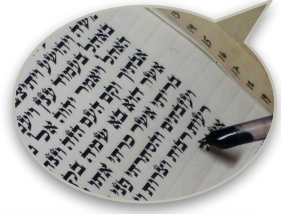




# The Collective Conversation

Weekly Torah Essays from the  
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Pinchas

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## The Timing of Pinchas' Reward

By Alan Sepowitz, z"l

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Why do we read of *Pinchas*' reward at the beginning of today's *parsha*? That is to say, why wasn't the honoring of *Pinchas* included in last week's *parsha*? For it was last *Shabbat* that we read, in *Parshat Balak*, of *Pinchas*' zealotry. Many of *Pinchas*' brethren had succumbed to the temptations of Midianite and Moabite women. Acts of debauchery and even of idolatry abounded. The laws of *Hashem* and the authority of *Moshe* were scorned. Particularly brazen in this regard was *Zimri*, a prince of the tribe of *Shimon*. Under the heavy guard of his *Shimonite* tribesmen, *Zimri* entered a tent with the Midianite woman *Cozbi* to engage in illicit relations.

All of Israel knew what was going on in that tent, but nobody acted except *Pinchas*. It is said that *Moshe* stood outside the tent but could not act — the very same *Moshe*, albeit 40 years older, who had slain an Egyptian taskmaster for mistreating a Hebrew slave.

Perhaps *Moshe*, despite his love for *Hashem*, could not take physical action against a fellow Jew. *Pinchas*, on the other hand, felt a visceral outrage that drove him to action. He found decadence where he yearned to see holiness. He acted to restore the children of Israel to a spiritual level befitting a people who recently had received the Torah. For at great risk to his own person, *Pinchas* passed the *Shimonite* guards, entered the tent, and skewered *Zimri* and *Cozbi* together on his sword. This graphic act of retribution ended Israel's rampant decadence and saved the Israelite nation from total destruction by *Hashem*. *Pinchas* brought the Jews back to the precepts of the Torah.

This son of the tribe of *Levi* was rewarded with the Priesthood — not just for himself, but for his descendants in perpetuity. He was recognized by *Hashem* as a staunch pillar of the faith, as one who knew right from wrong like white from black and who could see no middle ground and tolerate no compromise. *Pinchas* could not brook deviation from the word of *Hashem* as expressed in the Torah and he would not hesitate to expunge evil as a surgeon might excise cancer to prevent it from spreading. He would not only keep himself pure but would be his brother's keeper.

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It has been suggested by some commentators that *Pinchas*' ability to undertake violent action derived from his forefather, *Levi*. For it was *Levi* who helped lead the slaughter of the men of *Shechem* following the abduction of his sister, *Dina*. It is ironic that *Levi*'s partner in that carnage was none other than *Shimon*. *Shimon*, the progenitor of the tribe of *Pinchas*' victim, Prince *Zimri*. If *Pinchas* had inherited the ability to kill from *Levi*, then surely *Zimri* and his fellow tribesmen must have possessed the same inheritance from *Shimon*. The inference is that *Zimri* or his bodyguards would not have hesitated to kill *Pinchas* had they perceived his threat.

Thus, *Pinchas*' action was taken at grave danger to his own well-being, if not survival. Like *Yitzchok* under the poised knife of *Avraham*, *Pinchas* clung to an unflinching faith in *Hashem* as he did what he knew he had to do.

Unlike *Levi* and *Shimon* of *Sefer Berasheet*, *Pinchas* did not act out of revenge. He acted solely out of a sense of religious duty. Nor did he kill only outsiders. *Cozbi*, of course, was a foreigner, but *Zimri* was, after all, a fellow Jew. *Pinchas* must have felt some personal anguish at executing *Zimri*, for he was removing one of his own people from this world. But *Pinchas* clearly was able to suppress such feelings in a passionate display of religiosity. *Moshe* was unable to act against *Zimri*. *Pinchas* was able to act.. *Pinchas* was a zealot!

*Pinchas* has been linked to *Eliyahu*, about whom we read in the *Haftorah* usually read on this *Shabbat*. It is said that *Pinchas*' descendants will announce the coming of *Moshiach*.

Some midrashim even merge the identity of *Pinchas* himself with that of *Eliyahu*. I would also associate *Pinchas* with *Judah Maccabee*. The *Maccabees*, like *Pinchas*, were zealots who acted forcefully against fellow Jews who had turned their backs on Torah and *Hashem* by lusting after the ways of the Hellenist invaders. The memory of *Judah Maccabee* has been immortalized in the minds of both Jews and Gentiles through the holiday of Chanukah. *Parshat Pinchas* tells us that *Hashem* sought to bestow upon *Pinchas* a similar immortality through the Priesthood.

By juxtaposing the rewards of *Pinchas* and *Yehoshua* in one parsha, the Torah underscores a division of leadership which, in modern parlance, would be called the separation of church and state. *Parshat Pinchas* lays the foundation for this doctrine.

Let me return to my original query: why is this story of *Pinchas* divided between *Parshat Balak* and *Parshat Pinchas*? Why is the bestowal of his reward read the week following the description of his deed?

I think the answer to this question lies not in the reward *Pinchas* received, but in the prize he did not receive. Shortly afterward, in *Parshat Pinchas*, we read how *Hashem* passes *Moshe*'s mantle of leadership not to *Pinchas*, the zealot but to *Joshua*, to *Yehoshua ben Nun*. By juxtaposing the rewards of *Pinchas* and *Yehoshua* in one parsha, the Torah underscores a division of leadership which, in modern parlance, would be called the separation of church and state. *Parshat Pinchas* lays the foundation for this doctrine.

*Yehoshua ben Nun* was chosen to succeed *Moshe* because he was like *Moshe* — *Moshe*, the courageous leader who challenged the *Pharaoh* of Egypt, the pious man who received and promulgated the laws of *Hashem*, the wise judge who mediated disputes among his people but also the man who could not bring himself to execute *Zimri*. The attributes which enabled *Pinchas* to carry out that execution were the very traits that made *Pinchas* unsuitable for *Moshe*'s position. *Pinchas* was not the person to deal with the day-to-day problems of war and peace or to negotiate relations with other nations.

Sometimes we may need a *Pinchas* to teach us righteousness, but we need a *Yehoshua* to lead us in the Promised Land.

**Alan** and Betty were YIS members from its inception; they raised three children in the community. Rabbi Rubenstein frequently asked Alan to deliver the Shabbat morning drasha.

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