



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

## BAMIDBAR > Pinchas

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July 30, 2016

Pinchas

**Judaism vs. Terrorism**



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

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## ABSTRACT

Europe is the new Middle East. As one TV station put it, Europe is becoming accustomed to terrorism just like Jerusalem.

Ism is all the talk – terrorism, racism, fanaticism, fundamentalism, extremism, Islamism...

And what truism can be gleaned through the prism of another ism, Judaism?

From our Torah and Haftorah reading of this week (as well as from the mystics), we learn that:

- The antidote to bloodthirsty fanaticism is found in the actions of two zealots, Pinchas and Elijah.
- The solution to terror is found in a *bond of peace* and a *still small sound*.
- The answer to the architecture of evil is found in the architecture of prayer.

## **JUDAISM VS. TERRORISM: WHEN ONE ISM ABOLISHES ANOTHER**

### **1. Fanatic vs. Zealot (Quotes)**

- Question: *What's the difference between a fanatic and a zealot?*  
Answer: *A zealot can't change his mind. A fanatic can't change his mind and won't change the subject* – Winston Churchill
- *The whole problem with the world is that fools and fanatics are always so certain of themselves, and wiser people are so full of doubts* – Bertrand Russel
- *The question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists we will be* – Martin Luther King, Jr.

### **2. Current Events**

The *New York Times*, not exactly the most right-wing outlet in the world, this past Monday ran a headline that read: *String of Attacks in Europe Fuels a Summer of Anxiety*. The article, by Stephen Erlanger, the newspaper's London bureau chief, started as follows:

Nearly every day seems to bring a new horror to the streets of Western Europe, leaving innocent men, women and children dead or broken, fueling political and social tensions and creating what some are already calling the summer of anxiety.

Death and injury have been dealt out by truck, ax, handgun, machete and bomb. The victims have included families out for a night of fireworks on the glittering French Riviera, teenagers hanging out at a McDonald's, tourists on a train, and pop music fans at a Sunday night concert.

The author of the article left out “people praying in a church” – where a priest’s throat was cut in front of his horrified parishioners – because that attack hadn’t happened yet. But his observations applied just the same:

All of the assaults seemed to blur the line between ideological terrorism and violence driven by anger, grudge or mental instability. That very murkiness – the absence of a centrally organized plot or a singular villain to blame – has made it all the more difficult for France, Germany and the rest of Europe to know how to respond.<sup>1</sup>

The article went on to discuss the political ramifications of these attacks, as well as the changing tides in France, Germany, and as far away as Turkey.

Israel’s Channel 2, as Israelis are wont to do, put it a little more bluntly: Europe becomes accustomed to terror just like Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

We Jews are no doomsday sermonizers. We do not see apocalypse wherever we look and warn of a world coming to an end. On the contrary: even during these Three Weeks (when we commemorate the destruction of the Temple), we hope and see redemption coming, when the negative will be transformed to positive.

But we are also not naïve because, unfortunately, we are rather experienced when it comes to visitations of evil in all its forms.

One thing we have learned: the face of darkness hides behind an infinite array of masks, behind many an ism – Nazism, fascism, Islamism, racism, terrorism.

Agree or disagree with politicians feeding off people’s fear, we all can agree that there is no doubt – the world has to deal with a lurking terror threat. Any individual can go online, listen to someone spewing hatred and be “inspired” to carry out terrorist acts of murder.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/26/world/europe/string-of-attacks-in-europe-fuels-a-summer-of-anxiety.html?smprod=nytcore-iphone&smid=nytcore-iphone-share>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.mako.co.il/news-world/international-q3\\_2016/Article-265805254c12651004.htm?sCh=3d385dd2dd5d4110&pId=1898243326](http://www.mako.co.il/news-world/international-q3_2016/Article-265805254c12651004.htm?sCh=3d385dd2dd5d4110&pId=1898243326).

The Internet is an amazing thing, reaching billions of people in a nanosecond. But they can be reached with good and with evil, with holy messages and with hateful ones.

A fragile mind can all too easily be influenced by a message advocating murder with the nearest weapon available, be it a truck, a hatchet, a knife, or even a pair of scissors.

This is the face of modern-day extremism.

And what does that other ancient ism, Judaism, have to say about it?

### 3. Torah and Haftorah

Quite a lot, actually.

Indeed, our Torah reading for this week, Parshat Pinchas, opens with the story of a holy zealot of the highest order.

Wait, can a zealot be holy? How can zealotry be a good thing? Isn't zealotry – another name for fanaticism – the very thing that is driving today's terror?

We shall see.

The Haftorah that follows *Parshat Pinchas* is a selection from the First Book of Kings which focuses on the Prophet Elijah. What do Elijah and Pinchas have in common? They are both described as zealots.

About Pinchas we read: *Pinchas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest has turned My anger away from the Children of Israel by his zealous avenging (b'kano et kinati) of Me ....*<sup>3</sup>

And about Elijah we read: *And he said: "I have been zealous (kano kineiti) for the Lord."*<sup>4</sup>

What can these two holy zealots for G-d teach us about unholy fanaticism that leads to terror and murder?

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<sup>3</sup> Numbers 25:11.

<sup>4</sup> I Kings 19:10.

## 4. Pinchas

Pinchas was faced with a traitor among his people who publicly desecrated G-d (by literally sleeping with the enemy). Zimri, a leader from the tribe of Simon, defiled himself with Kozbi, a Midianite princess – in public, no less.

This act of defiant desecration endangered the entire Jewish people spiritually and also physically. Pinchas killed Zimri, and the threat was removed. After describing his zealous act of protecting Israel, the Torah states:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Pinchas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest has turned My anger away from the Children of Israel by his zealous avenging of Me ... [and this is why] I did not destroy the Children of Israel ... Therefore, tell him that I have given him My bond of peace.<sup>5</sup>*

The result of Pinchas's zeal was a *bond of peace*. How can such zeal bring a *bond of peace*? Because Pinchas' zeal was an act driven by humility and peace, not by aggression. Pinchas was known for his gentleness, the antithesis of anything violent. But when he witnessed the public desecration of G-d, he acted against his nature, because sometimes peace is preserved not by retreat and fear, but by destroying the forces that seek to destroy peace. And that too is done without hatred and anger, but simply because there is no other choice.

Peace happened because Pinchas acted in the way he did. Otherwise, if Pinchas were to have acted differently – that is to say, not acted at all – the result would have tragically been the opposite of peace.

The same is true with the story of Elijah.

## 5. Elijah

After Elijah rid Israel of the false prophets of Baal and stood up to King Ahab and Queen Jezebel, he had to flee into the mountains to save his life. There he encountered G-d, as our Haftorah describes:

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 25:10-12

*Behold! the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind splitting mountains and shattering boulders before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake followed, but the Lord was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in fire. And after the fire came a still small sound.”<sup>6</sup>*

G-d is not found in wind and fire, earthquake or chaos. Rather, G-d is found in a *still small sound*. As Pinchas’s work was rewarded with a *bond of peace*, so was Elijah’s work rewarded with the presence of G-d, signaled by a *still small sound*.

## 6. Three Levels of Prayer

But how does this relate to our present-day anxieties and plights? What does the zealotry of Pinchas and Elijah teach us about the terrorists of today?

As with so many questions, the answer, my dear friends, is found in prayer. By understanding how to connect with G-d through the process of prayer, we shall come to understand how *not* to connect with G-d through bloodshed and terrorism.

The mystics teach<sup>7</sup> that there is a highly sophisticated and brilliantly engineered three-step process to prayer, to interfacing with the Divine. This process is coded in the above-mentioned verses from our Haftorah that describe Elijah’s meeting with G-d:

1. First there was a *great and strong wind*. But the Lord was not in the wind. And after the wind an earthquake followed, but the Lord was not in the earthquake.
2. Then, after the earthquake, a fire, but the Lord was not in fire.
3. Finally, after the fire came a *still small sound*.

<sup>6</sup> I Kings 19:11-12.

<sup>7</sup> Likkutei Torah, Shelach, 49a; Shir Hashirim, 5bff.

Connecting with G-d begins with acknowledging the wind and the noise, the commotion and the tumult of the world. Slowly but surely, we begin to move away from the tumult. The first section of prayer, *Pesukei DeZimra* (the “Verses of Song” as these psalms are called) and the blessings that follow are analogous to the wind and the noise, to the joyous voices of angelic ensembles.

Then comes the second section, the *Shema* (“Hear O Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One”) which represents the fire, the burning heart, the heart of the soul, expressing its love for G-d. But even this is not the pinnacle of prayer.

The crescendo, the apex is the *still small sound*, the *Amidah* (the silent standing prayer also known as the *Shemonah Esrei*, the “Eighteen Blessings”). It is here that we stand still and all that matters is being one with the Creator.

This truism of Judaism is the answer to every schism and ism, be it terrorism, extremism or fanaticism.

## 7. Holy Zealotry vs. Corrupt Zealotry

The entire Torah was given to bring peace to this world, as it says,<sup>8</sup> its ways are pleasant ways and all its paths are peace:<sup>9</sup> Every act in Judaism, even an act of zealousness (wind, noise and fire), is all about bringing peace – the *still small sound*.

At times peace requires standing up for what is right and acting to eliminate threats to peace. But even that is done in the spirit of peace, with humility and no malice.

That is why prayer begins with a great strong wind, a tumult, a fire, but concludes with a still small sound. This is holy. This is prayer. This is the process of connecting with G-d ... as is holy zealotry that leads to peace.

<sup>8</sup> Proverbs 3:17.

<sup>9</sup> Rambam end of Laws of Chanukah.



Terrorism is the exact polar opposite. Its hallmark is aggression and violence. Terrorism's goal is to drive fear into people's hearts and to shatter the peace of the world, put fire to it, make a tumult and disrupt any unity.

There is a lot of confusion and pain in this world. We can heal it with peace as Judaism advocates, or make it even worse, as terrorism wants to do.

And the difference can be glaringly seen in its results:

Holy zealotry takes commotion and noise and turns it into peace and quiet. Corrupt zealotry, which is what terrorism is, takes peace and quiet and turns it into deafening chaos.

Holy zealotry is about coalescing all the millions of fragments of existence into one peaceful union. Corrupt zealotry is about exploding any peaceful union into millions of painful fragments.

A holy zealot is humble and refined. Debased zealots are filled with anger and rage. Their eyes bulge with revulsion as they aim to terrorize innocents.

This teaches us what positive steps we must take to abolish the negative acts we encounter, and manifest Pinchas' *bond of peace*.

Our every action should start with – and, thus, be informed by – this question: Will this action disrupt peace or bring peace? Will the following act result in tranquility or more discord? Is this act driven by humility or by anger?

Pinchas and Elijah were both presented with a challenge – the terrorism of their day if you will. The result of their respective actions was peace, tranquility, the *still small sound* of G-d.

But the result of every terrorist attack is the opposite – pain and destruction. And perpetrated with violent wrath. This is the difference between holy zealots like Elijah and Pinchas and the hate-filled fanatics of the world.

We all have our isms, we are all extremists in some way. The only question is: Are we extremely holy or are we extremely profane?

G-d is found in one place – the *still small sound*. If your zealous actions don't lead to peace, they are part of the problem, not the solution.

## 8. Personal Lesson

One ism's goal – that of terrorism – is to bring as much chaos and pain and destruction as possible. While another ism's goal – that of Judaism – is to bring tranquility, peace and quiet to the world.

Judaism disrupts the status quo by introducing something higher and peaceful. Terrorism disrupts the status quo by imposing something hateful and destructive.

Judaism disrupts through construction. Terrorism disrupts through destruction.

We must combat terrorism, of course, but it isn't enough to combat, we also must have to replace the explosive hate with passionate holiness. And to do that – to bring tranquility and peace to the world, we must nourish it in our lives.

How? you ask.

Well, first, start with yourself. Every day, preferably three times a day, connect with the *bond of peace* – the *still small sound* of G-d. The best vehicle for this is the *Amidah* prayer.

Once you get there, the next step is to share your experience. Sharing begins slowly. Dedicate one part of your day into which you will introduce the *small still sound* – the *bond of peace* – to others.

One example: Before a meeting at work, ask everyone present to be silent and think about what's important in their lives and how this meeting will make that important thing better.

Another example: Enjoy a peaceful Shabbat. Shabbat is the ultimate *bond of peace*. If you are not yet intimately acquainted with the tranquility of the *still small sound* of Shabbat, then you should definitely consider

becoming acquainted. And if you are already intimately acquainted with the *still small sound* of Shabbat, you should definitely consider sharing that gift with others by inviting them for Shabbat dinner. This will also have the added benefit of making you and your family even more intimate with Shabbat.

## 9. A Resounding Truth (Conclusion)

G-d is found in the stillness of life, in the small sound, in the white space between the musical notes.

With all the turbulence and noise in the world, with the raging winds, with the thundering commotion, the manmade earthquakes, the burning fires, now more than ever our job is to introduce a new dimension – the dimension of a *still small sound*.

Rashi translates a *still small sound* (*kol d'mama dakah*) with the Old French word, *retentissement*. The approximate English translation *retentissement* is “resounding.”

No one hears the sound but it resounds nevertheless. It reverberates and echoes through the world. No one sees G-d, but the G-dly message resounds throughout the land.

Sometimes the “loudest” and most effective sound of all is the sound of silence.

The world today is wide open. The more we flood it with good, the less room there will be for the opposite.

The still small sound resounds the loudest.

Shabbat Shalom!