

Echoes of Eden

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Fanaticism

Pinchas was a fanatic. As anyone raised in western society will tell you, fanatics are bad, and the only thing worse than a fanatic is a religious fanatic. We have been raised on the axiomatic, nearly religious certainty that religious fanaticism is the root of all evil, the underlying cause of every conflict around the globe. And yet, the biblical account of Pinchas' response to Zimri and Kozbi sends us some confusing messages.

Zimri and Kozbi, each a member of their respective societies' elite, make a very public display of their defiance of religious and social dictates. In what may be called the archetypical act of religious fanaticism, Pinchas takes the law into his own hands and commits a double murder, yet he is rewarded with eternal priesthood as well as the "covenant of peace". If ever there was an ironic award, this is it - or so it would seem.

Zimri and Kozbi do not seem all that strange to us. We, too, live in a time and place in which boundaries are constantly re-examined, redefined, and often discarded. Religion is under siege, in retreat. Popular culture exhorts us to "just imagine" a time when there is no religion – such a time, we are assured, will be utopian. Without religion there will be no more war, peace will break out all over.

This axiom is self-evident, despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary, namely, the entire "body of work" of the 20th Century, when arguably more people were killed than in any previous century – perhaps more than throughout all of history combined (some have put the number at 262 million victims), yet most of these lives were not taken in the name of religion. Socialism, communism, National Socialism (also known as Nazism), the most infamous

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among recent history's murderous movements, all had strong roots in atheism and paganism and were, for the most part, ideologically opposed to religion. Nonetheless, we tend not to let the facts interfere with our preconceived notion that it is religion that creates strife and is the real casus belli. Modern thinkers prefer to simply disregard other "minor" factors, such as greed, jealousy, hatred and tribalism.

Looking at the bigger picture, it would be more accurate to say that what lies at the dark heart of war is the human desire to control others – economically, politically, socially and sexually.

This is where religion can be the solution and not the problem: Religion creates boundaries. Religion makes value judgments. Right and wrong have objective meaning. Religion not only makes these judgments, but expects that mankind live up to these values. Both compliance and sin are significant and conscious choices; the optimistic view of Judaism is that man has the greatness to practice self-control. Without this expectation, Judaism would be an absurdity.

Judaism has great expectations of man. Man is in the image of God, and has the capacity for godliness, for greatness. However, unlike the pagan view of greatness, Judaism teaches that real victory is in the battle with one's own desire to control others and to satisfy egotistical desires.

The self-restraint that lies at the core of Jewish values is what Bil'am saw as he observed the Israelite camp from afar. He saw boundaries, the respect for privacy that was the basis of community. He saw religious and social demarcations that served as the basis for unity. Instinctively, he understood that a People with such self-control could not be cursed. Their essential character was deserving of blessing, and was a source of blessing for others.

When Bil'am raised his eyes and saw Israel dwelling at peace by tribes, the spirit of the Almighty was upon him...'How good are your tents, your tabernacles, Israel...(Bamidbar 24:2-5)

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Rashi: He saw each tribe encamped individually without mixing in with the others, and saw that the openings of their tents did not face one another so that one would not peek into another's tent. The spirit of the Almighty was upon him, and his heart did not allow him to curse them.

Zimri and Kozbi left little room for misinterpretation: theirs was an act calculated to break the religious, cultural, moral, social and personal boundaries that kept the nation together. Pinchas understood the threat they posed, foresaw the devolution of society that would result from dismantling all the boundaries. He knew how a world without boundaries would look: like an endless battlefield for individual power. Pinchas was, indeed, a fanatic- for peace. For his fanatical defense of the boundaries with which peace is maintained, God rewarded him with what he most desired: "And therefore I give him My covenant of peace." (Bamidbar 25:12)

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Pinchas is also no stranger to us : Like him, we are often faced with the challenge posed by moral relativism that threatens to tear down the boundaries and dilute the values upon which our lives are predicated. Like

Pinchas, we, too, must fight in order to achieve peace. At times, the battle is an internal struggle for self-control and self restraint; at times we must face up to external threats. May God bless us with the wisdom, vision and strength of Pinchas, and bring to fruition the Priestly Blessing of peace in our private and public lives.

For a more in-depth analysis see <http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2009/07/parshat-pinchas.html>