

*B'Kano Et Kinati B'Tocham*  
Pinchas and the Test of Legitimate Zealotry

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In the opening verses of this week's parshah, we have what is perhaps the most famous instance of zealotry in the Torah. As Hashem communicates to Moshe,

“Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohen turned back my anger from the Jewish people when he acted zealously on My behalf in their midst, and [therefore], I did not destroy the Jewish people in my zeal<sup>1</sup>.

The Torah, without hesitation, describes Pinchas' act, that of killing Zimri and Kozbi during their public fornication as one of zealotry, of *kinah*. The context surrounding this description compels one to interpret this act of zealotry in a positive light. After all, as the Torah says in the verse cited above, this act saved the Jewish people from a destruction far more severe than the plague which had already taken twenty four thousand lives.

Moreover, Pinchas himself is doubly rewarded on the basis of this action with a covenant of peace, *berit shalom*<sup>2</sup>, as well as a covenant of priesthood in perpetuity, <sup>3</sup> *berit kehnat olam*. The Torah reiterates that it was not despite, but *because* of his zealotry that Pinchas is rewarded, as the entirety of the verse states,

“He will have, as will his descendants after him, a covenant of eternal priesthood, on account of the fact that he acted zealously for his God, and he atoned for the Jewish people.” (BeMidbar 25:13)

Yet, even within this very context alone, one also receives the impression as to the dangers of zealotry. As the Torah states, had Pinchas not acted in zealotry on account of this public act of licentiousness, God would have been forced to act Himself, with disastrous consequences, *v'lo chilliti et bnei yisrael b'kinati*. That is to say, God's zealousness is so powerful that it could have brought about the total annihilation of the Jewish people<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> BeMidbar 25:11.

<sup>2</sup> BeMidbar 25:12.

<sup>3</sup> BeMidbar 25:13.

<sup>4</sup> See Netziv's distinction between *chemah*, mere anger, which is not capable of total destruction, and *kinah*, which he terms powerful anger, *chemah ha'azah*, which did have the potential for complete annihilation (Ha-Emek Davar BeMidbar 25:11, s.v. b'kinati). See the Ibn Ezra (ibid, s.v. b'kano) who notes that the Almighty is specifically described as *kana* in the context

## II.

It is not merely Divine zealotry, however, that gives us cause for concern. The celebrated mishnah in Pirkei Avot teaches us in the name of R. Elazar Ha-Kapar:

*Kinah*, desire, and [pursuit of] honor remove a person from this world<sup>5</sup>.

Here, very often, the term *kinah* is rendered with the translation of envy<sup>6</sup>. Yet, Rashi<sup>7</sup> argues that all uses of the root k.n.a. relate to the idea of *nekamah*, vengeance or vindication<sup>8</sup>. To be sure, one might feel envious if one senses that his own honor has been impinged by another, but *kinah* itself, according to Rashi, always relates to the desire that one might feel to actively seek vengeance<sup>9</sup> on such a person, much as Pinchas avenged God by killing those who disgraced His name.

Indeed, if one examines the uses of *kinah*, as applied to human interactions, throughout the rest of the Torah, one is certainly left with a clear sense of just how destabilizing and even dangerous this emotional state can be.

First, when the Torah<sup>10</sup> describes Rachel's reaction to Leah's pregnancy, *va'tekaneh Rachel ba'achata*, she demands of Yaakov only that which God could possibly provide, children. Ramban<sup>11</sup> explicitly links Rachel's inappropriate tone in this admittedly fraught situation to the sense of *kinah* which overtook her.

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of Avodah Zarah, and that indeed, the entire Jewish people might have been destroyed had it not been for Pinchas' act. See Rashi and Ramban to BeMidbar 25:5 for a further discussion of precisely how many Jews might have been implicated in the sin of Pe'or, and whether or not all in fact met Divine justice, despite Pinchas' heroism.

<sup>5</sup> Avot 4:21.

<sup>6</sup> Meiri specifies that the object of envy may be power or other forms of success which someone else has attained, Beit Ha-Bechirah, Avot 4:21.

<sup>7</sup> BeMidbar 25:11 s.v. *b'kano et kinati*.

<sup>8</sup> See Seforno as well, who understands that at least this particular usage of *kinah* is rooted in *nekama*. See his fascinating theory as to how sheer passivity in the face of Pinchas' zealotry was sufficient for the Jewish people to achieve atonement, given the passive nature of their sin, BeMidbar 25:11 s.v. *b'kano et kinati b'tocham*. Seforno's analysis does not include, by definition, those who actively worshipped Pe'or, but those who may have been destroyed through their passivity.

<sup>9</sup> Vengeance itself is an extremely complex topic which requires its own full analysis, beyond the scope of this essay. On the one hand, fraternal vengeance has been totally proscribed by the Torah (Va-Yikra 19:18), whilst we are commanded to avenge both God and the Jewish people of the Midianites in this very section of the Torah (See BeMidbar 31:2 and 31:3). The Almighty Himself is described as vengeful, *kel nekamot Hashem kel nekamot hofia* which the Talmud notes as particularly significant on account of the juxtaposition of vengeance with two Divine names (See Talmud Bavli Berachot 33a based on Psalms 94:1).

<sup>10</sup> Bereishit 30:1. See Rashi (ad loc.s.v. *Va-Tekaneh Rachel B'Achotah*) who cites the homiletic interpretation that Rachel experienced *kinah* not for the children, per se, but for Leah's righteous deeds which were evidently being rewarded. Radak (ibid), in contrast, understands the verse in its literal sense.

<sup>11</sup> Bereishit (ibid, s.v. *bava li vanim*), "*dibrah she'lo k'hogen b'kinata*".

When Yehoshua b. Nun<sup>12</sup> recognizes that prophecy is spreading beyond his revered mentor Moshe, he suggests that Moshe have the Eldad and Meidah, the two erstwhile prophets, incarcerated. Moshe responds incredulously, *ha'mekaneh atah li*, in essence, has your sense of zealotry on my behalf blinded you to what is a wonderful and positive development, the diffusion of the prophetic spirit throughout the Jewish camp, *"u'mi yiten kol am Hashem nevi'im ki yiten Hashem et rucho aleihem."*

Finally, in the depths of his desperation at the spiritual degradation of the Jewish people, Eliyahu<sup>13</sup> responds to God's indictment, *"mah licha poh eliyahu*, with the words, *kanoh kineiti la'Hashem Elokei Tzevakot ki azvu britcha bnei yisrael*<sup>15</sup>, that he has acted in zealotry on behalf of the Lord due to the spiritual infidelity of the Children of Israel. Unsurprisingly, the answer is not well received. Two verses later, Eliyahu is summarily dispatched from his post as prophet to be replaced by Elisha<sup>16</sup>.

### III.

One may wish to counter these negative instances of *kinah* throughout Tanach with a rabbinic statement with far reaching halakhic implications, *kinat sofrim tarbeh chochmah*, the [competitive] zealotry of scribes causes wisdom to increase<sup>17</sup>.

The context of this statement, a Talmudic discussion of *hasagat gevul*, illicit business competition, broadly excludes the dissemination of Torah from these restrictions on the basis of this principle<sup>18</sup>. Apparently, in the context of spiritual pursuits, *kinah* is not merely not construed negatively, but is seen as a potent catalyst for greater achievement.

Yet, here too, there remains much cause for concern. In his comment on the Mishnah in Avot cited above, which linked *kinah* to literally losing one's entire sense of

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<sup>12</sup> BeMidbar 11:27-29.

<sup>13</sup> Melakhim I:19

<sup>14</sup> Ibid,verse 13.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, verse 14.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, verse, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Talmud Bavli Masekhet Bava Batra 21b-22a. See Tosafot (ad loc.) as to whether Ezra actually ruled that scribes should work next to one another in practice, much as Torah scholars do not typically work in offices but in crowded batei midrash.

<sup>18</sup> See Rambam Hilkhhot Talmud Torah (2:7) who allows for an alternative instructor to set up a yeshiva in explicit competition for the students already enrolled in the first yeshiva, and the Shulchan Arukh's ruling on this basis, Yoreh De'ah 245: 22. See Rema (ibid) for the complex parameters that exist in similar situations concerning competing rabbinic authorities in a municipality. See also Rambam Hilkhhot Shekhenim 6:12 which excludes Torah study from zoning restrictions against noise pollution. See Shulchan Arukh's expansion of this ruling to any mitzvah, Choshen Mishpat 156:3.

place in the world, Rabbenu Yonah<sup>19</sup> notes that even in an instance of *kinah* in the context of Torah study, there is much that is left to be desired. Citing a verse in Kohelet<sup>20</sup> which establishes that much of the progress in world civilization is attributable to interpersonal *kinah*, Rabbenu Yonah goes so far as to say that there is still *ra'ah rabah*, considerable evil, in one who seeks to further his Torah study out of a sense of *kinah* for someone else's spiritual achievements.

#### IV.

What, then, made Pinchas different? What makes his *kinah* the source of manifold blessings for himself, and salvation for the Jewish people?

If we study the text carefully, we discover that Pinchas' act had nothing to do with his own sense of honor or dignity being impinged, or even to increase his own spiritual standing, as in the case of *kinat sofrim*. Rather, it was exclusively motivated by a sense that God's name had been desecrated<sup>21</sup>. The *kinah* did not belong, so to speak, to Pinchas, but to the Almighty. As the Torah states, *b'kano et kinati*.

Still, one might wish to argue, is this any different than Eliyahu? Does Eliyahu not describe himself as *kanah kineiti la'Hahsem*?

The critical difference, once again, lies in the very next word in the Torah's description of Pinchas, *b'kano et kinati* ***b'tocham***,

Pinchas was operating from within the Jewish people, and out of a sense of loyalty to the Jewish people, no different than his grandfather, whom the Torah makes a point of mentioning in this context, who ran with the *ketoret* into the very middle of the camp, *el toch ha'kahal*, to stop the spread of a plague<sup>22</sup>.

Eliyahu, tragically, had soured on the Jewish people to the point where he had abandoned them entirely, as God so pointedly says, *mah licha poh eliyahu*? What are you doing *here*? Why are you not with the Jewish people?

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<sup>19</sup> Commentary of Rabbenu Yonah to Avot 4:21.

<sup>20</sup> Kohelet 4:4. Rabbenu Yonah's reading of the verse aligns with Rashi, ad loc.

<sup>21</sup> Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin 82a, which establishes that the entire paradigm of *kana'im pogim bo*, for all of its complexity, is rooted in a righteous indignation in the face of extreme *Chillul Hashem*.

<sup>22</sup> BeMidbar 17:12. See Talmud Bavli Sanhedrin 82b which beautifully develops the connection to Aharon. It is exquisite that in describing Aharon's finest hour, when he saved the Jewish people from the terrible plague which was consuming them, the Torah utilizes the very same terminology it would later use regarding the grandson, *va'yarotz el toch ha'kahal*, as well as *va'yechaper al ha'am*. In both cases, the Torah also describes the result with the same exact expression, *va'tatzar ha'megafah*, BeMidbar 17:13, and 25:8, respectively.

This, in the final analysis, is the critical point. Typically, by its very definition, *kinah* means acting to advance one's own interests, or even God's interests in the case of Eliyahu, *against* the interests of another person or group. Rachel wishes to advance relative to her sister, and Yehoshua wishes to advance Moshe's standing, as if it needed some external validation, relative to Eldad and Meidad. Eliyahu, seemingly, seeks to cement his own fidelity to the Almighty by demeaning the Jewish people<sup>23</sup>.

Only Pinchas, in vindicating God's name at a moment of enormous *chillul Hashem*, utilized *kinah* to advance the interests of the Jewish people, causing Hashem's anger to be turned back from the Jewish people. Pinchas operated as one ensconced within the Jewish people, fully devoted to the Jewish people. In a word, *b'tocham*.

It was, perhaps, only the logical consequence that Pinchas was rewarded with *berit kehunat olam*, as an expression of the notion that the ultimate reward for his service to the Jewish people on a one time basis was the opportunity to do so on a persistent basis: *sechar mitzvah, mitzvah*<sup>24</sup>.

## V.

This reading, that *kinah* may be legitimate only if it passes a dual test, of advancing the Almighty's honor, as well as serving the needs of the Jewish people, as opposed to any personal interest, may be validated by another moment in Pinchas' career recounted in Sefer Yehoshua.

In the wake of a construction by Reuven and Gad of an edifice perceived by the Jewish people as a separatist altar, Pinchas leads a delegation to the tribes of the Transjordan<sup>25</sup>. It would seem a bizarre, even reckless decision, for someone whose first instinct was aggression, a *kanai* in the idiomatic sense of the term, to be sent into the midst of a veritable tinderbox.

And yet, Pinchas was no firebrand, no conventional zealot. His earlier, limited use of violence was justified only by the immediate needs of *Chillul Hashem* and salvation of the Jewish people.

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<sup>23</sup> The subtle, but vital contrast between the *kinah* of Pinchas and Eliyahu is of particular note given the rabbinic affiliation between the two, see Yalkut Shimoni 771:21. One can read the Midrash as giving Eliyahu the opportunity to rectify his previous error of despairing of the Jewish people, while adopting Pinchas' mentality of seeking their welfare even in a time of mass sin, such as Ba'al Pe'or.

<sup>24</sup> See comments of R. Ovadiah Bartenura to Avot 4:2.

<sup>25</sup> See Yehoshua Chapter 22.

As such, in this moment of crisis, when the Jewish people had already gathered for battle<sup>26</sup>, and mass bloodshed seemed a real possibility, Pinchas was the emissary par excellence to ensure that whatever steps were taken next, would only be for the sake of Heaven and in the best interests of the Jewish people.

After hearing out the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and the portion of Menashe that would reside in the Transjordan, and determining that their motivation in constructing this edifice was one of unity with the Jewish people, diametrically opposite what the Jewish people had assumed, Pinchas issues the following statement, clearly echoing the Torah's earlier words: "*ha'yom yadanu ki **b'tochenu** Hashem....az hitzaltam et bnei yisrael mi'yad Hashem*"<sup>27</sup>."

Once again, Pinchas is at the center of a great salvation of the Jewish people, and one which establishes the presence of the Almighty in their midst. The personal *berit shalom* that he had earned by virtue of saving untold thousands of Jews fourteen years earlier now redounds to the benefit of an entire nation with the blessing of peace in place of looming bloodshed.

Superficially, one might wonder how the violent Pinchas of Ba'al Pe'or becomes the diplomat of Sefer Yehoshua, but that would be to miss the point entirely. Pinchas, from beginning to end, concerned himself only with sanctifying the Divine name, and protecting the Jewish people from destruction. His role in Sefer Yehoshua is no departure from his role in mitigating Ba'al Pe'or, but a clear extension of it.

According to the Talmudic view<sup>28</sup> that Pinchas only fully earned his status as kohen until the episode in Sefer Yehoshua, *ad she'sam shalom bein ha'shevatim*, it is this peacemaking effort which reflects that his earlier actions were of pure motives, and not an excuse for violence or aggression.

## VI.

Finally, the premise that Pinchas' zealotry is acceptable because it meets two criterion, that of bringing honor to Hashem and peace to the Jewish people, without

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<sup>26</sup> See *ibid*, 22:12.

<sup>27</sup> Yehoshua 22:31.

<sup>28</sup> Talmud Bavli Zevachim 101b.

reflecting any personal interest is validated by a rabbinic view concerning the tragic end to Pinchas' life<sup>29</sup>.

When Yiftach's oath to offer his own daughter as a sacrifice was taken, and his own inexcusable pride prevented him from seeking counsel, it was incumbent upon Pinchas to place any personal considerations aside and save an innocent girl. Instead, Pinchas' sense of personal honor prevented him from initiating this interaction with Yiftach, and a horrific tragedy and an unspeakable desecration of the honor of Heaven ensued<sup>30</sup>.

Consequently, according to the Midrash, Pinchas lost his prophetic stature. Pinchas' sin, in this view, was not only a betrayal of one who might have been saved, but of his entire legacy, where personal interests were always subordinated to *kevod shamayim* and the national welfare, in which *kinah* found its only legitimate expression.

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<sup>29</sup> VaYikra Rabba 37:4.

<sup>30</sup> See Ramban VaYikra 27:29.