



## PINCHAS

Pinchas / 21 Tammuz  
Zealots, Radicals and Peaceniks  
July 15, 2017

## ZEALOTS, RADICALS AND PEACENIKS

## ABSTRACT

With religious fundamentalism terrorizing the world, this is a good time to explore the Torah's view on zealotry.

Jews are not zealots. Jews are not radicals. Jews are not kamikaze pilots or suicide-bombers. Judaism – the Torah – abhors all forms of fanaticism and extremism.

And the historical record bears this out. In fact, there is only one documented instance of suicidal zealotry in Jewish history and that ended with the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel. We do well to remember that event as we commemorate the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem, with the fast day of the 17th of *Tammuz*.

And with this thought in mind, it is most puzzling to see that, in this week's reading, the Torah *sanctions* zealotry – for it *commends* Pinchas for killing Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, while the latter was involved in a public act of immoral behavior.

In fact, in *all* of Torah, this is the only instance of sanctioned zealotry. Why would the Torah commend this one instance of zealous behavior when it knows the risks of how it can be interpreted?

And what does this teach us about modern day zealotry and its dangers? Haven't we learned the repercussions of the destruction perpetrated in the name of G-d by religious extremists?!

This sermon, while explaining why Judaism rejects radicalism, also demonstrates that there is a time for zealous passion – but guided by humility, love and compassion. And that in this era of apathy and complacency, it is very much needed.

## 1. Jews are Not Zealots

Did you know that fan is short for fanatic? But you never hear anyone say “sports fanatics” and “religious fans.” I guess that's because a sports fan, no matter how radical, will usually not resort to violence (in most cases that is). While religious fanatics have been known to be destructive.

Jews are not zealots. Jews are not radicals. Jews are not kamikaze pilots or suicide-bombers. Judaism – the Torah – abhors all forms of fanaticism and extremism. Writes Rambam/Maimonides that we should always

choose the “middle path” – not extreme right, not extreme left<sup>1</sup>.

And the historical record bears this out. In fact, there is only one documented instance of suicidal zealotry in Jewish history and that ended with the fall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel.

At the time the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem in 70 CE, the city was massively fortified. It also had huge storehouses of food and a good water supply. Jerusalem could have held back the Romans for a long time<sup>2</sup>.

But it didn't.

And the reason it didn't was zealotry, engendered by the “baseless hatred” of Jew vs. Jew. While the Romans were besieging the city outside, the Jews were waging a civil war inside. A group of Zealots<sup>3</sup> insisted on battling the Romans. When the sages said to them “let us go out and make peace,” these zealots “would not allow them to.” Instead, they demanded “let us go out and wage war,” to which the sages replied: “it will not be successful.” The Zealots, who controlled the resources, then proceeded to destroy the great storehouses of food so that the people would have no choice but to fight or starve. This brought on a great famine in Jerusalem, which ultimately led to its destruction<sup>4</sup>.

It is no wonder, then, that the Romans succeeded in breaching the walls of the city – an event we just remembered with great sadness last Tuesday on the fast day of the 17th of *Tammuz*, which began the traditional three-week mourning period that concludes on Tisha B'Av, when the Temple was destroyed.

Once the walls of Jerusalem were breached, a horrific slaughter ensued with the Romans taking the city, literally house-by-house. Despite the determined resistance of the Jewish defenders, the Roman General Titus slowly worked his way to the Temple Mount. Now a duel to the death ensued, and finally, five months after the Romans had begun their attack, Titus ordered the Second Temple razed to the ground. The date was the 9th of *Av*, the very same day on which the First Temple was destroyed, three weeks after the walls were breached.

Such are the wages of zealotry.

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1 *Mishne Torah, Hilbot De'ot 1:4.*

2 Talmud, *Gittin 56a.*

3 The Talmud calls them “ruffians” (baryonim), and “empty men with a propensity for war” (Rashi), condemning them for their aggression, their unwillingness to compromise to save the survivors of besieged Jerusalem, and their blind militarism.

4 Talmud *ibid*, Rashi and Maharsha. Midrash, *Eicha Rabba 1:31*. Josephus chapters 75 and on. See *Crash Course in Jewish History* by Ken Spiro (Targum Press, 2010), pp. 185-186.

## 2. Zealots at Masada (Optional)

A group of about 1,000 Zealots escaped and made their way into the desert, near the Dead Sea, where they took refuge in the great fortress on top of a mountain plateau called Masada, more than 1,200 feet above the shores of the Dead Sea.

Masada was built by Herod the Great as his place of refuge. As such, it was practically self-sufficient, with its own water collection system and storage houses that could feed an army for years. What's more, the fortress was practically inaccessible from below and easy to defend. Indeed, the Zealots managed to survive there for three years.

If you ever visited the ruins of Masada, you saw the remains of the fortress as well as the siege-wall, camps and ramp that the Romans built in order to capture it<sup>5</sup>.

Josephus, the Roman historian, reports on the capture of Masada in 73 CE. He says that knowing the end was near, the Zealots decided to die by their own hand rather than be captured and taken into slavery. But because Judaism forbids suicide, each male head of household slaughtered his wife and children, then the survivors drew lots, electing ten to execute them all. From among the ten, one was chosen by lot to kill the remaining nine, and then he alone committed suicide by falling on his sword. Josephus claims to have learned of this from two women who hid out with their children and escaped the carnage<sup>6</sup>.

The fact that we read this account with shock and some measure of disbelief is that Jews don't behave this way. Can you imagine Eastern European Jews slaughtering their wives and children in order to escape transport to Auschwitz?

No, Jews are not zealots.

## 3. Sanctioned Zealotry

So what are we to make of the Torah reading this week?

It appears that in this week's reading the Torah *sanctions* zealotry – for it *commends* the zealous act of Pinchas.

As we recall, the Israelite men were committing acts of immorality and idolatry, having been seduced by Moabite and Midianite women. As a result, a plague was unleashed in the Israelite camp, and Moses ordered the elders to kill the offenders. The elders were still weeping at the prospect of such a thing, when Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon, stepped forward with Kozbi, a Midianite princess, and began to behave immor

<sup>5</sup> Crash Course in Jewish History, pp. 191-192.

<sup>6</sup> Josephus, *The Jewish War* 7.323-336, (*The New Complete Works* of Josephus, pp. 929-933).

ally in front of the assemblage. Seeing this, Pinchas, the grandson of the High Priest Aaron, reacted ... driving a spear through the couple. With that act, the plague that had killed 24,000 people was halted<sup>7</sup>.

And then the Torah relates that G-d commended Pinchas:

“Pinchas, the son of Eleazar and grandson of Aaron HaKohen, 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<sup>8</sup>.”

What can this mean? Of all things, why is a covenant of peace awarded for a zealous act of killing?

#### 4. The Torah and Zealotry

This case of Pinchas is all the more troubling because the Torah clearly and consistently abhors zealotry.

Consider:

- When Abraham hears about the impending destruction of the twin-sin cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, he doesn't celebrate or join the attack, he implores G-d to spare the city<sup>9</sup>.
- Moses does the same, after the Jews built the Golden Calf openly defying the commandment against idolatry they had just heard and accepted at Sinai. Moses begs G-d to forgive them, and after 80 days he ultimately prevails<sup>10</sup>, evoking the powerful Thirteen Divine Attributes of Compassion, thereby opening the door of return to G-d for all souls.
- Further, the Torah is filled with the message of love and compassion. Indeed, this is the entire undercurrent of Torah. As Rabbi Akiva said, “Love your neighbor as yourself – is the fundamental principle of Torah<sup>11</sup>.”
- In other places, the Torah warns of the dangers of being “more religious” than G-d, acutely sensitive to the fact that people can create “Torah-sanctioned” outlets for their own personal aggression. “Erase My Holy Name,” G-d declares, “to preserve peace between husband and wife<sup>12</sup>.”
- When the Egyptians were drowning in the sea for their obstinate crimes against mankind, G-d rebuked the angels for singing praise: “My creatures are drowning and you sing<sup>13</sup>?!”

7 Numbers 25:5-9.

8 Numbers 25:11-12.

9 Genesis 18:23-33.

10 Exodus 32:30-34:29. Deuteronomy 9:18-10:10.

11 Leviticus 19:18 and in *Torat Kobanim* on the verse.

12 Rambam, *Mishne Torah*, end of *Hilbot Chanukah*.

13 Talmud, *Megillah* 10b. *Sanhedrin* 39b

- Even when King David fought justifiable wars, he was not allowed to build the Temple because of the blood on his hands. The Temple was built by David's son, Solomon, the man of peace<sup>14</sup>.
- The Mishne<sup>15</sup> tells us that a Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court) was labeled a “murderous” court if under their tenure one verdict of capital punishment was issued even once in 70 years! Not because the judges were accused of being biased or corrupt, but to emphasize how abhorrent death is, even when it may be justified.

The *only* exception to all these admonitions ... the *only* exception of sanctioned zealotry is Pinchas. Why would the Torah commend this one instance of zealous behavior when it knows the risks of how it can be interpreted?

And what does this teach us about modern day zealotry and its dangers? Haven't we learned the repercussions of the destruction perpetrated in the name of G-d by religious extremists?!

## 5. Specter of Radicalism (Optional)

A specter of radicalism – centered in the Middle East – haunts the secular Western world. Forces are simmering. As dictatorial Arab regimes fall, we hold our breaths to see who will replace them. For we know well that Islam – for all its many positive, Bible-based ideals – has also become a breeding ground for radicalism via its fundamentalist sects.

Islamic fundamentalism is a powerful movement that advocates violent struggle against Western secularism. Its members see Christian and Jewish influences as corrupt forces that need to be vanquished.

One of the primary philosophical fathers of modern Islamic fundamentalism, Sayyid Qutb, who was executed by Nasser in 1966, has an extensive corpus of writings that advocates the philosophical underpinnings of the Islamic war against secularism. To quote:

“If we look at the sources and foundations of modern ways of living, it becomes clear that the whole world is steeped in Jahiliyya (pagan ignorance of divine guidance), and all the marvelous material comforts and high-level inventions do not diminish this ignorance.”

Qutb then calls for a militant revolution that will, violently if necessary, annihilate the Jahiliya.

This is not to suggest that all Muslims feel this way. But however you want to analyze it, one mistake we should not make is that the Muslim world is indifferent. It has deep passionate beliefs that are not just going away because the Western world is uncomfortable with them.

<sup>14</sup> I Chronicles 22:8-10.

<sup>15</sup> *Makkot* 7a.

By the way:

Did you hear that poor financial decisions with a Chicago brokerage firm cost Al-Qaida over \$20 million in investments? Why are we risking the lives of our Navy SEALs? Send in Bernie Madoff. He will take care of these people. In five minutes they will be broke.

Barbara Walters of 20/20 did a story on gender roles in Kabul, Afghanistan, several years before the Afghan conflict. She noted that women customarily walked 5 paces behind their husbands. She recently returned to Kabul and observed that women still walk behind their husbands. From Ms. Walters' vantage point, despite the overthrow of the oppressive Taliban regime, the women now walk even further back behind their husbands and seem happy to maintain the old custom. Ms. Walters approached one of the Afghani women and asked, "Why do you now seem happy with the old custom that you once tried so desperately to change?" The woman looked Ms. Walters straight in the eyes and without hesitation said, "Land mines."

But all kidding aside ...

Unfortunately, this type of Islamic belief is a hotbed of fomenting radicalism, which has given birth and continues to give birth to thousands (if not more) of faithful individuals ready to sacrifice their lives in their Jihad against a world (in their minds) opposed to G-d.

But is not that exactly what Pinchas did? And if so, why did G-d commend him?

## 6. The Pinchas Difference

Something has to be *fundamentally* different about the Pinchas story. But if so, what?

First, in order to emphasize Pinchas' personality, the Torah pointedly identifies him as the grandson of Aaron, the High Priest. Aaron was man of love and peace, as the *Ethics of the Fathers* tells us: "Be of the students of Aaron, loving peace and pursuing peace. Love all creatures and bring them closer to Torah<sup>16</sup>."

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 intent 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 gentle nature to defend G-d and save lives. Selflessness, not personal prejudices, was Pinchas' driving force. The moment personal interests and inclinations are involved, one becomes a zealot bent on destruction.

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<sup>16</sup> *Pirkei Avot* 1:12.

It was actually Zimri, who was the aggressive one, as was his grandfather Shimon, who was rebuked by Jacob for his violent and heated behavior<sup>17</sup>.

## 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](http://www.shamash.org) – probably stems from an actual name in the Book of Numbers, Shlumiel ben Tzurishadai, a prince of the tribe of Shimon<sup>18</sup>. According to the Talmud<sup>19</sup>, 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 the 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...

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. Lesson for Today

At a time when we are facing the violent passions of thousands if not millions of religious zealots, Pinchas communicates an invaluable and powerful message.

The mistake we are facing today is in two extremes: 1) either extreme religious radicalism, or 2) its counterpart – extreme libertinism, where everything goes.

Indeed, these two positions actually feed off of each other, thus making them close cousins. Years of abuse in the name of religion have created a backlash and knee-jerk reaction to anything that even “smells” of religious authoritarianism, bigotry or imposition. Even if this may be understandable, it still doesn’t make it correct. Often, the reaction born out of an unhealthy situation is equally unhealthy.

Of course, polls show that we all know it to be true. In fact, 66% of Americans believe the country is headed in the wrong direction. But the good news is that gas is so expensive and traffic is so bad that we

<sup>17</sup> Genesis 49:5-7.

<sup>18</sup> Numbers 1:6.

<sup>19</sup> *Sanbedrin* 82b.



won't get there for a long time.

What may be even worse is passive apathy, or even radical apathy (if that's possible).

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

A deep apathy – quite invisible – has arisen as a result of all these battles of extremism on both sides. Some call it the "silent majority," others the "ignorant masses" (*olam golam* in Yiddish). You can add into the mix the cynics that cite Ecclesiastes: "Nothing new under the sun<sup>20</sup>." Thus it was and thus it will always be.

## 9. Another Option

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

G-d forbid that anyone should use Pinchas as a model to hurt another person even in the name of religious beliefs. Self-defense and protecting other lives is another story. But if you are 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. 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 G-d. 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.

## 10. Skewed Opinions

Recently, some prominent writers have suggested that terrorism against Israel can be justified because the Palestinians are fighting there for a cause, but it cannot be justified in other parts of the world.

It is 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 – in PC language – "reprehensible but understandable" and therefore "acceptable" in Jerusalem, then it becomes "acceptable" in London, Paris, Moscow, New York, Beijing and everywhere else in the world.

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 of all – indifference to violence and brutality against one group of

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<sup>20</sup> Ecclesiastes 1:9.

humans is indifference to brutality against all humans. We are in this together – for bad and for good. Winston Churchill put it best: “Appeasement in time of aggression is feeding the crocodiles in the hope that you will be eaten last.”

On the other hand, Pinchas teaches us that, just because religion has been abused and used to perpetrate atrocities, we shouldn't fall to the other extreme of not fighting for any values. We must never lose sight of right and wrong, but at the same time we must learn from the past how to fight for it with selfless passion (with emphasis on *selfless*).

## 11. Major Confrontation

Today, we face a major confrontation between religious and secular forces, and this battle is only accelerating.

To borrow a phrase – “a specter is haunting the world.” Not the specter of communism but of making our peace with G-d.

A new vision is needed. Or is it a timeless vision that simply needs to be rediscovered?

What is needed today is passion – but guided by humility, love and compassion.

The violence perpetrated around the world today offers us an unprecedented opportunity to wake ourselves up from complacency and embrace a zealous battle for justice and truth.

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

Who will answer the call?

In the absence of such a leader, each of us must fill the vacuum.

## 12. The Call

We are called today to join forces in a zealous and passionate 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 – and all in the spirit of unity and love fueled by selflessness.

Nations of the world, 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 and not anywhere. Religious beliefs must be used not 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 ... to fight the pagan 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 our communities, with unconditional and zealous love and pursuit of peace. By fostering and intensifying unity and peace – *shalom* – we will eliminate the cause that destroyed the Second Temple nearly 2,000 years ago and bring on the building of the Third Temple speedily in our time. Amen.

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