

# *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

## From Rav Binny Freedman

### (Portion of Pinchas)

This year, once again, has seen a terrible polarization in Israeli society.

Jewish men purporting to represent what Judaism is meant to be, describing themselves as “religious” or “ultra-orthodox” spitting on other Jews or even throwing chairs and certainly hurling derogatory slurs (often worse, in the eyes of Jewish tradition...) at other Jews, the former Chief rabbi of the State of Israel still in the midst of an Israeli police investigation into financial improprieties; Orthodox rabbis arguing with each other about who is more Orthodox, does it get any worse?

As we begin the three traditional weeks of mourning in the Jewish calendar which commemorate the destruction of the *Beit Hamikdash* (the Temple ) two thousand years ago due, according to the Talmud, to baseless hatred, (*sinat chinam*), it behooves us to consider how and why we find ourselves in this unfortunate state of affairs.

What do you do when someone you love does something you hate?

This week’s portion, *Pinchas*, may offer us some sage advice.

Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron the High priest, lays claim to fame at the end of last week’s portion, *Balak*:

No less than a Jewish prince, a tribal *Nasi* (Zimri ben Saluh of the tribe of Shimon) one of the great leaders of the Jewish people, is actually cohabitating with a Midianite (idolatrous) princess in public, literally opposite the Mishkan (the tabernacle) and (in shock?) no-one is doing anything about it! Even Moshe and Aaron are (seemingly) so overwhelmed by the audacity of this public desecration that they are simply weeping in front of the tent of meeting.

So Pinchas stands up and puts an end to this public desecration by publicly executing both Zimri, the tribal prince along with Kozbi, the Midianite Princess. And no less than G-d himself ( at the beginning of this week’s portion, *Pinchas*) declares his motives to be pure , his cause just, and guarantees him a ‘covenant of peace’.

Putting aside the many challenges inherent in such a story (and the fact that only G-d can declare such an action, with no judge or jury, to be acceptable) it is fascinating to note that the consequence of such a violent act is the granting of a covenant of peace. Even more interesting is that the Torah takes the time to delineate that Pinchas is the direct descendant of Aaron the High Priest whom we know was given this exalted role because he was the perennial “*Ohev Shalom*”: a lover and a pursuer of peace.

How can Pinchas who is depicted as the ultimate zealot be a descendant of Aaron who loved peace?

Perhaps before we can begin to decide what course of action to pursue when witnessing such public desecration we first have to be sure we still love peace. *Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz* ztza”l, the great Rosh

yeshiva of the Mir, points out (in his *sichos mussar*) that before meting out punishment, one must be filled with a sense of love and compassion for the one being punished.

Precisely because Pinchas was the descendant of Aaron, and was imbued with the quality of loving his fellow human being, he was able to mete out the appropriate consequence without being affected by personal considerations.

And how does one accomplish this seemingly impossible fête? It is equally interesting to note that when describing Pinchas' decision to execute the perpetrators of this horrible public desecration (which put an end to the plague ravishing the Jewish people) the Torah says:

*“Vayakam mitoch ah'Eidah”*

*“He arose from the midst of the congregation”*. (Numbers 25:7).

What made Pinchas such a great leader was the fact that he was firmly ensconced in the midst of the congregation. He was *with* the Jewish people; he felt their pain, reveled in their joy, suffered with their sorrow, and knew their challenges. He was a true descendant of Aaron whom our tradition describes as a lover and pursuer of peace.

Indeed when Aaron dies the Torah tells us he was mourned by the entire Jewish people. (Numbers 20:29) And the rabbis comment that this was because he was so beloved by them. Indeed it is said he was able to ‘cause friends to re-unite and husbands and wives to make peace’ something only possible in the context of a deep relationship with his fellow Jews. And, the verse uses the same word (*Eidah*, the congregation) later used in the story of Pinchas for Jewish congregation. Pinchas learned his love of his fellow Jews, and his ability to lead them and yet be amongst them at the same time, from his grandfather Aaron.

This trait was different, for example, from the way Moshe was viewed. In fact, when Moshe was up on Mount Sinai (whilst the Jewish people were committing their greatest mistake: the sin of the Golden Calf) G-d says:

*“Lech reid ki shicheit Amcha”*

*“Get down (off the mountain) because your people have become destructive”*. (Exodus 32:7 )

And the *Meshech Chochmah* (Rav Meir Simchah of Dvinsk) points out that what Hashem (G-d) is telling Moshe is: ‘if you are all the way up here (on Mt Sinai talking to G-d) and the Jewish people are all the way down there (in the midst of an orgy of idolatry at the base of Mount Sinai), something is very wrong: you need to get down; you need to be *with* the Jewish people. True leadership is knowing how to be amongst the people whilst still able to lead them. And that was the greatness of Pinchas.

Perhaps this is what is missing today. With 60,000 Yeshiva students ensconced in the study halls of the great yeshivot, Torah scholarship abounds. But this Torah scholarship is up on a mountain; completely divorced from most of the Jewish people and no longer in touch with whom the Jewish people are and what they /we need.

*I recall after a particular grueling day of maneuvers back when I was in IDF basic training, finally being allowed to collapse onto our beds in our tent. Given only 4 hours or so to sleep I vividly remember seeing Eli, a hesderrick (combining Torah study in yeshiva with a couple of years of military service), staying awake studying a page of Talmud with a flashlight while desperately trying to keep his eyes open, so as not to finish his day without some Torah study. It was a simple, almost overlooked moment; but it made a lasting impression on me.*

True leadership does not remain in the study hall, it arises from amidst the Jewish people.

At the same time it behooves us to be sure we love even those with whom we may strongly disagree; even as he picked up the spear in his hand, Pinchas was a descendant of Aaron, and he loved the same Prince of Shimon every bit as much as he loved the Jewish people. It was only Shimon's *actions* he was determined to stop. And every Jew, whatever his or her clothing and perspective is a part of us, and we need to feel that love for him or her even whilst we may disagree with what it is they are saying or doing.

If blind hatred lost us the Temple two thousand years ago, it is purposeful (tough?) love which will help us rebuild it.

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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