

Echoes of Eden

Rabbi Ari Kahn

Parashat Pinchas 5774

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 society's elite, make a very public display of their defiance of religious and social dictates. In response, in what may be called the archetypical act of religious fanaticism, Pinchas appears to take the law into his own hands: He 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 publicly, demonstratively. 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.

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, we are assured, is self-evident – despite the abundance of evidence to the contrary, namely, the entire "body of work" of the 20th Century, in which

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 and National Socialism (also known as Nazism), the most infamous 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 tend to simply disregard other “minor” factors that continue to bring out the worst in people and nations, such as greed, jealousy and tribalism.

Looking at the bigger picture, we may 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.... Judaism reminds us that humankind is created in the image of God, and has the capacity for godliness, for greatness.

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. Judaism is predicated on the optimistic view of human nature, that man has the greatness to practice self-control;

without this expectation, Judaism would be an absurdity. Judaism reminds us that humankind is created in the image of God, and has the capacity for godliness, for greatness. Although man certainly has the capacity to be victorious in the struggle to dominate others, Judaism teaches that true victory is in the battle with one’s own ego, and true greatness is achieved when one conquers the desire to control others.

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, and the respect for privacy that is the basis of community. He saw religious and social demarcations that serve 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.

Zimri and Kozbi, on the other hand, left little room for misinterpretation: Theirs was an act calculated to break the religious, cultural, moral, social and personal boundaries that keep the nation together. Pinchas understood the threat they posed, foresaw the devolution of society that would result from the deconstruction of Jewish society. He knew how a world without boundaries would look: like an endless battlefield for individual power.

Pinchas's actions should be read in context: A plague was sweeping through the camp. God's wrath had been kindled because of the idolatry and adultery that had spread through the camp, both of which were related to the worship of Ba'al Peor. Apparently, adherents of this type of idolatry believed that all things natural are holy; therefore, sexuality was part and parcel of their cultic practice.

God commands Moshe to have the worshippers of Ba'al put to death. Moshe turns to the tribal leaders, the judges, to implement God's command, to kill the perpetrators and thereby halt the deadly plague. Zimri, a leader of the tribe of Shimon, chooses to side with the sinners: Disregarding God's specific instructions to kill the perpetrators, Zimri makes a public statement, behaving obscenely in the most public, sanctified forum, and joins the idolatrous, adulterous mob. Only then does Pinchas step forward and kill Zimri and the woman with whom he so publicly flaunted the word of God, the leadership of Moshe, the sanctity of the Tabernacle, the purity of the Jewish camp and the Jewish home, as well as the most basic tent of Judaism, monotheism.

Pinchas was not a vigilante; he acted to fulfill God's explicit instructions, and did, in fact, stop the plague that had already claimed so many lives. Pinchas was, indeed, a fanatic; he was fanatically dedicated to peace. For his fanatical defense of the boundaries with which peace is maintained, God rewarded him with what he most desired: He gave him a covenant of peace:

"Pinchas, the son of Elazar and grandson of Aharon the Priest, was the one who zealously took up My cause among the Israelites and turned My anger away from them, so that I did not destroy them in My demand for exclusive worship. Therefore, tell him that I have given him My covenant of peace. This shall imply a covenant of eternal priesthood to him and his

descendants after him. It is [given to him] because he zealously took up God's cause and made atonement for the Israelites.' (Bamidbar 25:12)

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, often must fight in order to achieve peace. However, such battles must be waged only with Divine instruction and purity of spirit. Too many who think they have license to kill, who see themselves as modern-day incarnations of Pinchas, take the law into their own hands. They do not achieve peace; their actions serve only to further weaken the boundaries that keep the community whole.

May God bless us with the wisdom, vision and strength of Pinchas, and bring to fruition the Priestly Blessing of peace.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/07/audio-and-essays-parashat-pinchas.html>