

Spotlight on...Murder?

Background:

Parashat Pinchas tells of the story of Pinchas' response to the Israelites' idol worship. A lot of them were worshipping Baal-Peor, and Hashem got really angry and said that all the leaders of each tribe should be killed as punishment. This made the Jews really upset, and they were crying a lot. Just then, a Jew named Zimri took a Midianite woman named Cozbi and went to worship Baal-Peor with her. Pinchas took a spear and went up to Zimri and Cozbi and stabbed them both through the stomach. In response, Hashem told Moshe that Pinchas calmed Hashem's anger against the Jews. Therefore, Hashem wanted to give Pinchas a "brit shalom," or covenant of peace. We don't know what that means exactly. Here are some opinions:

Rashi: This was a covenant of peace, or a recognition of the fact that Pinchas had done something good for Hashem. The brit shalom was a way for Hashem to show gratitude to Pinchas.

Seforno: Brit shalom means protection from the angel of death, for we know that Pinchas lived way longer than everyone else. We know this because in the beginning of the Book of Shmuel, Pinchas is one of the kohanim in Shiloh. Yehoshua had died long before this time, which means that Pinchas lived an unusually long time.

Chizkuni: Brit shalom means that Pinchas didn't have to worry that Zimri and Cozbi's relatives would come and avenge their deaths (back then if someone killed another person, the dead person's relatives were allowed to come and kill the killer.)

Netziv: As a reward for calming Hashem's anger, Hashem blessed Pinchas that he would feel calm and peaceful for the rest of his life. Often after a person commits a crime they get more angry and agitated. Hashem blessed Pinchas that this wouldn't happen to him and he would remain a calm person.

Questions:

1. On a scale from 1-10 (1=criminal, 10=praiseworthy) how would you describe Pinchas' actions according to each of these opinions?
2. If you had to explain this story to someone today who wasn't familiar with it, how would you tell the story? Would you justify Pinchas' actions?