

Parashat Pinchas 5774, 2014

Pinchas and Self-Sacrifice

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 bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka.

Toward the end of last week's *parasha*, Parashat Balak, we find the following verse:

“Phineas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Kohen saw this, arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand.” (*Sefer Bamidbar 25:7*, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) At first glance, it appears very straightforward. Based upon the preceding verses, Pinchas witnessed the public immorality of a Jewish man, identified as “Zimri the son of Salu, the chieftain of the Simeonite paternal house,” and his Midianite consort, later identified as “Cozbi the daughter of Zur, a national leader of a paternal house in Midian.” Apparently upon witnessing Zimri and Cozbi entering Zimri's tent, Pinchas “arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand” in preparation for executing this lewd and licentious couple.

The Talmud, however, offers three possibilities as to what exactly Pinchas saw:

And it is also written, “And Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it.” **Now, what did he see?** — Rab said: He saw what was happening and remembered the halacha [law], and said to him, “O great-uncle! Did you not teach us this on your descent from Mount Sinai: ‘He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots?’” He [Moshe] replied. “He who reads the letter [i.e. states the law] let him be the agent [to carry out its instructions].” Samuel said: “He saw that ‘There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the L-rd’ (*Sefer Mishle 21:30*) [meaning] - Whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one's teacher.” [Therefore, Pinchas acted without Moshe's counsel since Zimri's action was a profanation of Hashem.] R. Isaac said in R. Eleazar's name: “He saw the angel wreaking destruction amongst the people.” (*Talmud Bavli*, Sanhedrin 82a, translation, *Soncino Talmud*, emphasis and brackets my own)

Let us briefly review the three positions:

1. Rab (Rav) - Pinchas “saw what was happening and remembered the halacha” that Moshe had taught regarding the permissibility of summarily executing “he who [publicly] cohabits with a heathen woman.”
2. Samuel (Shmuel) - Pinchas “remembered” a yet-to-be formally given verse from *Shlomo Hamelech’s Sefer Mishle* that served as the warrant for his zealous behavior, without having first sought out Moshe’s permission, since he (Pinchas) deemed this to be a moment of *chilul Hashem* (defamation of the Divine Name).
3. Rabbi Yitzchak, in the name of Rabbi Eleazar - Pinchas had a prophetic vision: “He saw the angel wreaking destruction amongst the people,” i.e. the Angel of Death brought a plague as a result of their profligate behaviors with the Moabite women (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:1-2). Pinchas then did what was in his power to stop this from happening – first and foremost, the execution of Zimri and Cozbi.

I would like to analyze the opinion of Rabbi Yitzchak, who spoke in the name of Rabbi Eleazar. In order to do so, I believe we need to focus upon Pinchas’ genealogy, and the actions of his grandfather, Aharon Hakohen, so we may better understand who he was and why he performed this act of zealotry. At the beginning of our verse, the Torah teaches us that Pinchas was “... the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Kohen.” Eleazar, Pinchas’ father, became the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest) upon the death of his father, Aaron (*Sefer Bamidbar* (20:24-28)). Therefore, Pinchas’ paternal lineage was one of *kedushah* (holiness) and near-royalty, since he was the son and grandson of these two illustrious figures in our history.

Aharon, Pinchas’ grandfather, was one of the most beloved individuals in all of Jewish history. The Torah relates that upon his death, “The entire congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days.” (*Sefer Bamidbar*

20:29) *Klal Yisrael* (the nation of Israel) was so overcome by Aharon's death that they simply could not believe that he had passed away. If that is the case, however, why does the Torah state, "The entire congregation saw that Aaron had expired?" Rashi (1040-1105) provides a powerful and poignant Midrashic explanation:

The whole congregation saw: When they saw Moses and Eleazar coming down, and Aaron did not come down, they said, "Where is Aaron?" He said to them, "He died." They said, "Is it possible that the one who stood up against the angel and stopped the plague can be overpowered by the angel of death?" Whereupon Moses asked for mercy, and the ministering angels showed him [Aharon] to them, lying in the bed. They saw [him] and believed. — [*Midrash Tanchuma, Chukat 17, Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah 19:20*]

Why was Aharon so thoroughly beloved by *klal Yisrael*? Rashi answers this question, as well, in his explanation of the phrase "the entire house of Israel":

the entire house of Israel: [both] the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between man and wife. — [*Avot d'Rabbi Nathan 12:4, Midrash Aggadah*]

This theme is also addressed in the well-known Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* 1:12: "Hillel would say: Be of the disciples of Aaron - a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, one who loves the creatures and draws them close to Torah." (Translation, Chabad.org) On a certain level, it is very possible that no one has ever loved the Jewish people in quite the same manner and with the same depth and intensity as Aharon Hakohen.

In my opinion, one of the best proofs of Aharon's overwhelming love for *klal Yisrael* is to be found in the narrative of the *Chet Haegel* (the Sin of the Golden Calf). According to the Ramban (1194-1270) and Seforno (1475-1550), *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our Teacher Moshe) perceived Aharon's actions in a purely negative fashion. He placed indisputable blame squarely upon Aharon's shoulders for the creation and subsequent worship of the Golden Calf. Therefore, an angry Moshe rebuked him and said: "What did the people do

to you, that you brought upon them such a great sin?” (*Sefer Shemot* 32:21) We are compelled to ask, what could have motivated Aharon to act in this manner, i.e., what could have caused him to fall to this level? Was it fear? After all, *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 7a*, relates how Aharon’s nephew, Hur, was murdered by the people for refusing to participate in the construction of the Golden Calf. Yet, even if Aharon was motivated by a visceral and understandable fear of death, it would have been insufficient cause to engage in any form of *avodah zarah* (idol worship) since, as the Ramban points out, it is “... in the category of those sins that one should be willing to die for rather than violate.” (*y’aharag v’al y’a’avor, Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 74a*).

Why, then, did Aharon help create the Golden Calf? The answer is found at the end of the above-referenced passage in *Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 7a*:

R. Benjamin b. Japhet says, reporting R. Eleazar: He [Aharon] saw Hur lying slain before him and said [to himself]: If I do not obey them [the advocates for a molten image], they will now do unto me as they did unto Hur, and so will be fulfilled [the fear of] the prophet, “Shall the Priest and the Prophet be slain in the Sanctuary of G-d? [*Megillat Eichah* 2:20] - and they [i.e. the Jewish people] will never find forgiveness. Better let them worship the Golden Calf, for which offence they may yet find forgiveness through repentance. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, brackets my own)

In short, in a poignant and profound act of self-sacrifice, Aharon compromised himself and his *schar l’olam habah* (reward in the world to come) to save *klal Yisrael*. He did this out of overpowering love for his fellow Jews and a desire to achieve peace; his actions were motivated by pure devotion to the Jewish people. His intentions were unparalleled in the care and concern for others they represented – irrespective of the heavy personal cost he may have had to pay.

I believe we can now more fully understand Pinchas and his actions. As Rashi makes eminently clear in his first comment on our *parasha*, Pinchas, like Hur and Aharon before him, acted with tremendous self-sacrifice when he executed Zimri and Cozbi, for upon their death the people began to speak against him and stress his maternal lineage:

Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Kohen: Since the tribes were disparaging him, saying, “Have you seen the son of Puti, whose mother’s father [Jethro] fattened (פָּחַת) calves for idols (See Rashi, Exod. 6:25), and who killed a chieftain of an Israelite tribe?” For this reason, Scripture traces his pedigree to Aaron. — [*Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin* 82b, *Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah* 21:3, *Midrash Tanchuma, Pinchas II*]

Given our people’s challenging and rebellious behaviors in the Desert (*Pirkei Avot* 5:4, *Talmud Bavli, Arachin* 15a), one can readily surmise that Pinchas put his life in clear and present danger to save them from the decimating plague that had begun to take its toll. Yet, out of love and devotion to *klal Yisrael*, nothing, including his own potential death, could prevent Pinchas from doing what he deemed necessary on their behalf. He knew that he had to act zealously to bring about his nation’s salvation. Therefore the Torah states:

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. (*Sefer Bamidbar* 25:11)

Hashem swiftly rewarded Pinchas’ altruism, as is illustrated in the following two *pasukim* (verses):

Therefore, say, “I hereby give him My covenant of peace. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him [as] an eternal covenant of Priesthood, because he was zealous for his G-d and atoned for the children of Israel.” (Underlining my own)

We, of course, do not have permission (*heter*) to act as Pinchas did. It is forbidden for us to act like zealots and take matters into our own hands. Yet, we can learn from Pinchas to have undying love and devotion for *klal Yisrael*, and do all that we can to be *mekadash*

shame Shamayim (sanctify Hashem's Name) – even if this entails struggle and self-sacrifice.

Shabbat Shalom

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