

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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Parashat Pinchas | July 6-July 12, 2014 | 8-14 Tammuz 5774

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Necessary Strength

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



אדני עוז לעמו יתן, אדני יברך את עמו בשלום

Israel is waging a powerful struggle to defend her citizens from the missiles which rain down on them every day, weapons targeted to kill. We love our Jewish homeland, and we are proud of our brothers and sisters who live and fight in Israel. We need to do all we can to keep them strong and capable of continuing to build and defend Medinat Yisrael. Given the confluence of recent events, this will be challenging.

We are still mourning three murdered Jewish boys. We see the haunting picture of a murdered Arab boy, all evidence pointing to Jewish perpetrators. Rockets from Gaza target not only our cities, filled with innocent Jews, but the nuclear power plant at Dimona. We see video of terrorists trying to infiltrate our borders from the sea. We read the reports of an entire family being killed accidentally in the bombing of Gaza. From the Old City of Jerusalem to the new city of Ashkelon, Jews and Arabs are scared, sad, and angry.

In such troubling times, our tradition pushes us not to wallow in anger or self pity, but rather yefashpesh bemaasav – we should examine our past actions and figure out how to best move forward. In the spirit of pishpush – self examination – I would like to rethink the brief notice of mourning that YCT sent out under my direction after we learned of the deaths of our three kidnapped boys, Naftali, Eyal, and Gilad. In that hurried communication, I used the standard, traditional words used for Jews who are martyred, people who are killed simply because they are Jews: Hashem yikom damam. This phrase is read each week in the Av Harachamim prayer before Musaf for Shabbat. It is based on Torah verses, and dutifully

translated – as it was in our message – it reads, “May God avenge their blood.”

In retrospect, I made a mistake in using this phrase. True, it has long been a regular part of our Jewish vocabulary – in Av Harachamim it refers to those killed by the Crusaders. And true, it declares that God alone can take vengeance. Nevertheless, the murder of an Arab boy, Mohammed Abu Khdeir, and the shocking possibility that this atrocity was committed by Jews, is ample cause for reflection on these words.

We now have our own state, the Jewish State of Israel. Even though as a people we are still fighting for survival – the hail of rockets constantly bombarding Israel are proof enough of this – we are no longer powerless. Thank God, we are partners with Hashem in building a strong homeland for the Jewish people. A new responsibility comes with that blessed power: to beseech God’s help in strengthening our people’s ability to defend and protect every inhabitant of our Holy Land. Rather than invoke the strength of God’s vengeance, we need to ask for the Godly might necessary to physically defend Israel and her people while simultaneously nurturing a profound respect for the lives and the rights of every Jew and Arab peacefully residing therein. This is the strength that is most needed for the protection of our people and, thereby, our homeland.

Yes, God will punish, avenge, and dispense ultimate justice. But just as it is not our role to avenge, in the position of power which we have, thank God, in our Jewish state, we have to refocus our prayers. We have to ask God to help us protect all the innocent and vulnerable people caught in the defensive war that Israel must fight. Musaf for Shabbat has not changed, but how we memorialize our martyrs can. From now on, I will invoke God’s mercy and protection for our people, our State, and all the innocent people who dwell in our land.

Israel is in an incredibly difficult position: She is mourning, fighting terrorism and terrible violence against

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Jews, fighting terrorist murder of Arabs, and waging a war against Hamas all at the same time. But that is what Israel must do, and only a God of strength and mercy can help Israel do that.

May the memory of our dear children be a blessing for us all, to fight the moral fight for safety, security, and peace for our people and for those who dwell in our midst.

יהי זכרם ברוך

FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

On Parashat Pinchas

By Rabbi Dov Linzer



There has been much talk this past week about vengeance. In this regard, it is instructive to explore what our parasha says about zealotry – which is a close cousin to vengeance – and peace. Consider the following: A religious zealot witnesses a person who is flagrantly violating religious standards of behavior and, acting in the name of God, picks up the nearest available weapon and violently slays this sinner. If this happened today – and it does – we would be outraged and call for this act to be condemned. The Torah, however, praises it.

“Pinchas... has turned My anger away from the people of Israel, when he was zealous for My sake among them, that I consumed not the people of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore, say, Behold I give him My covenant of peace... a covenant for eternal priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 25:13).

Is religious zealotry, then, an ideal to be emulated? While recognizing that such actions were praised after the fact in the Torah, the Gemara states that halakha, as a normative system, would never give prior warrant to such violence, and that, from a halakhic point of view, Pinchas was actually a “pursuer” who could have been killed to prevent him from taking Zimri’s life (Sanhedrin 82a). License can never be given to violence, even if it is motivated by religious zealotry.

One can detect a similar concern in the blessing that God gives to Pinchas: “Behold, I give him My covenant of peace.” While after the fact and in this unique set of

circumstances, this act of zealotry was praiseworthy, the blessing for eternity, the guiding principle for life, must be one not of violence but of peace.

One must hold strong to this zeal for truth and for God, but to realize it in the real world – the world of human beings and imperfection – one must actualize it in ways of peace. God's seal is truth (Shabbat 55a), and truth is absolute and unbending. But even God's name is erased for the sake of peace (Shabbat 116b). For the Torah of truth to be a Torah for life, one needs to be guided by the principle of peace. When Torah and truth run up against error and sin, the response need not be violence; the response can be understanding and compromise.

Thus, we find that, later in life, Pinchas becomes the embodiment of peace. In the book of Joshua, when the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe return to the Transjordan and build a large altar, the Israelites prepare to wage war against them, believing that they have abandoned God. Pinchas, however, is sent to lead a delegation, and he brokers a peace and averts war (Joshua 22). He has moved beyond his zealous, uncompromising youth, to become an elder statesman who pursues diplomacy, compromise, and peace. Significantly, the Talmud records the opinion of Rav Ashi that Pinchas did not even become a kohen until he brokered this peace (Zevachim 101b). His “covenant of priesthood” could only be realized when he realized his “covenant of peace.”

It is instructive in this regard to contrast Pinchas with Eliyahu. The midrash states “Pinchas is Eliyahu,” and indeed, both of them were “zealous for God.” In response to the rampant idolatry in the Land of Israel, Eliyahu decrees that there be no rain in the land and after three years of famine, in a great public demonstration, slays the prophets of the pagan god Ba’al by the edge of the sword. He runs to hide in a cave, and there God appears to him:

And he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said to him, What are you doing here, Eliyahu?

And he said, I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; for the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword; and I am the only one left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

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And God said, Go out, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind tore the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice (Kings I, 19: 9-13).

Eliyahu has indeed been “zealous for the Lord,” and as a result, many have died by sword and by famine. God, however, has a lesson to teach him – God is not about violence, but about the small, still voice, the voice that will speak to a person’s heart, the voice that will bring about peace. Eliyahu, however, cannot comprehend this message:

... And, behold, there came a voice to him, and said, What are you doing here, Eliyahu?

And he said, I have been very zealous for the Lord God of hosts; because the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword; and I am the only one left; and they seek my life, to take it away.

And the Lord said to him, Go, return on your way ... and Elisha ... shall you anoint to be prophet in your place (Kings I, 19: 14-16).

Eliyahu is so committed to his absolute sense of truth that he cannot understand that the time for zealotry has passed, and that for the people to reconcile with God, a small voice, the voice of peace, is needed. If he cannot understand this, then he can no longer lead the people, and Elisha the prophet must take his place.

Pinchas is Eliyahu, but he develops and matures. Eliyahu, on the other hand, is Pinchas but only the younger Pinchas. Eliyahu is taken heavenward in a whirlwind; he is not a person of this world. His zealotry for truth and for God could not be reconciled with the frailties of human beings. He is never to become the older Pinchas. At least not in this world. But Eliyahu will become the ultimate emissary of peace in the future world:

Behold, I will send you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord; And he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children, and the heart of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse (Malachi 3:22-23).

He will be the one to bring about peace to save the world from the harsh judgment that God, in His attribute of truth, would demand.

In the end, the Sages debate how much Eliyahu’s final mission of peace will in fact trump his earlier mission of truth and zealotry. Regarding those whose personal status had prevented them from marrying within the Jewish people, we find the following discussion in the mishnah:

R. Yehoshua said: I have received a tradition from Rabban Yochanan b. Zakkai, who heard it from his teacher, and his teacher [heard it] from his teacher, as a halakhah [given] to Moses from Sinai, that Eliyahu will not come to pronounce unclean or to pronounce clean, to put away or to bring near, but to push away those brought near by force and to bring near those pushed away by force...

R. Yehudah says: To bring near, but not to push away...

The Sages say neither to push away nor to bring near, but to make peace in the world, for it is said, “Behold I send to you Eliyahu the prophet, etc., and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children and the heart of the children to their fathers” (Mishna Eduyot 8:7).

According to R. Yehoshua, even in the future, Eliyahu will not compromise truth one iota. Peace will only be a possible byproduct of truth. Eliyahu’s mission will be to rectify falsehood, to ensure that a person’s status is true to reality. R. Yehudah, however, believes that, in the end, truth will serve the interests of peace, and that it will be called on only to bring close those who have been distanced. The Sages, however, reject both of these positions and believe that for Eliyahu these two principles will never be able to be reconciled. Eliyahu will only be able to devote himself to peace by allowing the work of truth to be done by others.

Eliyahu was not of this world, but Pinchas was of this world. He was given God’s covenant of peace, and was able to realize in his own lifetime true religious leadership, a leadership that brings an unflinching devotion to God and to truth in one’s service to the people, and a leadership that actualizes this truth in ways of peace.

GUEST DVAR TORAH

How to Win Friends and Influence People

By Ben Shefter (YCT '16)



An episode of any good TV show ends with a cliffhanger, making you want to come back for more next week. When this happens in the Torah, however, one has to wonder why. What can we learn from the division of a story in mid-thought?

We find this question in Parashat Pinchas. We are introduced to Pinchas at the end of Parashat Balak when he separates from the congregation and kills Zimri. When we think of this image we are left in shock: What happened? What will happen next? What were the people thinking at that moment? Will the people want to kill him? If we only read Parashat Balak, we would be left with this cliffhanger, but the sequence of events continues in this week's *parasha*.

Rabbi Aharon-Ya'akov Greenberg says in *Itrei Torah* that the division of the story serves to differentiate between the act and the reward. As discussed in Tractate Sanhedrin 82a, Pinchas saw what Zimri was doing and knew that it was against *halakha*. He asks Moshe what to do, and Moshe responds by saying that whoever observes the infraction is responsible for enforcing the punishment. The Sages further explain that, when God's name is being profaned, one needs to take matters into his own hands. From this it seems that Pinchas was doing a good thing, so why does the Torah separate his act from his reward?

The answer can be seen in the dynamic that vigilantes experience in many comic books and movies: The vigilante does something good for society but is condemned for his actions since he violated the law in the process. Rabbi Greenberg explains that one can tell a good vigilante from bad by examining his motivations. Many times we can do something good with the wrong intentions, or *vice versa*. Especially in the realm of zealotry, as in Pinchas' case, it is hard to differentiate between proper and improper *kavana*. Therefore, the story of Pinchas is broken up to show his pure motivations. What is more, his reward is a "covenant of peace," which appears to be a good thing. Had his intentions not been pure, he would not have received this reward.

learn the importance of pure intentions. In the context of Bamidbar, Pinchas' act was appropriate. Even though nowadays this type of action would not be accepted as proper, we can still learn something from the story being told in two parts. This idea is particularly relevant given what is going on in Israel right now. As we see events unfolding, we need to take our emotional and spiritual pulse to make sure our hearts are in the right place. We might want to retaliate, but we need to think about the ramifications. For Pinchas, the outcome was peace and tranquility after the traumatic experiences of *Bnei Israel*. Today, an act of violence might just lead to more violence.

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT

Name:

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Special Interest: Chaplaincy

About Andrew:

Andrew Scheer entered rabbinical school with a dual mandate: to be with Jews wherever they are, and to operate on the belief that Jewish teachings have something to offer everyone. It is no surprise, then, that Andrew places his time at Rikers Island high on the list of experiences he has found meaningful while at YCT.

To read more about Andrew and the ways in which he aspires to impact the Jewish community, please see our weekly email newsletter. If you do not receive our newsletter but would like to, please email us at sleeve@yctorah.org.

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