



The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Pinchas

Tamuz 5781 / July 2021

Zealots are not Leaders; Zealotry is not Leadership

By B. J. Douek

Moses is commanded to ascend Mount *Abarim* to gaze upon the Land of Israel, which he will not live to enter. He inquires of the Almighty about the transition of leadership — who will lead the nation once he delivers them to the boundary of their heritage? Judging by the name of our *parsha*, *Pinchas* was a leading candidate. He acted to restore God’s honor and forestall the existential threat to the nascent nation, and he stopped a highly lethal plague. What’s more, he recognized that if there were no champion to step forward, the populace would “have lost God and thereby their future existence.”

Yet it doesn’t happen that way. The hero who saves the people Israel, who receives not one but two rewards from God is bypassed. Why?

The Book of *Balak* presages the entire portion of *Pinchas*. That saga embodied in the eponymous preceding *parsha* is devoted toward one objective—cursing the Israelites. Thrice prodded by *Balak* and thrice discouraged by God to curse the Jewish people; instead, *Balaam* invokes the most lavish of praise with the most exquisite of poetry in all of Torah, to wit: “none have beheld iniquity in Jacob, neither hath one seen perverseness in Israel; the Lord his God is with him...” and “how goodly are they tents, oh Jacob, thy dwellings oh Israel!” and “a star shall step forth out of Jacob, and a scepter shall rise out of Israel...” Our prophets do not speak this way. The authentic prophets of Israel exhort in order to correct.

Balak and *Balaam* have seemingly failed, but the narrative does not end with the ignominious exit of the two antagonists. Their departure is immediately followed by the description of the Israelites cohabiting with the daughters of Moab, sacrificing to their gods, feasting at their idolatrous feasts, and worshiping *Baal Peor*. These acts invoked intense Divine anger, causing a catastrophic plague that killed 24,000, nearly 4% of Israel’s arms-bearing strength.

Without seeking advice or a ruling from Moses, *Pinchas* outraged by the publicly wanton behavior of the tribal leader *Zimri* and his Moabite paramour, grabbed a short spear and stabbed and killed them both *in flagrante delicto*. With this action, *Pinchas* brings God’s plague to an end.

There can be no doubt that *Pinchas* was a religious hero. He rushed into the breach when the nation was facing religious and moral crises and palpable Divine anger. He acted while everyone else, including Moses, watched. He risked his life by doing so. There can be little doubt that the mob might have turned against him and attacked him.

Rabbi Shlomo Riskin extols the leadership of Moses through his life’s work. In the *Balak-Balaam-Pinchas* affair, however, wherein the core values of the newly minted Jewish nation are rapidly disintegrating, Moses is frozen by inaction, and ultimately the Jewish people are saved by *Pinchas*’ righteous action.

Returning to our original questions, *Pinchas* received two awards from the Almighty, yet he is not the successor. Succession goes to Joshua ben Nun. Why two? Why not? Why Joshua?

Pinchas is the archetypal *kanai* (zealot)— someone who acts on his own to sanctify God’s name in the face of its desecration. He acts on impulse, rendering his shorthand judgment of the circumstances that he confronts. He can respond to those circumstances as he sees fit; nothing is out of bounds. He can kill if necessary. And he will be praised in Heaven.

The *Amoraim*, however, debated *Pinchas*’ *bona fides*. *Rav* argues that *Pinchas* may have acted within the law, but he should have allowed God to execute its provisions. Conversely, *Shmuel* reasoned that *Pinchas*’ action in

response to an open and unprecedented breach of the Covenant of emergency proportions represented a kind of battlefield execution and reasoned that the demands of God required human realization.

The *Pinchas* precedent has been significantly circumscribed. Although his act was lawful, *Chazal* nonetheless said that had *Zimri* turned around and killed *Pinchas*, he would have been deemed innocent as he would have acted in self-defense. Had *Pinchas* killed *Zimri* even a moment after the act of immorality, he would have been guilty of murder. And had *Pinchas* asked a court of law whether he was permitted to do what he was about to do, the answer would have been no. This is a rare instance of the rule, *halakhah ve-ein morin kein*, “It is a law that is not taught”.

Why this moral ambivalence?

What *Pinchas* did, while necessary at that moment in time, dare not be a precedent. He sidestepped the legal procedures of justice. He swept past the basic pillars of due process—warning, witness, testimony, interrogation—without which a just society cannot survive. The zealot who takes the law into his own hands embarks on a course of action fraught with moral danger. Only the holiest may do so, only once in a lifetime, and only in the direst circumstance of national risk, when there is nothing else to be done and no one else to do it.

This is not leadership.

Nevertheless, *Pinchas* was rewarded by the Almighty for this act of individual vigilantism. As to which God states: “*Pinchas* ... has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous with My zeal...” In light of this analysis, what do we make of the two awards *Pinchas* receives.

The first reward is understandable. *Pinchas* performs an act in the name of Heaven and for that he is rewarded with the office of the priesthood for himself and his descendants. This was significant because arguably, he was not automatically in line to inherit his father’s office. *Eleazar* was not yet a priest when *Pinchas* was born. The second award, the Covenant of Peace, is more complex. *Pinchas* was a man of rage and impulse, hair-triggered by emotion, “fierce as a leopard, swift as an eagle, fast as a hart, and strong as a lion in doing God’s will.” He lacked the reserve that allows us to step back, evaluate various stimuli, and consider options and their consequences. *Pinchas*’ act of murder was poisoning his soul and fitness to be part of a community and certainly a leader. The Covenant of Peace, then, was not a reward for his impulsive behavior, it was the cure—the ability to quell the rage of his emotions and to manage the delicate balance that allows us to be part of society.

This balance explains the succession to Joshua.

And God said into Moses: take unto thee *Joshua ben Nun*, a man in whom there is spirit. In *Joshua* the Almighty indicated a man with an understanding heart (as Solomon) to judge Thy people to discern between good and bad; to get about (as *Caleb*) both in matters military and to be a role model for the welfare of the people; and an intrinsic spiritual and moral agent in him to an eminent degree (as *Hosea*) that merited him to be successor to Moses.

B. J. and Bunny were invited to join the Young Israel of Scarsdale community over 40 years ago when a former Sisterhood president in her enthusiasm, nearly ran Bunny down in our driveway. The fateful driveway became a Torah transfer point in moving into the sanctuary on Daisy Farms from the Rabbi’s house. We are proud to have been builders in the community, but we have received far more than we have given.

Save the date

EXPLAINING THE WORD TORAH

Rabbi Menachem Liebtog will introduce Sefer Devarim

Wednesday • July 14 • 8 PM



The Collective Conversation is a project of the Young Israel of Scarsdale and the YIS Living Torah Fund

Learning and Growing Together as a Community • Learning as Legacy

[Click here](#) to see past issues of *The Collective Conversation*