

Parshat Pinchas is about many things. One of the major events is Moses and Aaron's successors (Joshua and Pinchas) are chosen. Another event is the census that God tells Moses to take. And one other major element is that the daughters of Tzlofhad plead their case to own land since their father died without any sons. There is also a list of the appointed sacrifices for many holidays.

The most important story in this Parsha I think is the story of Pinchas. In the last Parsha, Pinchas got praised for killing a son of a clan chieftain named Zimri and a Midianite woman named Cozbi because they were "having relations". I don't agree with this. Yes, God wanted them to punish people who were caught with Midianites but there is also a law in the Torah to set up courts and appoint judges. So though the law might have required them to be killed anyway, it is still good to give them a fair trial within the law. On the other hand, the book Text Messages (which is a commentary for teens) references the Talmud in Sanhedrin 82a and suggests that the court might have said that "the law might permit [capital punishment] but we don't follow that law [anymore]." So maybe they wouldn't have been killed anyway, it's hard to say. So, why was Pinchas praised for killing the couple? Well the answer is simple. It is possible God agreed with the values that he chose to uphold and praised him for it.

I don't think Pinchas thought of the consequences of killing Cozbi and the man when he did it. He didn't focus on community values. He only thought about his sense of right and wrong. I question why Moses did not step in and say killing people on your own is wrong. It gave the wrong message to the community. It teaches people that they can decide all by themselves what is right or wrong instead of the community deciding. It teaches children to just do something impulsively even if it's wrong. As part of my bat mitzvah project, I worked with preschool children. They sometimes fought with each other and we tried to teach them that it is wrong to fight. If I fought with my sister in front of them, they would learn fighting is right even if I tell them not to fight.

It's good to act and do what you think is right, but you still need to care about the rules and the wider community. If Pinchas thought it was right to stop people from doing something wrong and acted on it, action is good but not if the action breaks other commandments. The expression two wrongs don't make a right sums up this thought.

I noticed something else interesting about the structure of this parsha. If you go through the Torah not many women are named in it. But in this portion, many women are named. Cozbi and all 5 daughters of Tzlofhad. They were ironically connected; The daughters went to Moses about something they believed was wrong and convinced Moses and God to change a law they thought was

unjust. Cozbi, a Midianite priestess, broke the law with an Israelite man. Perhaps they also thought that law was wrong, although they didn't go and argue their case, they just broke the law. They did opposite things and got rewarded or punished. These kinds of parallel stories happen frequently in Torah. In many parshiyot there are 2 opposite stories or laws, highlighting what is praiseworthy and what deserves punishment.

If we go over what Parsha Pinchas has taught us today we can understand the message of this parsha. The message is that change is possible and can be good. Cozbi and Zimri caused the Israelites to think about what was right and what was wrong, although didn't change any laws. The fact that Pinchas was chosen as Aaron's successors underlines the importance of moral conviction for the Israelites going forward. The daughters of Tzlofhad were one of the first women's rights movements, which was pretty cool, and they convinced Israelite leadership that change was necessary. Moses and Aaron's successors were chosen and the Israelites learned that leadership must change over time. This portion has a lot of change, much of it difficult, but absolutely worth it.

So my question to you is - based on this parsha, what do you think the best ways to make change in a community are?