



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Pinchas

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June 29, 2013

Pinchas

**War and Peace: Is There a
Peaceful Approach to War?**



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

How should we react when we witness a crime – with aggression or with passivity? Do we confront or ignore? If you see a wrong being done – one person hurting another; your child acting inappropriately – how do you balance strong, disciplinary action without becoming overzealous?

This question has plagued peaceful people through the ages: How should a man of peace deal with injustice?

The answer to these questions can be found in this week’s controversial Torah portion, where God grants a zealot and a killer a “covenant of... peace.”

In its inimitable way the Torah provokes us into revisiting peace and asking: What exactly is peace?

Most of us identify zealotry as a radical and extreme force, equated with terrorism, which has no redeeming quality. But is that how the Torah sees it?

Many wonder: Will there ever be peace for the Jewish people living in their homeland? But maybe we should be asking: What is peace? Does peace mean always laying down our arms and giving up what we hold dear? If so, how is peace different from passivity or weakness? And if not, can there be peace in the absence of negotiations or compromises?

For answers, we will mine the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov on this issue, which contain extremely relevant and powerful lessons about peace, fundamentalism and extremism – and which explain what we can do to address these explosive issues.

WAR AND PEACE:**IS THERE A PEACEFUL APPROACH TO WAR?****1. Who Wants War? (humor)**

The social studies teacher had just finished a unit on war and peace.

“How many of you,” he asked, “would say you're opposed to war?”

Not surprisingly, all hands went up. The teacher asked,

“Who'll give us the reason for being opposed to war?”

A large, bored-looking boy in the back of the room raised his hand.

“Johnny?” The teacher said.

“I hate war,” Johnny said, “because wars make history, and then some poor, innocent kid has to memorize all about it.”

2. The Covenant of Peace

Only once in history – and once in the entire Torah – was someone granted God’s covenant of peace. That man was Pinchas, the subject of this week’s Torah reading. But the reason given for this reward *of peace* is most puzzling – for it appears that Pinchas was a zealot and a killer.

Pinchas was the one who speared and killed Zimri and Kosbi for desecrating the name of God with their illicit public behavior. To that God responded:

“Pinchas, the son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, was the one who zealously took up My cause among the Israelites and turned My anger away from them so that I did not destroy them ... Therefore I have given him My covenant of peace.”¹

¹Number 25:10-12.

Pinchas' act was indeed noble – for it averted a terrible plague in which 24,000 people had died – but how could a violent act by a *zealot* merit a covenant of *peace*?!

There must be something about peace that we don't understand here.

3. Peace in the Middle East (Optional)

Peace is indeed illusive. If the news media are to be believed, the quest for peace in the Middle East is on the back burner if not completely off the stove. As uncertainty and turmoil rule the region, we wonder: Will there never be peace for the Jewish people living in their homeland?

But maybe we should be asking: What exactly is peace? Does peace mean always laying down our arms and giving up what we hold dear? If so, how is peace different from passivity or weakness? And if not, can there be peace in the absence of negotiations or compromises?

Shalom means much more than absence of war. As we consider this week's Torah reading – which seems to turn upside down the terms zealotry and peace, let us examine these concepts more carefully.

Most of us identify zealotry as a radical and extreme force, equated with terrorism, which has no redeeming quality. But is that how the Torah sees it?

For answers, we will mine the teachings of the Baal Shem Tov on the issue, which contain extremely relevant and powerful lessons about peace, fundamentalism and extremists – and which explain what we can do to address these explosive issues.

4. A Mysterious Zohar Passage

The Baal Shem Tov explains² Pinchas' covenant of peace by citing a cryptic and mysterious passage from the Zohar. This passage states that the souls of Nadav and Avihu – the two sons of Aaron whom God had killed when they brought a strange offering to the Tabernacle – were re-incarnated in Pinchas. And that he rectified their sin.

Let us recall the circumstances of their untimely deaths:

Each took his censer, placed fire and then incense on it, and they offered before God a foreign fire, which He had not instructed them. Fire came forth from before God, and it consumed them, so that they died before God.”³

Says the Zohar that even though the bodies of Nadav and Avihu were consumed, their souls continued to live on in Pinchas.

The Zohar then asks the obvious question: Nadav and Avihu were two individuals. Why then did they not reincarnate in two different people?

And it quotes the answer of Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai: Nadav and Avihu were “two halves of one body.” (Since they were never married, they were each “half a person”). Both their souls were therefore considered as one, and as such they reincarnated into one person – Pinchas.⁴

What can this mean? Why is it relevant for us to know that Nadav and Avihu were “two halves” of one soul, and what connection does that have with the story of Pinchas? How exactly did Pinchas rectify the act of Nadav and Avihu?

²*Toldot Yaakov Yosef Parshas Acharei*. See Ohr HaTorah Acharei, p. 551. Maamar Pinchas 5673 (delivered one hundred years ago this week); 5675 (in Hemshech Ayin Beis).

³Leviticus 10:1.

⁴Zohar III 57b. See also *Likkutei Torah of the Arizal*, specifically *Parshat Vayikra* (cited in this Baal Shem Tov piece from the *Toldos Yaakov Yosef*).

5. Baal Shem Tov's Explanation

Explains the Baal Shem Tov, in a most simple and brilliant fashion, by citing a Midrash⁵ which says that Nadav and Avihu died “for not taking counsel from each other.” If we read their story carefully we will see that “each took *his* censer,” each one took it *alone*, and that each one acted on *his own* initiative, without consulting the other.⁶ This makes is clear, says the Baal Shem Tov that Nadav and Avihu were not at peace with each other.

And if they were not at peace with each other, they could not be at peace with God.

Additionally, had they consulted each other, they would have realized that extra sensitivity was needed before entering the Holy of Holies, which would have stopped them from offering “before God a foreign fire, which He had not commanded them,” and prevented their deaths.

Nadav and Avihu were great and passionate souls, but there was no peace or harmony between them. Each of them got caught up in his own thing – their own passions so consumed them that they forgot about anything but their own spiritual needs. Although a focus on spirituality is admirable, when it excludes everything else, it becomes selfish. And, therefore, the fire they created was a “foreign fire.”

This cautionary lesson is particularly relevant to the time period we are in – the Three Weeks between the 17th of Tammuz when the walls of Jerusalem were first breached and the 9th of Av when the Temple was destroyed. All this happened because of lack of harmony and “baseless hatred” between Jews.⁷ In other words, the Temple was destroyed because the Jewish people did not live in peace with each other. And without peace among them, the Divine Presence could not dwell among them.

⁵ *Vayikra Rabba* 20:8.

⁶ Interesting to note that according to the Midrash their death was “*on account of four things*” (for drawing too near and entering the holy of holies, for bringing an unauthorized offering, for offering a “strange fire” and for not taking counsel from each another). Yet, the Baal Shem Tov emphasizes only the last item, perhaps because he sees this as the root or primary cause of their error.

⁷ Talmud, Yoma 9b.

6. Nadav, Avihu and Zimri

Though we can hardly compare Nadav and Avihu's behavior with that of Zimri, the Zohar does equate their "foreign fire" with Zimri's act involving a "foreign woman."

This is because once people begin to experiment with "foreign" forces – "foreign" as in "strange," or "estranged" from the Divine – nothing good can happen even if their intentions are soulful. Because they are driven by their *personal* interests, they have no checks or balances to ensure that their act is a holy one. If only they are the final arbiter, there is no telling where their behavior will lead.

Like Nadav and Avihu, Zimri was a leader, and a passionate one at that. Yet, his own desires blinded him to the point that he was able to desecrate God's name – in the presence of all – with his brazen, illicit behavior.

7. Zimri that Shlumiel (Humor)

By the way, Zimri has made his way into modern Hebrew in a round-about way.

Israelis are fond of the word *shlumi-el* which means "useless/luckless." This expression, says Eli Birnbaum – author of the "Passing Phrase" on www.shamash.org – probably stems from an actual name in the Book of Numbers, Shlumiel ben Tzurishadai, a prince of the tribe of Shimon.⁸

According to the Talmud,⁹ Shlumiel was one of the five names of Zimri. Some claim (tongue in cheek) that the etymology stems from the idea that lots of people were sinning but he was the one to get caught. This idea was brought into German in the early 1800's by Adelbert von Chamisso in his story *The Wonderful History of Peter Schlemihl*. Hence the Yiddish *schlemiel*, meaning a hopelessly incompetent person, a bungler – the guy who falls on his back and breaks his nose...

⁸Numbers 1:6.

⁹Sanhedrin 82b.

So as the old joke goes: What is the difference between a *shlemeil*, a *shlemazel* and a *nudnik*? A *shlemeil* is a waiter who spills a bowl of hot soup on the customer; the *shlemazel* is the customer; and the *nudnik* keeps asking what kind of soup it was.

But seriously ...

8. The Healing Power of Peace

What can heal and rectify this turmoil created by self interest? What power can repair the rift – lack of peace and harmony – between great souls? The obvious answer is: peace, *shalom*.

Shalom is not merely the absence of war, nor is it any other passive state. *Shalom*, which means “completeness/wholesomeness/fullness,” is a powerful force in its own right.

Shalom, explains the Baal Shem Tov, is a force that “unites two things together ... When there is division among people, the one who unites them is called a pursuer of peace (*rodef shalom*).” God, therefore, granted Pinchas a “covenant of peace,” because Pinchas turned away God’s anger from the Children of Israel, and he repaired the rift between God and the people (and between Nadav and Avihu).

9. A Man of Peace or a Zealot

Pinchas was a man of peace, not a zealot. It was his love for peace that caused him to act zealously in defending God’s honor.

Let us recall the events that prompted Pinchas to act:

The Jews had betrayed God, allowing themselves to be seduced by the Midianite women (at Balaam’s advice), to the point of blatant wanton idol worship. As a result, their relationship with God was ruptured, bringing on the Divine wrath, which led to a terrible plague killing thousands of Jews.

Pinchas, a man of peace, could not tolerate seeing this major rift and the damage that it was causing. Pinchas' passionate and zealous commitment to *shalom* (completeness) provoked him to finally act, and kill Zimri and Kosbi, which put an end to the plague.

Peace, not zealotry, is what drove Pinchas.

In taking bold action to achieve peace, Pinchas also rectified the actions of Nadav and Avihu, who were "two halves" of one soul, but due to their individual passions each had become consumed with his own spiritual interest, causing them to split apart.

Due to his zealous actions to achieve peace, Pinchas was then granted the covenant of peace – the force "which unites two things together" – thereby re-uniting the souls of Nadav and Avihu in one body.

So now let's ask again: Was Pinchas an extremist, a zealot and a radical, or was he a man of peace?

10. Torah and Zealotry

The Torah clearly and consistently abhors zealotry, and there are many proofs:

When Abraham hears about the impending destruction of the infidel city of Sodom – inhabited by criminals by all accounts – he doesn't celebrate or join in the attack, even though it was led by God Himself. Instead, He argues and implores God not to destroy the city.

The same with Moses after the Jews built the Golden Calf, openly defying the commandment against idolatry they had just heard and accepted at Mount Sinai. Moses insists that God forgive them, and after 80 days he ultimately prevails, evoking the powerful Thirteen Attributes of Divine Compassion, thereby opening the door of repentance to all souls.

The Torah is filled with messages of love and compassion. Indeed, this is the entire foundation of the Torah, as Hillel maintains. "Do not do unto others as you would not have them do unto you. This is the entire Torah; the rest is commentary. Now go and learn."

Even when King David fought justifiable wars, he was not allowed to build the Holy Temple because of the blood on his hands. His son, Solomon, the man of peace, built the Temple.

The only exception is Pinchas.

11. The Risks

Why would the Torah allow for the celebration of this one instance of zealous behavior when it knows the risks of how it could be misinterpreted?

The answer is: Because the Torah makes it abundantly clear that Pinchas was not a zealot, but a man of peace.

Pinchas is identified as the grandson of Aaron who was a man of love and peace. As we read in the *Ethics of the Fathers*: “Be of the students of Aaron, love peace and pursue peace. Love all creatures and bring them closer to Torah.”¹⁰

Had Pinchas been an aggressive personality, had he been an advocate of religious radicalism, that would have boded trouble. But Pinchas was a man of peace, a quiet man. Even in this act of zealotry, his intention was not to kill, but to protect innocent people from being killed.

When Pinchas saw that the people were dying as a result of the public atrocity and desecration that Zimri perpetrated, he went against his own quiet nature to defend God and save lives. Selflessness, not personal interests, was what motivated him.

It was actually Zimri who was the aggressive one, as was his grandfather Shimon who was rebuked by the Patriarch Jacob for his violent and heated behavior.

¹⁰ *Pirkei Avot* 1:12.

12. Lessons for Today

What lesson does this have for us today, when faced with the violent passions of thousands if not millions of religious zealots?

The same questions can be asked on the personal front: How should we react when faced with an untenable situation – with aggression or with passivity? If you witness a wrong being done – one person hurting another; your child acting inappropriately – how do you balance strong, disciplinary action without becoming overzealous?

The mistake we make today is that we vacillate between two extremes: 1) extreme religious radicalism, or 2) extreme libertinism, where everything goes.

These two positions actually feed off each other, thus making them close cousins. Years of abuse in the name of religion have created a backlash and a knee-jerk reaction against anything that even “smells” of religious bigotry or fundamentalism. Even if this may be understandable, it still doesn’t make it correct. Often, a reaction to an unhealthy situation is equally unhealthy. And that reaction – known as moral relativism or apathy – is just that.

As one fellow asked his friend: “What’s worse, ignorance or apathy?” His reply: “I don’t know and I don’t care.”

Deep apathy has arisen as a reaction to the battles between extremes. Some call such apathetic people the “silent majority,” or the “ignorant masses” or people who “live lives of quiet desperation.” You can add into the mix the cynics that cite Ecclesiastes: “Nothing is new under the sun.” Thus it was and thus it will always be.

Comes Pinchas, the man of peace, and tells us that there is another option: No extremes, no bringing in your own personal prejudices – your feelings of aggression or passivity, violence or comfort zones. Pinchas teaches us simple selflessness to protect and defend innocent lives. Zealousness – but in peace.

Or better put: The zealous pursuit of peace.

13. The Problem of Passivity

God forbid that anyone should use Pinchas as a model and hurt another person even in the name of religious beliefs. Self-defense and protecting other lives, however, is another story.

If you stay silent when you see other people being slaughtered, then you are not a man of peace, you are a coward.

What we learn from Pinchas is the exact opposite of killing in the name of religious zealotry. Violence against other people, especially innocent ones, can never be tolerated – no matter what its cause. Anger and murder resulting from religious feelings is perhaps the most dangerous of all, because the “holy war” helps mask the venting of personal aggression.

Any justification of violence, whether it is in the name of religion or in the name of fighting for a cause, is unequivocally deplorable and goes against the laws of God.

Some prominent writers have suggested that terrorism against Israel can be justified because the terrorists are fighting for a cause, but it cannot be justified in Europe or elsewhere in the world. It would be laughable if it weren't so tragic to suggest that terrorism is acceptable in one region but not in another. Imagine someone arguing that he can “understand” Nazi atrocity against Jews but not against Americans ... If violent terrorism is “acceptable” (or more PC: “reprehensible but understandable”) in Jerusalem, than it becomes “acceptable” in London, Madrid, New York and Mumbai.

The Nazi terror made it abundantly clear that injustice in one place is injustice everywhere. Hatred of one race is hatred of all. And the biggest revelation: Indifference to violence and brutality against one group of humans is indifference to brutality against all humans. We are in this together – for bad and for good. Churchill put it best: “Appeasement in time of aggression is feeding the crocodiles in the hope that you will be eaten last.”

14. Lessons from Pinchas

Pinchas teaches us that, just because religion has been abused to perpetrate atrocities, we shouldn't go to the other extreme of not fighting for any values.

We must never lose sight of right and wrong, and at the same time, we must learn from the past how to fight for what is right with selfless passion, not with violence.

We face today a major confrontation between religious and secular forces – it is a battle that might have started in the Middle East but it is spreading throughout Asia, Africa and Europe, and it is only accelerating.

On a subtler scale, similar tensions are brewing in the United States. Whether it be around evolution and creationism or the right to live and die, abortion or the display of the Ten Commandments, the long history of the battle for dominance between religious and secular voices continues to rage.

Leaders arise in times like this. For a new vision is needed, or is it a timeless vision that simply needs to be rediscovered?

We need a zealot to lead us today. Not a murderous zealot but a zealot of peace – a true Pinchas that will rise and defy conventional thinking.

15. Zealous Pursuit of True Peace

Today we are called to join forces in a zealous and passionate battle against all form of extremism and violence, including those perpetrated in the name of religious zealotry. To counter the passion of misguided souls ready to blow themselves up, we need to zealously defend and promote the divine principles of justice and peace – in the spirit of unity and love fueled by selflessness.

Nations of the world and communities across the globe need to zealously unite with one powerful message: We will not tolerate or accept any form of violence, not in Jerusalem, not in London, not in New York.

Religious beliefs must not be used to fight wars, but to promote spiritual values, to establish laws that respect basic human rights and allow for diversity.

We must demand of the Muslim world – and for that matter of the Christian and Jewish world, as well as of all religions and creeds – to embrace the principles established by Abraham, father of all nations, to promote the deepest values of virtue and integrity, all with love and inspiration. We must fight the foreign forces of the universe, not with violence, but by spreading light and warmth.

And on a personal level, we must counter the forces of “baseless hatred” that tear apart communities, with unconditional and zealous love and pursuit of peace.

The same formula can be applied to dealing with behavior in our own lives that cannot be ignored.

Pinchas teaches us the art of balance – an art that has been lost of many of us: The covenant of peace: How a man of peace deals with confrontation. How to stand up for values, but with total selflessness and kindness. How not to ignore a crime, while also not becoming overly aggressive. How to not underreact and also not overreact. Pinchas teaches us how to earn the covenant of peace. We can call it: gentle aggression.

By fostering and intensifying unity and peace, we will eliminate the cause that destroyed the Temple and bring about the building of the Third Temple. May it happen speedily in our time. Amen.

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