

Parashat Pinchas -- July 14, 2012

Hazzan N. Schwartz -- Agudas Israel

At the beginning of today's *Parashah*, Pinchas is rewarded with perpetual priesthood for an act of violence that he committed at the end of last week's *Parasha*. Our *Torah* commentators through the ages have been uncomfortable with both the act itself and with this reward for that act.

Last week the *Torah* portion ended with an account of the Israelites being seduced by their Moabite or Midianite neighbors into an orgiastic spree of idolatry. When an Israelite tribal chief named Zimri publicly has sexual relations with a pagan princess named Kozbi, Pinchas executes them both with a spear.

This week we read of how God rewards Pinchas for that execution. Taking the text at face value, it seems that God rewards Pinchas with perpetual priesthood. However, there are two unusual indications in the actual text of the *Torah* which show that the story is more complicated than it seems.

When the name *Pinchas* appears in verse 11 of chapter 25, the "yod" is written so as to be smaller than usual. In verse 12, the "vav" in the word *Shalom* is broken in the middle of the vertical stroke. Both of these may be the *Torah* scroll's way of indicating to us that something much deeper is contained in this text.

The letter "yod" is said to represent God in general, and specifically that aspect of God which lives inside each of us. This is taken from the name "Yah", which is part of the Tetragrammaton (God's four-letter name in the *Torah*). By making the "yod" in his name smaller, the *Torah* text itself indicates that Pinchas diminished the Godly aspect of his own being when he engaged in his rash act of violence.

By breaking the "vav" which acts as the "oh" vowel in the word *Shalom*, perhaps the *Torah* is indicating that such an act of zealotry destroys the peace within a community in the long run. While the Hebrew Bible contains several records of zealous acts, Rabbinic Judaism has frowned on zealotry for the last 2,000 years as contradictory to our Jewish ideals and ethics.

Perhaps this is because of the trouble which has been brought upon us whenever we succumb to the temptation of zealotry. In Genesis, when Simeon and Levi massacre the men of Shechem after the attack on their sister Dinah, their father Jacob says, "You

have made us odious to our new neighbors.” The successful rebellion of the *Hanukkah* story in 165 B.C.E. and the unsuccessful revolt against Rome in 70 C.E. had elements of civil war between various factions of Jews over the proper course of action.

In the 20th century there were zealous actions taken to establish the modern State of Israel that are now being reevaluated. Begin’s *Irgun* was arguably a Jewish terrorist organization engaged in assassination of British soldiers, including the bombing of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem. The *Irgun* refused to come under the command of the *Hagannah*, and when they tried to land a ship full of weapons for their own use, it was sunk at the order of Ben Gurion for fear that there could be civil war among the Jews.

Near at the end of the 20th century, a street battle in Brooklyn between Satmar *Hassidim* and Lubavitch *Hassidim* had to be broken up by the New York City mounted police, much to the embarrassment of many American Jews. In the 21st century, some fundamentalist *Haredi* men in Israel and North America are now persecuting Jewish girls and women for not being sufficiently observant of strict dress-codes and behaviors.

Some say that the religious settlers in the hills of Samaria and Judea are the salvation of Israel, while others say that these settlers are the greatest obstacle to peace. There are Jews who are making plans to build a third Temple where the Dome of the Rock now stands in Jerusalem, while most of us think that such an act would now destroy Judaism. Perhaps the ultimate modern acts of religious zealotry were the massacre of Muslims at Hebron by Baruch Goldstein, and the assassination of Yitzchak Rabin.

Zealotry is not limited to the right wing in modern Judaism. There are those who feel strongly that if Israel cannot keep the very highest ideals of ethical conduct during its struggles to survive, then it should not exist as a Jewish state. There are Jews who feel so strongly that North American Jewry should be integrated into the secular community that they actively campaign against Jewish communal support for Jewish Day Schools, and there are even Jews who oppose our ancient act of circumcision.

As a worldwide community of perhaps 14 million Jews among a world of over 7 billion people, we cannot afford the luxury of zealotry from the right or from the left. While there are many examples of zealotry in the Hebrew Bible and throughout Jewish history, the *Torah* scroll itself reminds us with the small “*yod*” and broken “*vav*” in today’s *Parashah* that zealotry is **not** condoned by mainstream Judaism, that it diminishes the Godliness within us and damages peace within the Jewish community.