

Parashat Pinchas
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Joey Baron
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Here we are on a hot, steamy summer Shabbat while in Israel kids have been kidnapped and killed and bombs are flying. This is the kind of week when we come here seeking solace and understanding, a week when we crave the wisdom of our sages and the companionship of our friends.

Instead you get me.

And to make matters even worse, this week we all get to read about Pinchas.

Lets start with a story. Several years ago, the Baron family faced a crisis. Reuben wanted us to skip Chanukkah. Now, to be honest, I always thought we go a little overboard in our Hanukkah celebrations but to not celebrate it at all was a little extreme. But Reuben was deeply and sincerely bothered by the fanaticism inherent in the story of the Maccabees.

Nina, who loves family celebrations and getting a gift each night, was furious.

This was a real problem that Debi and I didn't know how to handle. So Reuben and I met with Rabbi Perkins. Reuben shared his concerns and the Rabbi responded with great respect telling him how the Rabbis of yore (well he didn't say yore but it would have been funny if he did) shared his feelings about the complexity and violence of the Maccabee story. And one of the reasons the story is not part of the Torah is because it is so controversial.

The rabbi also pointed out with great wisdom that the only obligation we Jews have on Chanukkah is to light and observe the candles. We don't have to believe the Maccabees were heroes or even if they ever existed. All we need to do to fulfill the mitzvah of Hanukkah is bring some light to the darkness of winter.

I think it's easy to have that same ambiguous discomfort with the story of Pinchas in today's Parsha. In fact, it is even mentioned in the story of Chanukah, "Matityahu saw a Jewish man about to offer a sacrifice on an alien altar in the



presence of the entire congregation, and he was zealous, and swiftly slaughtered the man...and smashed the altar to bits; thereby, he was zealous on behalf of the Torah just as Pinchas had done to Zimri.”

But Pinchas gets his own Parsha in the Torah and all the Maccabees get is a megillah. They both killed a Jew so what’s the big difference?

Well, let’s compare circumstances. Matityahu killed a Jew who was about to make a sacrifice on a Greek altar built in - and as an affront to - the temple. The Greeks were forcing their beliefs and their ways on the Jewish community including decreeing that Jewish brides must spend their wedding nights with the local Greek ruler.

In defiance of that, at her own wedding, Hannah, the daughter of Matityahu, stripped naked before all the guests. When her brothers sought to kill her for her lewdness, she challenged them.

"Me, you are ready to kill," she answered. "But not the wicked Greek occupiers who are polluting all of the daughters of Israel and who have brought this terrible immodesty upon us!"

Shaken by his daughter’s words, Matityahu and his sons rose up in revolt against their Greek oppressors.

Nudity may have stirred Pinchas to action, too. After all, last week, he killed Zimri, a prince of the tribe Simeon while he was engaged in sexual relations with Cozbi, a Midianite princess, not only in front of everyone but also in front of the holy meeting place. A prince of Israel was totally flaunting his disregard for Moses and for God.

Pinchas can’t stand it. There have been so many people turning away from the covenant because of Midianite women, there is literally a plague on his people. For Pinchas, this was the last straw. Its one thing to take a Midianite woman home to your tent, it is quite another to take her in front of the holy Meeting Place. Pinchas has had enough and thrusts his spear thru both Zimri and Cozbi the Midianite.

And for this, Pinchas is rewarded by God, with a promise of peace.

With all that is going on in Israel this week, I desperately wanted to come to grips with Pinchas. Why did he do it? More importantly, why did he get rewarded by God rather than thrown in jail?

I was so desperate for answers, I turned to the law.

According to USLegal.com, a crime of passion is a criminal defendant's excuse for lacking the premeditation element of a crime due to sudden anger or heartbreak. The defense is usually raised in murder or attempted murder cases, when a spouse or lover finds his/her partner sexually involved with another and shoots or stabs one or both of the coupled pair. To successfully raise the defense, the defendant must have acted immediately after the provocation, without time to "cool off". If the element of premeditation is eliminated, the charges may be lessened from provable homicide to manslaughter with no death penalty and limited prison terms. The impassioned defendant may even be acquitted.

No, I'm no lawyer but by this definition it seems that Pinchas' act was a crime of passion. There was no premeditation. He is frustrated by what was going in his community and then he is confronted by something he just can't stand. He snaps and kills the couple.

In the Maccabee story, however, the killing is not quite so spontaneous. They have been goaded on, aroused to act by their sister's dance. Maybe it was earlier in the day or the day before. But I think it is safe to say, her dance led them into some sort of premeditation.

Is that why Pinchas gets a parsha and Matitayahu doesn't?

Its interesting to me that both these stories share zealous murder as well as some type of unapproved sexuality. In Pinchas, it is the Jews succumbing to The Midianite's seductions. While in the Chanukkah story, it is both the ruler's abusive behavior of brides but also a community wide infatuation with the Greek concept of body strength and beauty being perceived as somehow equivalent to righteousness.

Sex can be a very powerful motivation. Though widely misinterpreted, still today, martyrs for Islam get on the high speed lane to Paradise where they will have an eternity of pleasures, with beautiful servants and ideal husbands or wives. I suspect with little obligation for celibacy. Is this another reward for zealotry?

But why else would one killing cause God to give you rewards while another leads to punishment? Well, there can be no premeditation and no consultation of any kind. If Pinchas had even looked at Moses for approval, it would be murder, not zealotry. And the act must be done with absolutely no sense of reward of any kind, in this world or in any paradise to come. A zealot's motivation can only be the

desire to reconcile wayward people with their G-d, The true zealot is an utterly selfless individual—one who is concerned only about the relationship between G-d and His people. The moment his personal prejudices and inclinations are involved, he ceases to be a zealot.

Pinchas' zealotry did reawaken the people to their covenant with God and because of that, God's wrath fades and a plague that killed thousands stops. And for that, God grants Pinchas peace.

People have been having a hard time with Pinchas from the moment the incident happened. The sages of The Talmud recognized that Pinchas set a most dangerous precedent. According to the Talmud, Moses actually wished to excommunicate Pinchas. And in another fascinating commentary, the sages state that had Zimri resisted Pinchas, he would have been cleared of charges on the grounds of self-defense.

Clearly, this is a difficult story on a very difficult week. Even Pinchas's reward gives us mixed messages. God grants Pinchas peace, Shalom. But that too isn't quite what it appears. Literally, in the Torah, the Vav in Shalom is broken. It is not one line or ink stroke. It is interrupted.

There are some beautiful commentaries about this. Most focus on the idea that this peace was meant more as peace of mind. Pinchas wasn't an evil man or a trouble maker. He was someone who killed two people out of frustration and passion and maybe a subconscious hope that it would steer his community back to holiness.

This week, I can't help but think that, as lovely as that interpretation is, maybe the answer is more obvious. Maybe real peace, the kind of peace we all desire, the kind of peace where none of the letters are broken just can't happen when we act zealously. Wars may be inevitable and everyone has the right to defend themselves. Pinchas' action may have turned Israel from promiscuity, but this broken Vav reminds us but there is a long road between sin and peace

As bombs fall this week, as teenagers are murdered, buildings destroyed, and children quake with fear, lets think about our friend Pinchas and let us pray and do whatever we can to build a peace that is real...a peace so solid that none of the letters can ever be broken.

Shabbat shalom.