

“Our Own Zealotry First”

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Shabbat Shalom everyone.

Thank you, as always, for including my family and me in our wonderful Temple Beth El community. We love being here, and love getting to know all of you.

This week we read from *Parashat Pinchas*, named after the Levite who enthusiastically skewered an Israelite man and a Midianite woman who were consorting near the entrance of the Tabernacle, the portable home for our holy objects in the desert. In last week's *parasha* we read the full story, I will summarize quickly.

The Israelites socialized with some Midianites and began to eat their foods and worship their gods. God sent a plague to punish the Israelites for their idolatry and demanded that those worshipping other gods be killed, and their heads impaled on stakes to appease God's wrath. Moses delegated, asking each Israelite leader to kill the wrongful worshippers in each of their tribes. Before anyone could carry this out, Pinchas observed this particular couple, the Israelite man and his Midianite girlfriend, in the most prominent place in front of the entire community. Pinchas grabbed a spear and ran them through. The plague that God had sent ceased, still killing 24,000 Israelites.

That takes us up to this week, which begins with these four verses:

10 Now Adonai spoke to Moses, saying:

11 Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest has turned my venomous-anger from the Israelites in his being-zealous with my jealousy in their midst, so that I did not finish off the Israelites in my jealousy.

12 Therefore say: Here, I give him my covenant of shalom;

13 it will be for him and for his seed after him a covenant of everlasting priesthood - because he was zealous for his God and effected-appeasement for the Israelites.

God's wrath ceased against the Israelites, who God quickly commanded to turn their vengeance towards the Midianites.

God apparently rewarded Pinchas for murdering two people in a public position, so as to stem the tide of the divine anger that killed so many more. God absolved Pinchas of murder, and created a “covenant of shalom”, that seemed to result in Pinchas and his descendants staying in the high priesthood forever, his birthright as a grandson of Aaron, despite his murderous actions.

What’s going on here?

I have a theory that the Levites, who were given the role of priests, in general, and the Cohen’s, the high priests, in specific - and these are the family of Aaron and his male descendants, like Pinchas - may have been difficult people.

In Exodus they went out and started killing the worshippers of the Golden Calf as soon as Moses returned and got angry with the community.

Israelite society cooked up a very interesting solution for those people who seemed so quick to take up the sword against their own fellow community members - the larger community gave them a special task, and took them out of circulation.

The Levites and the Cohen’s got the highest honors - they attended the Tabernacle in the desert, and eventually the Temple in Jerusalem. In order to keep this honor they had to obey some very rigorous rules of ritual cleanliness that prevented them from holding other jobs, and they forfeited the right to own land or join the military. Throughout ancient Israelite history this separation of powers persisted and its violation caused great unrest when the Hasmonean Dynasty, the one founded by the Maccabees, united the monarchy and the priesthood for the first time.

This arrangement of separating the Levities doesn’t seem like such a bad idea. Take the people most likely to take the law into their own hands and kill people out of their enthusiasm for the divine, and give them a very detail-oriented job that prevents them from ever having the capacity to disturb the civic order with their overactive senses of righteousness.

Today we resist such “profiling” for many good reasons. We offer people the opportunity to choose their paths through life, to make careers and options for themselves. As Reform Jews we uphold at the heart of our identity a universal freedom to make our own ways as Jews, Americans and humans.

We identify as people of moderation, moderates if you will, and decry the extremists who take the law into their own hands.

We even have our own options for self-selection by which our most pious can choose different paths within Judaism, pursuing whatever best suits their level of devotion to their more rigorous interpretations of *mitzvot*, of our commandments.

And then, we wash our hands of the whole thing. We can easily turn to fellow Jews in other groups and say - “They’re too strict for me, what zealots they are!” or “They’re too lenient for me, what heretics they are!” and be content with our own middle path, whatever it might be.

Perhaps we should take a lesson from the Torah here, perhaps we all bear responsibility for the shape of the entire community, even its extremes. As another scholar once told me, “We must attend to our own fundamentalists before we ask anyone to attend to theirs.” We can easily see that the role of the Levites may have been the Ancient Israelite solution to their zealot and fundamentalist factions.

We know how to do this - when the orthodox establishment in Israel threatened to take away the right of return from non-orthodox converts, we as Reform Jews took action. Let us raise our voices more often, let us not allow our zealots, our fundamentalists to define who we are, or who is authentically Jewish. Let us claim our Judaism as not merely “OK”, but profoundly inspired by and connected to the wisdom of our ancestors. Let us stand up and demand civility and equality as the norm, not merely an exception.

Pinchas and his spiritual descendants offer radical and sometimes violent solutions to the challenges of new diversities in Judaism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. We must loudly counter with voices of compassion and celebration for the abundance of beauty in a more colorful and complicated Jewish population, and with new visions of co-existence gently and convincingly offered to our leaders here and in Israel.

If Shabbat offers us a model of change from the everyday, a taste of a dynamic and different world of variety and color, then perhaps we can use Shabbat as a pause to recognize our own need to find helpful places for all of our differences in a functioning community, and within our broader community of communities. May this Shabbat of little changes offer us the space to reflect on how we can be agents of positive change for ourselves, and even for those with whom we disagree most.

Shabbat Shalom!