

*Obtaining Authentic Peace in Our Time*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Human history is filled with the horrors of war. Unfortunately, while peace is held up as the greatest of objectives, pragmatic reality is quite a different matter. *Shalom* (Peace) is thus an ideal goal that has proven elusive since time immemorial. As such, the following verses in our *parasha* (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:10-12) become all the more fascinating:

The L-rd spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Kohen has turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them, so that I did not destroy the children of Israel because of My zeal.” Therefore, say, “I hereby give him **My covenant of peace.**” (This and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Who gave Pinchas his “covenant of peace?” What exactly is the meaning of “My covenant of peace?” What is the content of this promise? These are substantive questions that deserve meaningful and thoughtful responses. It is to this task that we now turn.

Who gave Pinchas his “covenant of peace?” The straightforward answer is that Hashem gave Pinchas this reward. The translation above certainly seems to support this direct reading. It appears, in fact, to be a *quid pro quo*, a *middah keneged middah*, that follows directly from Pinchas having “turned My anger away from the children of Israel by his zealously avenging Me among them, so that I did not destroy the children of Israel because of My zeal.” Rashi (1040-1105) suggests precisely this interpretation when he states: “That it should be a covenant of peace for him [i.e. Pinchas]. Just as a man owes

gratitude and favor to someone who did him a favor, so here G-d expressed to Pinchas His feelings of peace.” (Brackets my own)

The *Gemara* in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin* 82b, however, suggests an entirely different approach as to who gave Pinchas this “covenant of peace,” namely, Moshe and not Hashem: “*Amar lei Hakadosh Baruch Hu: ‘Hakdame lo shalom, shenemar ‘lechan emor henei notan lo et briti shalom.’*” (“The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Moshe: ‘You [Moshe] should welcome him [Pinchas] in peace. Consequently, the Torah states: “therefore let it be said [in general and by you Moshe] behold there is given to him [Pinchas] My covenant of peace,’” translation and brackets my own). The *Kli Yakar*, (Rabbeinu Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, 1550–1619), in his commentary on our *pasuk* (verse), underscores this approach:

Therefore the Torah states: “*lechan emor henei notan lo et briti shalom*” (“therefore let it be said [in general and by you Moshe] behold there is given to him [Pinchas] My covenant of peace”) instead of the expected phrase: “*lechan emor lo*” (“therefore [Moshe] say [directly] to him [Pinchas]”) since the correct explanation is that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* said to Moshe: “therefore say to all of the Jewish people in reference to yourself that you [Moshe] are giving him [Pinchas] my covenant of peace.” This was necessary so that the Jewish people would not say that Moshe was upset with Pinchas for not directly asking him the halacha [prior to his act of killing Zimri and Kasbi while they were engaged in their illicit activity]. Therefore, this was made known to the public when Hashem told him [Moshe] “you should state on your own behalf “*henei notan lo...*” this phrase clearly refers to Moshe [and not to Hashem]. (Translation and brackets my own)

It is important, too, for us to understand the meaning of G-d’s promise to Pinchas of His “covenant of peace.” What is the content of this pledge? Here, as well, we find at least two different approaches. The *Ibn Ezra* (Rabbeinu Abraham ibn Ezra, 1092 – 1167) explains the need for this promise in the following manner:

The reason for the phrase “My covenant, the covenant of peace” (“*et briti brit shalom*”) is similar in kind to the phrase “*kisacha Elokim*” (“Your throne, O judge, [will exist] forever and ever; the scepter of equity is the scepter of your kingdom, *Sefer Tehillim*,

45:7). There are many other examples [in the Bible] like this. The reason for this pledge was so that Pinchas would not be afraid of Zimri's kinsmen since Zimri had been the prince of his family. (Translation and brackets my own)

This mode of interpretation is followed by the 12<sup>th</sup> century Northern French commentator Rabbeinu Bechor Shor (Rabbi Yosef ben Yitzhak): "He [Pinchas] had nothing to fear. Neither from Zimri's relatives, even though he had been a prince, nor from Kasbi's relatives even though she was a king's daughter."

The Netziv, (Rabbeinu Naphtali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin, 1817-1893), in his seminal Torah commentary known as the *Haamek Davar*, offers a unique and deeply psychological insight as to why "My covenant of peace" is promised to Pinchas. As noted above, both the Ibn Ezra and the Bechor Shor focus upon Pinchas' potential fear of others and the revenge that they might have sought against him. In contrast, the Netziv focuses upon the fundamental changes that could have affected Pinchas' personality as a result of his heroic and halachically-mandated act. He suggests that Pinchas could have been changed forevermore by the experience of having killed Zimri and Kasbi, even though they were unquestionably subject to the death penalty for their horrific deed. This, therefore, was why he needed Hashem's "covenant of peace":

In reward for his having removed *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* anger and fury from the Jewish people, he was blessed with the quality of peace – in order that he should not have consternation and be mortally afraid. This was necessary since the nature of the act in which Pinchas had been engaged required him to kill someone with his own hands. This could have brought about a change in his personality that would have caused him to become vicious and unfeeling toward others. Since, however, everything he did was for the purpose of serving Hashem, based upon [his purity of intention and singular purpose of soul], he was rewarded with the blessing that he would live ever afterward in [psychological] comfort [and sensitivity toward others] and with the quality of peace. The action that he had undertaken would not, therefore, pervert his personality. (Translation, underlining, and brackets my own)

We live in a world of terrorism and war, replete with countless acts of man's inhumanity to his fellow man. It is far too easy for us to become inured and insensitive to the body counts of United States' and Israeli soldiers who die defending our countries, our freedom, and our way of life. We, therefore, no less than Pinchas, need *Hakadosh Baruch Hu's* "covenant of peace" as interpreted by the Netziv. We need to be sensitive to the heartbreaking tragedy of the death or maiming of even one soldier or civilian. We need, in short, to remember the sanctity of life and the uniqueness that Hashem bestows upon each and every individual. In short, we too, need Pinchas' blessing.

May we all merit Hashem's "covenant of peace," and may we become sensitive to our fellow man and recognize each individual's unique place within G-d's creation. If we can achieve this goal, then we, like Pinchas, will "live ever afterward in [psychological] comfort [and sensitivity toward others] and with the quality of peace." Surely, this will help bring *Mashiach Tzidkeinu* (our righteous Messiah) soon and in our days. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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