

Zealots – Fanatics or Heroes

Parshat Pinchas - 2005

We are a people who love labels of the extremes.

In assessing zealots there is a very, very thin line in determining who is a hero, worthy of praise and adoration and who is a fanatic deserving of contempt and rejection. Over the centuries we have been blessed by many zealots who sought to keep the Jewish spark alive. One collectively accepted hero is Mattiahu, whose blow against a Jew worshipping a pagan god, cascaded into the Maccabean revolt and our eventual freedom from Assyrian tyranny.

On the other hand, during the last decade we have witnessed a number of zealots who chose to take the law into their own hands. These include: Dr. Baruch Goldstein of the Hebron massacre; Yigal Amir, Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin's assassin, and Eden Natan Zada, a young soldier who murdered four innocent Israeli Arabs. Yet, one person's fanatic is another's hero.

Being a zealot does not mean automatic inclusion into the Hall of Jewish heroes. Dramatic action driven by religious passion does not mean that Klal Yisrael – the nation of Israel – has benefited -- has been lifted to a higher spiritual plane. In fact, it may be just the opposite. Passion supporting a point-of-view, whether it is for withdrawal from the territories or against withdrawal, does not permit one Jew to act against another Jew or gentile with violence.

So, what about our ancestors? Didn't they face the thorny issue of zealotry – fanatics or heroes? How did they respond to such actions? Torah is not only a book of our past...it is the story of our people l'Dor v'Dor – from generation to generation. In Parshat Pinchas we learn that there exists is a thin line between fanatic and hero -- between community complicity and opposition.

In Parshat Pinchas we learn of three major challenges confronting Moshe and the people of Israel:

- First, maintaining national unity in the face of major disagreement.
- Second, how to manage inheritance amongst the generations.
- Third, dealing with Moshe's eventual departure from the scene after we have participated through Torah in his evolution from vigilante to moreh haderech – the ultimate guide.

Yet, when we look at these three segments of Parshat Pinchas, and throw free choice and emotion into the mix, each challenge requires demands we explore new territory in collective tolerance – in personal opinion, property ownership and government.

Some additional words about this dramatic Parasha... In Parshat Pinchas, named for Aaron's grandson, the people of Israel have been beset by a major plague. Almost 24,000 have died. The deaths end abruptly when Pinchas acts to demonstrate his passion for G-D.

Then in the midst of another census, the daughters of Zelophehad make a case for inheriting their father's holdings and ask to receive a pledge of land in Eretz Yisrael. Moshe turns to Adonai, and then announces to the people that the daughters shall be entitled to their inheritance. The case is set for women's inclusion in the rights of inheritance – that their needs must be considered forever more.

Next, Moshe learns that his life will soon draw to a close...that he will not enter the land of Israel after 40 years of leadership...after 40 years of responding to the people's whining. Standing on a mountain top near Jericho, he is given a private view of the magnificent land his people will enter. Moshe now knows his physical remains will stay on one side of the Jordan; his people eventually marching forward to the other.

Having arrived at the doorstep to the Promised Land, a nation of zealots will be needed in order to cross the Jordan River and forge a home. It is time for a new leader, and for the people to accept a new mission. Right-hand man Joshua will receive smichut – personal ordination – symbolized by the laying on of hands by his mentor Moshe.

Joshua, who protected the Israelites against the Amorites; who waited patiently near Mount Sinai for Moshe's decent; who held Moshe's arms aloft during the battle with the Midianites, and who together with Caleb, served as one of the two clear-headed spies, is selected as Moshe's successor.

Moshe, instructed to "lay one hand upon Joshua" to signify the beginning of leadership change, shows faith and confidence in his protégé, places his yadiim – both his hands upon Joshua. Leadership transition has now begun. The balance of power – political and spiritual – is announced. Joshua and Eleazar the High Priest must work together for the nation's good.

Now with inheritance and leadership succession determined, the Parasha outlines how from generation to generation we will acknowledge the Jewish cycle of religious holidays. Timing and celebration is set down for Rosh Hodesh, Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur, Sukkot and Sh'mini Atzeret.

The Parasha ends with the organization of the Jewish calendar year – times for community gathering and worship – from introspection to repentance to collective celebration. The Parasha begins with the people on the verge of assimilation and self destruction – revolt and retribution – and ends with plans for collective celebration and sacrifice. In the end, we are a unified people, with acknowledged leadership and a connection to Adonai.

Last week, we read Parshat Balak – Moshe, the High Priest Eleazar, his nephew and Aaron’s son, stand silently in shock. Having narrowly escaped the curses of the sorcerer Balaam, they find themselves suddenly locked in a battle for community survival – not against an advancing army – against assimilation. Balaam, whose curses were turned into blessings, did have one word of counsel for his benefactor Balak – “Disconnect the people from Torah and collective leadership and they will crumble.”

Pinchas, Eleazar’s son, stands with the tribal elders in the meeting tent, witnessing his leadership’s inability to mobilize against the Midianite secret weapon – “Party Time” with the Midianites. He grabs his spear and without asking for the wisdom of the sages or Moshe’s permission...acts alone. Pinchas suddenly becomes a *Mission Impossible* Mr. Phelps, and G-D the mysterious inner voice stating, “If you or any members of your team are caught, the secretary will disavow any knowledge of your action.” And, with the spark of zealotry, he then kills two prominent offenders – Zimri, the son of Salu, head of the Simeon house, and Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a tribal head of one of the Midianite clans.

Knowing full well the Commandment – “Thou shalt not kill” -- Pinchas takes his spear and through his own zealous, passionate act, brings a to close the plague brought on by the people’s wonton disregard for public law. Pinchas’s act is a violent wake-up call to the people of Israel and to G-D. For the text states:

The Eternal spoke to Moses, saying, “Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion.”

Can we condone Pinchas’s act of vigilantism? The Talmud tells us that had Pinchas asked the rabbinical court for guidance, drawing from Jewish law to justify his action, the gathering of sages would have advised, “The law may permit it, but we do not follow that law.” The Commentary is telling us that zeal for nationhood must not overpower our zeal for compassion.

Zimri is no innocent in this story. After enduring so much to reach this point in the journey to the Promised Land, he turns his back on Moshe and the Commandments and takes matters – well actually Cozbi – into his own hands. More so, knowing full well that co-mingling with Midianites is punishable by death, he and other Israelites openly flirt with Midianite women and their pagan god Peor. Their crime is not one of forbidden love – physical or emotional -- of the non-Jew, rather complete disregard for the love of Adonai and Am Yisrael.

For Zimri and his cohorts there is no seeking introspection or repentance. Moshe's pause – his inability to act with immediacy may in fact be a silent plea: "Zimri, I'm giving you one last chance – please rejoin us." Zimri's response is the act of thumbing his nose at playing by the rules and belonging to a people.

There are those who interpret Adonai's response to Pinchas's action as judge, jury and executioner as inappropriate reward. What is the response of G-D? Adonai bestows upon Pinchas the pact of peace and the pact of priesthood for himself and his descendents.

Isn't it strange that someone who has just committed murder, to now be offered a pact of public peace? What irony!

But why not? G-D almost destroys the people of Israel at Mount Sinai and again at the banks of the River Jordan. Moshe, Pinchas and others serve as G-D's partners in redirecting this zeal. Pinchas's act of "Jew killing Jew" was a mad act ending the plague – the pail of icy water that results in the Jewish people spared from further loss.

Sadly, violence in the name of the people belongs to the people for generations to come. But, this horror can stop plagues...just as the Rabin assassination was a national wake-up call against the madness of verbal assault that was rapidly leading to wider nationwide Jew versus Jew violence.

How can G-D possibility punish Pinchas for his zealous act and not look in the cosmic mirror? The pact of peace between Pinchas and G-D is a wonderful way of HaShem saying, "In looking at your behavior, I realize that I too act out my rage against people. Together, let's stop destroying what we love and make a pact between us to act with greater thoughtfulness."

What became of Pinchas? Though Pinchas was given the pact of peace -- a Brit Shalom -- he did not know peace. In fact, it is written in the book of Prophets, that as a chief lieutenant for Joshua, Pinchas time and time again accepted difficult, risky missions as scout, soldier and troop leader.

Nor is the path of everlasting peace in Torah a straight, solid line.

According to Midrash, the letter vav in the word Shalom in Parshat Pinchas must be broken in two. The space between the top half of the letter and the bottom is left for two specific reasons. First, the vav when complete resembles a spear pointed downward – just as Pinchas ended the lives of Zimri and Cozbi with the thrust of a spear. And, second, we are reminded that no act of violence can bring about complete peace.

Torah is G-D's gift to our people. Through our people, it is a gift to the world. Just as Pinchas could not truly enjoy peace after entering the Promised Land, we must not allow the Land to destroy our Brit Shalom – our pact of peace -- among the people. The broken vav is not an imperfection of Torah; it is a perfect reminder that peace is created by our filling in the narrow space that separates us from one another.

Shalom u'vracha

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