

The Zealot vs Zelophehad's Daughters – Parashah Pinchas 5782

I often hear from people, I'm spiritual, but I'm not religious. I often wonder what that means, and when I ask, I often hear something pointing to having a relationship with the Divine, and also rejecting some fixed notion of exactly how that looks. And in some ways I agree with that, but I think that runs the risk as well of "throwing out the baby with the bath water." Let me explain.

At the beginning of this week's Torah reading, Pinchas, is a reward from God to Pinchas for doing a violent act. Pinchas is Aaron's grandson, and he sees that a plague is spreading among the Israelites, presumably because they have been intermingling with Midianites. Pinchas sees Zimri, an Israelite, and Cozbi, a Midianite woman, intermingling, and swiftly kills them with a spear.

"Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. Say, therefore, 'I grant him My pact of friendship. It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.'" (Numbers 25:11-13)

This is a story in the Torah that exemplifies so clearly a reward for violence that I find it very difficult. Without further examination, I think I would, at least before becoming a rabbi, walk away from finding value or anything in this parashah. I find it upsetting and against how I believe we are to behave in this world.

But if we stick with it, and look at what is happening, and understand a nuance in the text, we can fill out the story more, and find something useful. As a matter of fact, I believe the text is practically screaming at us to do so.

What's happening here? The text is illustrating a setting here in which the Israelites are engaging in idol worship – they're not simply intermingling! – having intimate relations with the Midianite women was seen as a form of idol worship. And, resulted in a plague sent upon them by God. Seeing that the behavior of the Israelite men had not changed, Pinchas takes "impassioned action" and kills Zimri and Cozbi. And God rewards him!

Pinchas becomes judge, jury, and executioner. And this is apparently okay. At least here, in this case. God says “נָתַן לּוֹ אֶת-בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם”, “I grant him My covenant of shalom.” (Num 25:12).

And here is where a deeper look at the Torah is valuable. You and I know the word “shalom”. It means “peace.” The same root also forms the word “shalem,” meaning “whole,” but we don’t find real peace or wholeness here. The letter “vav” in the Torah scroll, in the word “peace” of “I grant him My covenant of shalom” is a broken vav. Intentionally so. It is not a scribal error. It is a broken vav that every Torah that is written today, and for centuries before us, records this broken vav in the middle of this “shalom”.

Any resolution that is based on violence causes fear, not just in the moment, but into the future as well. Pinchas may have been afraid of the Israelites surviving, as after all, they were undergoing a plague, and were still engaging in idol worship. But his violent act does not connect the people back to God, it does not repair what had been happening, it simply stopped it.

The letter vav is a letter, which at the beginning of a word, means “and”. It is not only a letter, but a word, meaning “and.” The word “and” connects words, ideas, people. “A AND B,” “Abraham V’Sarah – Abraham and Sarah,” “yes and no.” The connection here is broken.

God rewards Pinchas with the covenant of peace, and reward Pinchas and his descendants with a pact of priesthood for all time, but we should be noting that though it saved the Israelite people, this particular covenant of peace contains an inherent brokenness.

Pinchas, the zealot, is not to be emulated. His fear stoked fear, and stopped everything in that moment, but as they say, life goes on. We are always going to make mistakes. We do not want to emulate Pinchas, the zealot, a murderer, a fanatic – we do not want to foster fear. We must promote true peace.

Two chapters later, in this same parashah, we meet Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah, the daughters of Zelophehad. The note what they perceive to be an injustice, and respond by standing before Moses, Eleazar the priest, the chieftains, and the whole assembly, at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting, and confront a patriarchal system that would require sons to inherit land. They make

a case for receiving a holding of the land of their deceased father so that his name will not perish. After Moses hears their case and then brings their case before God, God instructs Moses that their plea is a just one, and to give them the hereditary holding among their father's kinsmen. Their father's share is transferred to them.

Their approach to injustice, only two chapters later, to be instructive. As we often say to children, "use your words." Indeed they do, respectfully, and clearly. They strive to promote justice, questioning the existing law that they saw as unjust, and indeed, was, and going about to change it. We learn from the daughters of Zelophehad that even God's established law, as given to Moses, needed to be questioned. And with a good argument they did so, and even God found that the law needed modification. The daughters of Zelophehad story gives us a lasting teaching on how to promote justice and peace.

I think that we begin with the highly unsettling story of Pinchas and learn that his violence does not promote peace, while the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, using their words, making a strong case, and questioning the law, with the intention of true justice is an everlasting instruction on justice and promoting peace.

Shabbat shalom!

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