

Pinchas' action, Moses' inaction, and God's reaction

Story

The people 'whore' with Moabite women, sacrifice to their gods; God gets angry, has some executed, brings plague. Then an Israelite cavorts with a Midianite woman in full sight of all, near Tent of Meeting. Pinchas grabs spear, kills both. God pleased, rewards Pinchas.

Text

[Numbers 25] 6. And, behold, one of the people of Israel came and brought to his companions a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses, and in the sight of all the congregation of the people of Israel, who were weeping before the door of the Tent of Meeting.

7. And when Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from among the congregation, and took a javelin in his hand;

8. And he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly. So the plague ceased from the people of Israel.

9. And those who died in the plague were twenty four thousand.

Parshat Pinchas begins here:

10. And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying,

11. Pinchas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned my anger away from the people of Israel, while he was zealous for my sake among them, that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy.

12. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace;

13. And he shall have it, and his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was zealous for his God, and made an atonement for the people of Israel.

Pinchas' action

-Is Pinchas a model? Rabbis: He did right because God said so, but don't you do the same. [2nd temple fell because of zealots' senseless hatred -- *sin'at chinam*]

-Hirsch: Pinchas did right because he acted on impulse; if he had waited, would have been murder

-Sforno: Public transgression, so it is vital to address it now, as new rules take hold. Starts low with sex, ends high with idolatry.

-Talmud Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 9:7:

The Elders of Israel sought to excommunicate Pinchas [for murder], but the Holy Spirit hurried and [stopped them]

Rabbi Baruch Epstein: Holy Spirit had to testify that Pinchas' zeal was genuine, and ONLY such intervention can prevent punishment for murder. Can't keep such people in the community.

-Pinchas didn't want to do it, but had to stop the plague fast:

-Midrash, Ex. Rabbah 33:5:

R. Jose said that Pinchas reasoned to himself: 'If a horse risks its life itself in war, and is prepared to die for its master, then how much more should I be prepared to do so to sanctify God's name? ... What shall I do? I cannot kill both. Two can kill one, but can one kill two?' While he was pondering, the epidemic raged among the Israelites.

-Talmud, Sanhedrin 82b:

Then [Pinchas] came and struck them down before the Almighty, saying. 'Sovereign of the Universe! Shall 24,000 perish because of these' [Implying: It is better for these two to die than 24,000 more of our people to die.]

-Rav Kook: If his grandfather Aharon was a "lover of peace and pursuer of peace", how can Pinchas do such an unpeaceful thing? Answer: It was contrary to his nature and was done purely for God's sake. THAT is what pleased God.

-Pinchas gave dangerous interpretation to Talmudic rule: "If someone [rodef] comes to kill you, kill him first" if that's the only way to stop him [Sanhedrin 72a]. Was Zimri a rodef?

-Modern view: Sex with aliens propagated the plague, which may have originated from those aliens; must nip in bud by preventing such sex.

Moses' inaction

Midrash, Exodus Rabbah 33:5:

When Cozbi came along, [Zimri] desired her, but she said to him: 'I will not yield to you, for my father told me that I must yield only to Moses.' To which he replied: 'I am greater than Moses, for he belongs to the third tribe, whereas I belong to the second. Shall I show you that I am greater than Moses? Well, in front of him will I take you,' ... so impudent was he towards him. He said to Moses: 'Is she forbidden or permitted?' To which Moses replied: 'She is forbidden to you.' Zimri then retorted: 'Are you the most faithful follower of the Torah, on whom God prides himself saying, 'My servant Moses ... is trusted in all My house' You tell me that she is forbidden?

Well, the wife which you have taken is also forbidden to you, for both are Midianite women; and whereas this one is the greatest of her family, your wife is the daughter of a heathen priest.'

-R' Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg: A kana'i [zealot] must have pure motivations. That is why Moses did not kill Zimri himself: His wife, Tzipporah, was also Midianite. Of course, Moses' case was different, for he married before the Torah was given. Nevertheless, in his humility, Moses feared that if he killed Zimri, he might derive satisfaction from taking revenge on the person who insulted him.

-But Pinchas was son of a Midianite woman himself! His father Elazar, son of Aaron; married another daughter of Jethro the Midianite. So the woman he killed may have been a relative!

Talmud, Sanhedrin 82b:

The Israelites began berating Pinchas for his presumption, as he himself was descended from a Midianite idolater, Jethro. The Israelites said: "See this son of Puti [Putiel, i.e. Jethro] whose maternal grandfather fattened (pittem) cattle for idols, and who has now slain the prince of a tribe of Israel (Zimri)!" To counter this attack, God detailed Pinchas's descent from the peaceful Aaron. And then God told Moses to be the first to extend a greeting of peace to Pinchas, so as to calm the crowd. The atonement that Pinchas had made was worthy to atone permanently.

God's reaction

-Pinchas was rewarded not so much for killing two, but for stopping plague and saving the people from God's ire.

God prays: May it be My will that My mercy supersedes my anger:

Talmud, Berachot 7a:

R. Johanan says in the name of R. Jose: How do we know that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers? Because it says: 'Even them will I bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in the house of My prayer [bet tefillati]'. [Isa. 56:7] It is not said, 'their prayer', but 'My prayer'; hence [you learn] that the Holy One, blessed be He, says prayers.

-What does He pray? R. Zutra b. Tobi said in the name of Rab: 'May it be My will that My mercy may suppress My anger, and that My mercy may prevail over My [other] attributes, so that I may deal with My children in the attribute of mercy and, on their behalf, stop short of the limit of strict justice [not impose full penalty]'.

Parallel with Pinchas: Moses killing Egyptian

Torah does not say good or bad; tradition generally says good, but some say bad and that that's real reason Moses not allowed in Israel.

On Pinchas, since God says good, commentators may not say bad.