

A Muse: Pinchas 2008

“Phinehas, son of Elazar son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back my wrath from upon the children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance. Therefore, say: Behold! I give him My covenant of peace.” (Numbers 25: 11-12)

Pinchas in his zealotry lanced through Zimri and his midianite paramour and in so doing saved the rest of the Israelites from the rage of God. This entire incident is puzzling in view of the fact that Moses was married to Midianite, and Jethro, the father in law of Moses was is venerated in our tradition, so much so that we have a portion of the Torah named after him. To complicate matters more so is the fact that our matriarchs were all foreign women, from Aram.

Clearly in spite of the plethora of themes in this weeks portion, the dominant theme, although ignored by so many of our rabbis and teachers in favor of less threatening themes in the portion such as the daughters of Zelofchad or the division of the Land among the tribes is the zealotry of Pinchas rewarded for his bloodbath by being designated as the primogeniture for the High priest hood.

Our tradition recognized the centrality of this event when linking the story of the zealotry of Elija as the haftarah of Parshat Pinchas, relating the story of Elijah on Har Horeb and the slaughter of those worshipping foreign gods. Clearly there is a relationship between the actions of Pinchas to that of Elijah and our commentaries take note of it. Rashi even comments that Pinchas is Elijah.

Another zealot, Matityahu is also related to our hero, Pinchas. Mattityahu, known to be a zealot in Sefer Macabim is also compared to Pinchas.

The common denominator of all three incidents is their zealotry for God and the blood shed which is accompanied by it. All three of the protagonists are rewarded for their zealotry: Pinchas was the primogeniture of the priesthood; Elijah was able to ascend the heavens in a fiery chariot and Mattityahu was able to establish a dynasty.

Whether Judaism is a religion of zealotry can be argued, depending on your position. There are those who would point to the Talmud Bavli, Shabbat 88a, which comments that God, at Sinai gave an ultimatum to the Jewish people, either accept the torah here on Sinai now, or be buried under the mountain. On the other hand we have enduring concepts such as elu v'elu divrei elohim chayim, and darchei noam, ideas which sustain the principle of respecting differing points of view.

Having said that, one of the great luminaries of the age, Harav Kook, is fraught with many contradictions as to his own commitment to tolerance. He didn't accord any currency to the secular Zionists and believed that they were only to be tolerated with the hope that one day they would see the light. On other occasions he referred to them as dangerous people with dangerous ideas, but he stopped short of denouncing them always with the hope that perhaps they would reform. While Harav Kook therefore can't be categorized as a liberal who supported a pluralistic society he also wasn't in the tradition of Pinchas' zealotry.

It all reminds me of the position of many in the orthodox community that give token respect to those not of their practice, always with the hope that if they treat them respectfully they will be able to make them "frum" Jews. This approach indicating a basic lack of respect for the other is reminiscent perhaps of harav Kook's position regarding the secular Zionists, tolerance kept in check!