

I believe the greatest honor a congregant can have is the opportunity to deliver a Dvar Torah, or words of Torah. Therefore, I sincerely thank Rabbi Netter for this opportunity. I have often begun my remarks in the past, by quoting the comments of Ben Zoma from the 4th Chapter of Pirkei Avot, Ethics of the Fathers or Chapters of the Fathers. Ben Zoma asks the question of “Who is an honorable man?” Ben Zoma answers “He who bestows honor on others.” And so it is, especially in the Talmud, that one honors others by stating the source of where a sage has derived information and acknowledges the source of that information.

I have reviewed the Talmud on Pinchas especially Sanhedrin 82a and b, Sanhedrin 106a and Elijah the prophet, whose story is reviewed in the usual Haftorah that is read with this parsha, but not today. However, because Elijah is the only other person in Tanach that is considered a zealot, we will compare these two men whom the Talmud suggests are the same person spiritually, using teachings of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, Rashi, Rabbi Heschel Greenberg, and perhaps my favorite source, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain, Rabbi Jonathon Sacks.

The Title of my Drash is “The Zealot” and the question to be addressed is, was Pinchas acting out of violence or did he follow an ancient law that allowed him to kill Zimri, the prince of the tribe of Shimon, for the good of the Israelites? Was he a hero or a villain? It is so fascinating that from the early *amoraim*, the authors of the Bavli or Babylonian Talmud, to the modern Biblical scholars, the answers are diverse and opposing. So my task then is to try to analyze differences of opinion and come to some reasonable conclusion. In doing so, it is important to evaluate what the Torah and the Talmud say about Pinchas. And as you know, The Talmud often does not come to any conclusion. Therefore, my responsibility is to review some of these ideas and come to my own conclusion. For you who listen to these ideas, you will have to come to your own decisions on Pinchas and Elijah.

With Pinchas a new type enters the world of Israel: the zealot. “Pinchas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous with My zeal in their midst so that I did not put an end to them in My zeal” (Num. 25:11). Notice the word for zeal (*Kanah*) appears three times [in the Hebrew] in this sentence. Pinchas was followed many centuries later by the only other figure in Tanakh described as a zealot, the prophet Elijah. He tells God on Mount Horeb, “I have been very zealous for the LORD God Almighty.” (1 Kings 19:14). In fact, tradition identified the two men: “Pinchas is Elijah” (Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, 771). Pinchas, says Targum Yonaton (to Numbers 25:12), became an angel who lives forever and will be the harbinger of redemption at the End of Days.

What is fascinating is how Judaism - both Biblical and post-biblical - dealt with idea of the zealot. First, let us recall the two contexts. First is that of Pinchas. Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually devised a strategy that succeeded. He persuaded the Moabite women to seduce the Israelite men and then lure them into idolatry. This evoked intense Divine anger, and a plague broke out among the Israelites. To make matters worse Zimri, a leader of the tribe of Shimon, brought a Midianite woman into the camp where they flagrantly engaged in intimacy. Perhaps sensing that Moses felt powerless — he had himself married a Midianite woman - Pinchas seized the initiative and stabbed and killed both of them, ending the misbehavior and the plague by which 24,000 Israelites had already died. That is the story of Pinchas.

Elijah’s story begins with the accession of Ahab to the throne of the northern kingdom, Israel. The king had married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, and under her influence introduced Baal worship into the kingdom, building a pagan temple and erecting a pole in Samaria honoring the Ugaritic mother goddess Asherah. Jezebel, meanwhile, was organizing a program of killing the “prophets of the Lord.” The Bible (1 Kings 16) says of Ahab that “he did more evil in the eyes of the LORD than any of those before him.” Elijah announces that there will be a drought to punish the king and the Baal worshipping nation. Confronted by Ahab, Elijah challenges him to gather the 450 prophets of Baal to a test at Mount

Carmel. When all are present, Elijah issues the challenge. They and he will prepare sacrifices and call on God. The one who sends a fire from heaven will be the true God. The Baal prophets do so and call on their god. But nothing happens. In a rare show of scornful humor, Elijah tells them to cry louder. Maybe, he says Baal is busy, or travelling, or having a sleep. The false prophets work themselves into a frenzy, gashing themselves until their blood flows, but still nothing happens. Elijah then prepares his sacrifice and has the people douse it three times with water to make it harder to burn. He then calls on God. Fire descends from heaven, consuming the sacrifice. The people, awestruck, cry out “The Lord - He is God! The Lord - He is God” - words we say on Yom Kippur at the climax of the Neilah service. The people then kill the prophets of Baal. God has been vindicated.

There can be no doubt that Pinchas and Elijah were religious heroes. They stepped into the breach at a time when the nation was facing religious and moral crisis and palpable Divine anger. They acted while everyone else, at best, watched. They risked their lives by so doing. There can be little doubt that the mob might have turned against them and attacked them. Indeed after the trial at Mt. Carmel, Jezebel let it be known that she intends to have Elijah killed. Both men acted for the sake of God and the religious welfare of the nation. And God himself is called “zealous” many times in the Torah.

Yet their treatment in both the written and oral Torah is deeply ambivalent. God gives Pinchas “my covenant of peace,” meaning that he will never again have to act the part of the zealot. Indeed, in Judaism, the shedding of human blood is incompatible with service at the Sanctuary (King David was forbidden to build the Temple for this reason.) As for Elijah, he was implicitly rebuked by God in one of the great scenes in the Bible. Standing at Mt. Horeb (where Moses had received the Torah) God shows him a whirlwind, an earthquake, and a fire, but God is not in any of these. Then God comes to Elijah in a “still, small voice” (Kol Dimamah Dakah) (I Kings 19). He then asks Elijah, for the second time, “What are you doing here?” and Elijah in exactly the same words that he had used before: “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the Lord God of Hosts.” He has not understood that God has been trying to tell him that He is not to be found in violent confrontation, but in gentleness and the word softly spoken. God then tells him to appoint Elisha as his successor.

Pinchas and Elijah are, in other words, both gently rebuked by God.

Halakhically, the precedent of Pinchas is severely limited. Although the act was lawful, the sages none the less said that had Zimri turned around and killed Pinchas instead, he would be deemed innocent since he would have acted in self-defense. Had Pinchas killed Zimri even a moment after the act of immorality he would have been guilty of murder. And had Pinchas asked a court of law whether he was permitted to do what he was about to do, the answer would have been no. This is a rare instance of *halakhah ve-ein morin kein*, “It is a law that is not taught” (Sanhedrin 82a).

Why this moral ambivalence? Rabbi Sacks suggests that the simplest answer is that the zealot is not acting within the normal parameters of the law. Zimri may have committed a sin that carried the death sentence, but Pinchas executed punishment without a trial. Elijah may have been acting under the imperative of removing idolatry from Israel, but he did an act — offering a sacrifice outside the Temple - normally forbidden in Jewish law. There are extenuating circumstances in Jewish Law in which either a King or the court may execute non-judicial punishment to secure social order (Maimonides, Hilkhoh Sanhedrin 24:4). But Pinchas was neither a King or acting as a representative of the court. He was acting on his own initiative, taking the law into his own hands. There are instances where this is justified and when the consequences of inaction would be catastrophic. But in general, we are not empowered to do so, since the result would be lawlessness and violence on a grand scale.

More profoundly, the zealot is in effect taking the place of God. As Rashi says commenting on the phrase “Pinchas ... has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous” Pinchas has “executed My

vengeance and showed the anger I should have shown” (Rashi to Num.25:11). In general we are commanded to “walk in God’s ways” and imitate his attributes. “Just as He is merciful and compassionate, so you shall be merciful and compassionate.” That is not, however, the case when it comes to executing punishment or vengeance. God who knows all may execute sentence without a trial, but we, being human, may not. There are forms of justice that are God’s domain, not ours.

The zealot who takes the law into his own hands is embarking on a course of action fraught with moral danger. Only the most holy may do so, once in a lifetime, and only in the most dire circumstances. Even then, were the zealot to ask permission from a court, he would be denied it. My conclusions on why I support Pinchas are really quite simple. 1.) He followed Jewish Law, 2.) He was made a priest by God, 3.) He stopped the plague of 24,000 Israelites, 4.) In the text of the Chumash, God praises Pinchas for his zeal and 5.) Rashi, Rabbi Greenberg, and the Late Chabad Rebbe all consider Pinchas to be a hero in that selfless instant in time when even Moses and the tribes of Israel were crying and could not act.

In keeping with Rabbi Netter’s dialogue with the congregation, can you think of 2 other events where 24,000 people died of either a plague or were murdered in either Torah or Talmud? Answers are 1.) The people of Shechem after Shimon and Levi killed them 3 days after circumcision, and 2.) Rabbi Akiva’s students until the 33rd day of the Omer.

Pinchas gave his name to the Parsha in which Moses asks God to appoint a successor. R. Menchem Mendel (1789-1866), the 3rd Chabad Rebbe, was asked why Pinchas, hero of the hour, was not appointed instead of Joshua. His answer was that a zealot cannot be a leader. That requires patience, forbearance and respect for due process. The zealots within besieged Jerusalem in the last days of the Second Temple played a significant part in the city’s destruction. They were more intent on fighting one another than the Romans outside the city walls. The Rebbe comments that the true zealot is an utterly selfless individual - one who is concerned only about the relationship between God and His people, with no thought for his own feelings on the matter. The moment his personal prejudices and inclinations are involved, he ceases to be a zealot.

This may be the reason why the law that “zealots smite him” falls under the unique legal category of “a law that is not instructed.” The true zealot has no thought for himself, not of his feelings on the matter, nor of his personal safety, not even of the moral or spiritual implications of his act on his own self. He is simply determined to put an end to a situation that incurs the divine wrath against Israel.

God attested that Pinchas had inherited the peace-loving nature of his grandfather Aaron, while Zimri was every inch a descendant of Shimon, whom Jacob rebuked for his heated and violent nature when he said in Genesis 49:5 “Cursed be his anger, for it was fierce.”

Indeed, the Talmud describes a hypocrite as one who “does the deeds of Zimri and asks to be rewarded like Pinchas.” Zimri’s kindness was the ultimate hypocrisy: instead of fulfilling his role as the leader of his people by prevailing upon them to cease their behavior that was destroying the nation, he pursued the fulfillment of his own passions without regard to the terrible consequences to their spiritual and physical well-being - all the while disguising his act as selfless and self-sacrificial. In contrast, Pinchas’s deed was “hypocritical” in the positive sense: ostensibly violent and cruel, but in truth a selfless act of peace. (Lubavitcher Rebbe)

Nothing in the religious life is more risk-laden than zeal, and nothing more compelling than the truth God taught Elijah, that God is not to be found in the use of force but in the still, small voice that turns the sinner from sin. As for vengeance, that belongs to God alone.

Shabbat Shalom