

# Pinchas 5775

Last week, in Balak, we saw the prince of Moab attempt to undermine the people of Israel by hiring a well known prophet to curse them.

Prophets, as we now know, only see things, they can only relay ideas, actions, and consequences and try to influence change. They cannot directly alter the actions of G-d, turn blessings into curses, or turn curses into blessings. Only through how the people who listen to their prophesies act are the prophets able to enact change.

We remember Balaam being hired to curse the Israelites and watching that task turn against his employer, Balak, in a most glorious way. Instead of witnessing curses against whom he perceived to be his enemies, he saw them magnified in front of his own eyes.

Pinchas is a continuation of this theme. We remember [last time I spoke](#) about how the first verses of each book can influence every story we read and study. Numbers starts off with Hashem telling Moshe to take a census. If you also remember the alternate book proposed after the two inverted *nuns* in [B'ha'alotkha](#), the first verse is the Israelite people complaining bitterly.

We see Pinchas, a man who is usually of calm demeanor, follow Zimri, the son of an Israelite chieftain, and Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite chieftain whose name seems to establish a bizarre precedence for sexual immorality, into a tent, and slays them with a spear. Just as with the curse of Miriam, we have a lot of controversy around this seemingly large overreaction.

Many sages have even gone so far as to say that, while Pinchas was following *halacha*, had he gone to a tribunal with his actions, they would have told him that it was an outdated law

no longer followed.

Our chumash's commentary, on page 918, says some interesting things about these actions. The *yod* in "Pinchas" in verse 11 in the sefer Torah, so only in the scroll, is written smaller. It is diminished. The *yod* is understood to stand as a placeholder for the name of G-d and for *y'hudi*, or Jew. The commentary goes on to tell us that also, in the sefer Torah, the *vav* in "*shalom*" in verse 12 has a break in its stem.

While the *yod* represents Hashem, the *vav* represents something physical: spears and tent pegs.

Pinchas' actions were extreme. They made him the subject of ridicule among the people. On the surface, our Torah seems to endorse these actions and G-d even seems to reward them. But let's look a little closer.

There was already a plague going on due to the Israelite's infidelities and immoralities. Moses was commanded to lead the people up against the Midianites, the aggressors by seduction. The Midianites were encouraged or ordered, depending on interpretation, to tempt the Israelites into sexual impropriety. Many of the Jewish men were, indeed, led astray, and both nations were suffering for it.

Pinchas was the only one who followed G-d's orders to destroy the aggressors, and he started with Zimri and Cozbi. I feel he would have continued on had the effect of their deaths not stopped the plague as quickly as it did and had it not inspired Moshe to finally take arms against Midian.

I am not going to condone or condemn what Pinchas did. Saying he should or should not have done that is not the point of this *parasha*. There may have been other ways to calm the angst of the people, raise up their bitter complaints, and there may have not been other ways. Just as we see a contemporary pulling away from animal sacrifices, we see a moral pulling away from death penalties for aggressions such as these.

Attempting to justify this in a modern light is nearly useless.

That said, Midian was an extremely profitable nation which brought in much from spice trading. Moab, the aggressors in Balak, were likely a part of the Midianite realm at this time. Not only were there religious and moral problems at stake with the fornication of two rival tribal chieftains' children, but economic ones, as well.

So Pinchas did what he did to preserve not only the Jewish people's moral safety, but to protect their economic standing.

This act had consequences, though. As we've seen, the spark of joy that G-d puts in everyone was diminished. The *yud* that is so prominent in his name, that is is the second letter has been shrunken down, as only an act of extreme violence can do. It is a diminishing within himself that he will carry for the rest of his life. The *vav* in *shalom* is broken. His spear with two bodies on it has broken a tent peg of the shelter of peace. Only by breaking that spear can we repair the glorious tents of the nation that inspired *mi chamocha ba'elim, Adonai*.

He was given an appointment to the priesthood, of course. But perhaps, as our *chumash* points out, it wasn't a reward. Perhaps it was a way to help him rebuild himself. By studying, by teaching, by involving himself in scholarly affairs, maybe he could both get back that interjection of joy that he lost through his actions and strengthen the shelter of peace.

I haven't yet touched on the final two parts of this three part *parasha*, though. And I will be quick about it.

After the plague is lifted and moral and economic security is restored to the Israelite encampment, a census is ordered. Yes, another census.

If we recall, Numbers starts off with our first official census. This is because we must be accountable for each other,

we must make sure our brethren are with us and us with them. We can only stand as a people, and after facing what was surely a catastrophe in that time, our nations must be watched for, accounted for, and noted.

Our people needed to know what we would have available should Midian and Moab retaliate, as they were likely to do. Our people needed to know how many lives were dependent upon each other, our people needed to know the extent our nation was at risk.

Our festivals, with the sacrifices, rituals, and procedures, give us something to look forward to. I've spoken before about how the nature of sacrifice, taking something you've poured so much attention into, and watching it, often violently, leave you with no immediate tangible reward, can put your own life in perspective. These festivals bring us together as a people. They help us rebuild our nation, remember our struggles and, more importantly, our successes. *Pesach* is a celebration not only of our survival, but our elevation. *Sukkot* is a festival not only of booths and food, but of our journey. *Shabbat* is not just an observance of the end of the week, but a triumph over our work.

Pinchas is a microcosmic telling of our story. We had aggressors, we beat them, we accounted for ourselves, and we celebrated *with* G-d.

I have one final theme to weave into here, and it's one that I feel we should be cognizant of today.

When the symbols of aggressors who have long been defeated try to come back and threaten your people, they must be taken down. In the fledgeling Israelite nation, that was the Moabite chieftain's daughter. In this day, that symbol might be the flag of a secessionist faction that tried to split the country apart. Pinchas took down that symbol and his violence broke a part of us. His ascension to the priesthood was an attempt to

repair his diminished soul.

Bree Newsome is a courageous young woman who climbed a flagpole and took down the symbol of an uprising which was defeated 150 years ago. This was the Civil War, where our own nation was fighting among themselves. Because of the economic and moral impropriety of the slave trade, which was vastly different from the economics of slaves in the Torah, those who stood for human rights stood against those who would continue to exploit the lives and dignity of others. Our nation had a faction that was just as seditious and terrible as the Midianites and Moabites, only instead of seducing people into sexual acts, they kidnapped people from other countries, abused them, and systematically oppressed them.

There are people who want to keep this symbol alive, purportedly as a reminder of the past. but it is, to colored minorities, literally equivalent of the National Socialist Party flag. It is a symbol not only of oppression and hate, but of very real pain, suffering, and irreparable displacement.

This young lady took down a flag. Many predominantly black churches have had heinous acts of arson committed against them recently. There are uprisings of racism against black, brown, and even Semitic peoples coming back because of this recent push to banish this symbol of hate and treason.

I pray that we find peaceful ways to uproot the aggressors of our nation and people, whether it is the internal ones of our United States or those in the Middle East that would do away with our people and land. I pray that we are able to put down our spears, keep our vavs intact, keep the *yod* influence strong within us, and build not just a shelter of peace, but a monument of it for all of humanity.

Shabbat shalom.