

“At the end of Parashat Balak, we are introduced to the extreme character of Pinehas.”<sup>1</sup> At the end of last week’s Torah reading (*Etz Hayim*, pp. 907-908):

1. *While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women,*
2. *who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshipped that god...*
4. *The Lord said to Moses, “Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled...”*
6. *... one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting.*
7. *When Pinchas ... saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand,*
8. *he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked.*

At the opening of this week’s reading (p. 918-919, v. 12-13), God says:

12. *Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My pact of friendship (b’riti shalom).*
13. *It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.”*

As you can see in the commentaries at the bottom of p. 918 of *Etz Hayim*, even though God had commanded that the ringleaders be impaled, our rabbis were quite uncomfortable at the zealous action of Pinchas and the reward he received. “The Talmud claims that, had Pinchas asked the rabbinical court if it was permitted to kill Zimri and Cozbi [identified by their names and noble stations in verses 14-15], ... the court would have told him: ‘The law may permit it but we do not follow that law!’ [BT Sanh. 82a]”

A larger excerpt from Sanhedrin 82a:

*R. Hisda said: If the zealot comes to take counsel [whether to punish transgressors listed in the associated Mishnah, including a category that includes Zimri], we do not instruct him to do so. [Rabba b. Bar Hana repeats this in R. Johanan’s name.] What is more, had Zimri forsaken his mistress and Pinchas slain him, Pinchas would have been executed on his account [for the zealot may slay only when the offender is engaged in the offence]; and, had Zimri turned upon Pinchas and slain him, he would not have been executed, since Pinchas was a pursuer [seeking to take his life]....*

*[Before he was slain, Zimri] went unto Cosbi, and said unto her, “Surrender thyself unto me.” She replied, “I am a king’s daughter, and thus my father has instructed, ‘Thou shalt yield only to their greatest man.’” “I too,” he replied, “am the prince of a tribe; moreover, my tribe is greater than his [Moses’], for mine [the tribe of Simon] is second in birth, whilst his [tribe of Levi] is third.” He*

---

<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Matthew Berkowitz, “Zealotry, Good And Bad,”

<http://learn.jtsa.edu/content/commentary/pinehas/5773/zealotry-good-and-bad>, viewed on June 28, 2013

then seized her by her coiffure and brought her before Moses. [One wonders if this is the source of the comic-book image of a caveman dragging a woman by her hair.] “Son of Amram,” exclaimed he, “is this woman forbidden or permitted? And should you say, ‘She is forbidden,’ who permitted thee Jethro’s daughter?” At that moment, Moses forgot the halacha.... [The Talmud now quotes v. 7, given above.] Now, what did he [Pinchas] see? Rab said: He saw what was happening and remembered the halacha, and said to him, “O great-uncle! Did you not teach us this on thy descent from Mount Sinai: He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots?” He replied, “He who reads the letter, let him be the agent [to carry out its instructions].”

... the ministering angels wished to repulse him [Pinchas], but He said to them, “Let him be, for he is a zealot and the descendant of a zealot<sup>2</sup>; a turner away of wrath and the son of a turner away of wrath<sup>3</sup>.”

I think these Talmudic verses are very important. Even the zeal of Pinchas is described as having been filtered through consultation with Moses, and Pinchas is described as acting as a peacemaker. The Torah seems to justify zealotry that the rabbis preferred to interpret more moderately; they preferred to stress that the Tanach generally prefers moderation. Examples:

- "צדק צדק תרדף" - Justice, justice shall you pursue" (Deut. 16:20 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 1088). Our commentators understand “pursue” as connoting zeal, and say that the repetition of “צדק – Justice” moderates the zeal of our search for justice by teaching that justice must be pursued justly; we may not be so zealous in our pursuit of justice that we employ unjust tactics; the end does not justify the means.
- Mainstream Judaism is neither war-mongering nor pacifistic. *Shalom*, peace, is a major theme of our liturgy, but Torah recognizes that there are times when war is necessary. As we will read next week (Num. 31:19, *Etz Hayim*, p. 946), soldiers returning from battle, who had shed blood or even merely touched a corpse, were required to take part in a rite of purification. Even righteous bloodshed required both spiritual cleansing and a transition to life in civil society.
- Mainstream Judaism teaches neither asceticism nor greed. On one hand, wealth, honorably pursued and acquired, is respected – not just because our institutions hope for large donations, but also because wealth allows the wealthy the means to perform tzedakah and the leisure to study. We even pray for prosperity, e.g., in the bracha for the new month (“הי ים של פרנסה” - a life of prosperity” – *Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, p. 150). On the other hand, consider Psalm 115:4 (*Siddur Sim Shalom for Shabbat and Festivals*, p. 134): “Their idols are silver and gold...” The psalmist might have described the idols as “metal and stone.” By using “silver and gold,” the psalmist warns us not to idolize wealth, but, rather, to keep a healthy perspective on the subject.

---

<sup>2</sup> Reference to Pinchas’ ancestor Levi, who took zealous revenge on behalf of his sister, Dina

<sup>3</sup> Reference to Pinchas’ grandfather Aaron, who turned away God’s wrath in the aftermath of Korach’s revolt

## *Pinchas*

- We moderate our celebration of Passover by spilling drops of wine as we list the Ten Plagues, to acknowledge suffering even of the Egyptians who enslaved us.
- Deut. 6:18 (*Etz Hayim*, p. 1028): “Do what is right and good in the sight of the Lord...” Isn’t “right” sufficient? What is added by adding “and good”? The rabbis taught that if you are in a dispute and the law is entirely on your side, it is still better to try to reach a reasonable agreement with the other disputant rather than insisting on a complete victory, in order to promote peace in the community.
- We are taught (Ex. 23:2-3 – *Etz Hayim*, p. 471) to be partial to neither the mighty nor the weak in judicial proceedings.
- “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” is not interpreted in Jewish law in the barbaric fashion in which these words are so often misunderstood; rather, the phrase means fair punishment, and fair compensation to the victim, are required according to the seriousness of the offense.

Thus, our tradition almost always prefers moderation to zealotry. Pinchas may be an exception due to what appears to be divine approval under extraordinary circumstances, but he is not a model for us.