

Our Problem with Pinchas

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A major problem facing the Jewish people today is that we have too many like Pinchas, and too few like Pinchas' grandfather Aaron. As a people we are burdened with too many who “know” with absolute certitude that they are right and the “other side” is wrong. Too many who have it on impeccable authority that they are right, that God is on their side—and too few who are not so sure of their positions, too few ready to listen and learn from others, open to the idea that it is good to seek consensus and conciliation with those with whom we may disagree. This problem affects not just those considered on the religious or nationalist right wing. On all sides, and on a variety of issues, both religious and secular, right as well as left, in the domains of social, political and religious concern, there are far too many Jews who are so passionate in their conviction, unwavering in the certitude of their positions, and determined in their sense of self, that the virtues of reasoned debate, respectful discourse, and harmonious exchange, are under siege and on the defensive.

Now this problem of extremism, intolerance, and undeterred devotion to absolute truth, can best be understood, by examining what it is that Pinchas represents, and why he holds such a fascination for so many. Here is a young man who has no doubts about who he is, what God wants, what is right and wrong, and what has to be done in the face of evil and immorality. While Moshe hesitates, he jumps into action without compunction; while the master prophet is momentarily stunned by a brazen violation of a communal taboo, Pinchas alone sees his path illuminated by a vision of the truth that blinds him to any mitigating moral restraint. He sees an Israelite nobleman consorting with a Midianite princess, in an idolatrous mass orgy, and in the name of his God, Pinchas kills them both on the spot, oblivious to social sanction, uncaring of due process or legal restraint. His motto: “damn the torpedoes—full speed ahead.” What a dashing, heroic figure he must have cut, filled with God's righteous indignation, a charismatic with a mission and a cause. An activist paradigm not just for his contemporaries, but for all generations. No wonder that for so many today, Pinchas is seen as a model to be emulated, a man who selflessly fights for God and truth, not out of convenience but out of principle, a true religious hero, possessing the courage of others' convictions, consistent to a “T”, a soldier in the army of God.

There is only one problem with this picture: to believe it, and to teach it, is not only to distort God's will, it is to play with fire, and to court catastrophe. For Pinchas is not, and should not be, our model. It is not that Pinchas was wrong. After all, it is clear from our parshah that God pointedly commends and rewards Pinchas for what did, granting him the enviable berit shalom, a covenant of peace, and berit kehunat olam, an eternal priestly covenant, even though, as the Jerusalem Talmud Sanhedrin 9:7 records, Pinchas was condemned by the Sages for doing what he did. The question is not whether he was right or wrong. It is rather whether anyone else, then or since, should feel free to imitate Pinchas' ways, and follow in his footsteps. And here, we in fact say, “halakhah—ve' ein morin ken: what he did may have been correct, but we do not teach or

instruct others to act in that manner.” True, Pinhas was extraordinarily gifted and blessed by God: but that is precisely it — he was extraordinary, one of a kind.

For this reason, to teach our children, at home or in school in the synagogue, that like Pinchas a Jew should, when in the public realm, or in dealing with those he sees as sinners, carry out what he perceives to be God’s will, while putting aside any social restraints, moral qualms or sense of self-doubt or moral quandary, because one acts selflessly for God and Torah, no matter what the world may think, is to risk producing a generation of what might be called “morally-challenged” and close-minded fanatics, bereft of ethical concerns for others different from themselves, intolerant of outsiders, cut loose from the essential restraints of conscience or the moderating milk of human kindness.

Better that we teach that, Pinhas notwithstanding, sublime truth must learn to coexist with peace— or better yet, that there are times when truth must take second place to peaceful coexistence. As our Sages (Yevamot 65a) teach *mutar lo le’adam leshanot bidvar hashalom*, “a person should feel free to violate the truth in the interests of peace.” Not so as to advance oneself at the expense of another, but so as to benefit the larger group, irrespective of oneself. As Rabbi Ben Zion Firer puts it, “truth that needlessly causes others to suffer, violates a larger truth.” And indeed it is for the most part undeniable that when truth and peace go head to head against each other, and one must give way, it is peace that must prevail—for it is preferable to speak a lie that brings peace, rather than to propagate a truth that guarantees dissension. Given human nature, truth, unlike peace, can never be identified with absolute certainty, it surely is a quality that is subjectively determined. Hence it is better to have absolute peace, rather than relative truth.

For this reason, says Rabbi Firer, the word *shalom*, as written in the Torah here in the context of Pinchas, in accordance with the *masorah*, has a *vav ketu’a*, a broken *vav*. Why? Because for Pinchas all that counted was the absolute, unvarnished truth, peace be damned. He was the personification and epitome of *emet*. For him, and in that singular circumstance, there was only truth, and truth alone, not peace! At best, peace was a distant second in his pantheon of values and priorities. In a compromised, conflicted world, Pinchas stood for unmitigated, unvarnished *emes*! But that was for Pinchas and Pinchas alone. But for all others, it was *shalom* that took, and takes, precedence and pride of place. And not just peaceful co-existence, but all of the other fundamental moral values, including a healthy sense of self-doubt, of socially responsible moderation, of thorough-going humility, a sincere self-doubt in the presence of what one perceives to be the fault of everyone else. For all the rest of us to ask ourselves: maybe I should not be so sure of myself, perhaps there is another moral perspective, perhaps God’s will is not so clear and unambiguous that I should feel free to act unilaterally as his agent or Cossack!

Now let me not be misunderstood: I do not only refer with these words to those Jews who are on the religious right, or the so-called strictly Orthodox. The Jewish secular or liberal left can be, and often is, equally self-righteous and stereotyping of their fellow Jews, no less certain that God’s truth (or whatever be their source of moral right or wrong) agrees with them. They too are capable, and sometimes guilty, of behavior that sacrifices peace in the name of truth, real or perceived. There is no shortage of hotheads in the mold of Pinchas, in the war of words and deeds, in Israel or America, and in the executive offices of the assorted seminaries, synagogue groups, or political and charitable umbrella organizations of American Jewry.

But, having said that, my concern is primarily with ourselves, as Orthodox Jews. It is our own schools, synagogues, and communal institutions that are of concern to me. The moral values that we teach and tolerate in them, the primacy of place that we ascribe to the virtues of cooperation and tolerance that we are prepared to instill in and through them, and our readiness to ensure that coming generations of Jews, Orthodox or otherwise, put an emphasis on moral and character excellence that is at least the equal of the spiritual, ritual, and halakhic emphasis that heretofore has been our hallmark.

And in that respect, it is not Pinhas, but his zeidi, Aharon, who must be our paradigm. Ohev shalom, ve'rodef shalom, lover of peace, pursuer of peace, be it between husband and wife, parent and child, neighbor and neighbor, rebbe and talmid, or for that matter, between the God of truth and rebellious, compromised, man. Aharon who is complicated and conflicted, who loves God but who also feels compassion for his errant fellow Jews, who seeks to bring the truth from heaven down to earth, but also to plead the cause of man below before God above, who sees the common person's faults, but also his potential strengths if given a second chance. Who does not see the world in black and white, but rather as a many-hued composite of moral struggle, of failure followed by renewed faith and resolve. And above all, it is Aharon who sees his own faults before those of others, who knows that moral failure, like charity toward others, begins at home, and with one's self.

Perhaps it is for this reason, to paraphrase Rashi's comments in the opening words of the parshah, that the Torah invokes the lineage of Pinchas as "ben Elazar ben Aharon," i.e., it was the saving zechut or merit of his grandfather that stood the grandson in good stead. The combination of zeal and harmony, determination and flexibility, together undergirded the brit shalom, the covenant of peace and tranquility that is the abiding legacy of the descendants of Aaron.

May our generation of Jews be privileged to once again regain that precious balance, in the merit of our illustrious forebears, of blessed memory.