When the people were fearful of entering into The Promised Land (in the story of twelve spies), Joshua did not react with anger as God and Moses did. Instead he remained patient and reasonable while addressing the people’s hopes rather than giving voice to their fears. It is clearly Joshua who is the role model the Torah offers for living in a world full of violence and frustration. Instead of giving in impulsively, Joshua responds by keeping his patience guided by behavior that reflects justice and righteousness.

As we continue to follow the news about Judicial Reform in Israel, we are hopeful that the Israeli government will come to its senses and will also be guided, as Joshua was, by a sense of justice and reason.

It is critical that this happen now, perhaps more than ever, as Israel must stand united in the face of threats from Iran. To achieve this, we can turn to the Torah where we are reminded that the best way to achieve our goals is through patience.