Columbia Jewish Congregation

D’Var Torah: Pinchas

Numbers 25:10 - 30:1

July 11, 2020; 19th of Tamuz, 5780

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The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, “Phinehas[[1]](#footnote-1), son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me.”[[2]](#footnote-2) (Num. 25: 10–11). So some policeman killed a Black man and the country lost its collective mind. But we welcome the riots: the burning, looting, and murder because it was done in passion in the name of some higher cause. “Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My pact of friendship. 13 It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.’” (Num. 25: 12–13).

Arnold M. Eisen, chancellor emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, writes “[t]here seems something utterly primitive about the notion of an out-of-control God, grateful to Pinehas . . . for finding a means to assuage His anger.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Eisen is troubled: “The Torah seems to be saying that one can imitate God not only through acts of justice and mercy, creation and redemption, but in hot anger, violence, and slaughter. This is not the Judaism I have been taught, but there it is—or seems to be—in black and white.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Zimri, son of Salu, a chieftain of the tribe of Simeon, and Cosbi, Cozbi daughter of Zur, a Midianite princess (Num. 25: 14–15), challenge the leadership of God and Moses by engaging in public sex in an alcove, *kubah*, of the Tabernacle. Pinchas thrusts a spear through Zimri and into Cosbi’s alcove. If that is how you translate *kubah*.[[5]](#footnote-5) The reward of eternal priesthood and covenant of peace should be troubling to us as it is to Eisen. And the rabbis have traditionally proffered explanations to attempt to mitigate our concerns.

The modern biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman argues as non-Levites, the presence of Zimri and Cosbi violated the divine sanctity of the Tabernacle, a crime for which there is no defense.[[6]](#footnote-6) Pinchas, a priest, was justified in entering the Tabernacle and administering punishment. This understanding seems to be beneficial because with the loss of the Tabernacle and its unique holiness, there is no longer justification for this sort of religious violence.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Other rabbis see the crime as one of political transgression, an Israelite chieftain and a Midianite princess conspire to undermine the Israelite theological-political order. God, here, seems to condone the violent, extrajudicial redress of political grievance. So, this summer’s anarchy would be expressly approved by God.

“I grant him My pact of friendship. It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time.” (Num. 25: 12–13). The rabbis notice two scribal oddities in the traditional calligraphy of this passage of the Torah: the ‘yud’ in Pinchas’ name is incredibly small, and the ‘vav’ of the word ‘Shalom’ is broken in half.[[8]](#footnote-8) This certainly should command our attention because each letter in the Torah scroll is considered sacred and one damaged or incomplete letter will “pasul” (invalidate) the entire scroll.[[9]](#footnote-9)

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One midrashic explanation notes the yud stands for God (yud-hey-vav-hey), for Israel (Yisrael), for individuals (yud, hand) and for the community (numeric value of yud = 10, a minyan).[[10]](#footnote-10) The small yud tells us that each of us is diminished by killing: Pinchas, God, each of us as individuals, and all of us as community.

But we are still troubled because God has rewarded Pinchas with a covenant of Peace, of Shalom. The tradition is to write the “vav” in the word “shalom” as a broken letter. Big and small letters are unusual in the Torah, they are often incite commentary, but they are kosher. A broken letter is not kosher and vavs with broken legs risk being yuds, so having a broken vav is deeply jarring.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The Talmud teaches:

How do we know that a physically malformed cohen may not perform certain priestly duties? Rav Yehudah said that Shmuel said, because of the verse “Therefore I shall say, see, I give him my covenant of peace” - when he is complete (shalem) and not when he is lacking. But [objects the anonymous voice of the gemara] it doesn’t SAY “shalem,” it says “shalom.” Rav Naḥman answered, The vav in shalom is broken.

Kiddushin 66b.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The Torah was codified into the current, written version by the Masoretes, 8th and 9th century rabbinic sages, who instructed that the word “Shalom” in the term “Brit Shalom” should be written with a broken letter vav.[[13]](#footnote-13) As a result, every Torah scroll now bears the inner message that peace achieved through zealotry and violence is an incomplete peace – a “broken peace,” as it were.[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus we may understand (“Brit Shalom”) not so much as Pinchas’ reward, but rather as an obligation imposed by God that will require responsibility and moderation on Pinchas’ part forever until *olam habah*.[[15]](#footnote-15)

The Sages of Talmud and midrash seriously considered Pinchas’ future responsibilities. The Sages identify Pinchas with the prophet Eliyahu.[[16]](#footnote-16) This identification is in view of Eliyahu’s Divine service which was characterized by zealousness: “I have been very zealous for the sake of God, the Lord of Hosts.” I Kings 19:10.[[17]](#footnote-17) By this statement, Eliyahu criticized the Jewish people for “forsaking [God’s] covenant.”

God appointed Eliyahu, the broken and incomplete Pinchas, as “the angel of the covenant.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Thus, Pinchas, as Eliyahu, has the enduring responsibility, for all time, to attend the circumcision of the Jewish people such that he may attest to their faithful adherence to the Covenant.[[19]](#footnote-19)

We are troubled that God seemingly rewarded Pinchas’ zealous rage. Malachi prophesies Eliyahu, that is Pinchas, will return to announce the coming of the Redemption, his eternal mission, in Maimonides’ words “he will come solely to establish peace.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

God gave Pinchas a covenant of peace because Pinchas acted for God. The Talmud tells us Pinchas will receive the covenant “when he is complete (shalem),” because God has given a broken vav.

The small yud tells us that each of us is diminished by the violence in our world. The Torah tells us that we will receive our Covenant of Peace when we, as individuals and as a community, perform *tikkun olam*, and heal the broken vav by healing the world.

Shabbat shalom.

1. This name is variously translated as “Pinchas,” “Pinehas,” and “Pinchas.” I use “Pinchas” for my writing, but adopt the translation of the source I quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This translation was taken from the JPS Tanakh. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Arnold M. Eisen, “Doing Violence For God,” http://www.jtsa.edu/doing-violence-for-god[7/3/2020 3:32:47 PM] (chancellor emeritus of the Jewish Theological Seminary, Professor of Jewish Thought). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marc Gary, “In the Face of Violence, a Covenant of Peace,” *Torah from JTS*, [www.jtsa.edu/torah](http://www.jtsa.edu/torah). (“in an alcove (*kubah*) near or in the Tabernacle.” “Pinehas grabbed a spear and thrust it through them both in a violent parody of the sexual act itself (the spear ended in the woman’s *kubah*, which may refer either to her belly or her sexual part”). Marc Gary is Executive Vice Chancellor and COO, JTS. *See* Robert Alter, The Five Books of Moses, 819, n. 8. (the Hebrew *qubah*, is unique to this text, but is linked to the Arabic *qubbe* a small red leather tent used for cultic or conjugal purposes. *Qubah* also puns with *qebah*, “belly”). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Id.* (citing Richard Elliot Friedman, Commentary on the Torah, 514, on Num. 25:8). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Rabbi Menachem Creditor, *Pinchas 5768: “The Blessings of Brokenness*,” http://www.seventyfaces.com/dvar/106/pinchas-5768-the-blessings-of-brokenness. Rabbi Menachem Creditor serves as rabbi of Congregation Netivot Shalom in Berkeley, CA. and serves on the Executive Council of the Rabbinical Assembly; Rabbi Mayer Friedman, *Parsha Shiur*, Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur, parshashiur.googlepages.com. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Rabbi Gavriel Bellino (“Rabbi Greg”), *Rabbi’s Corner A Separate Peace*, <http://sixthstreetsynagogue.org/category/bmidbar-numbers/pinhas/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jen Taylor Friedman, Pinchas, scribal oddities, Hatam Soferet Blog, Jul. 14th, 2009, http://hatam-soferet.dreamwidth.org/443763.html. Jen Taylor Friedman is a post-denominational halakhically-observant egalitarian Jewish ritual scribe and scholar. She is notorious for having created Tefillin Barbie, and notable for being the first woman ever known to have written a sefer Torah, for which the Forward listed her as a Top 50 Jew. She lives in New York City, writes Torah, and learns at the Drisha Institute. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jen Taylor Friedman, Pinchas, scribal oddities, Hatam Soferet Blog, Jul. 14th, 2009, http://hatam-soferet.dreamwidth.org/443763.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Rabbi Brant Rosen, Broken Peace, http://rabbibrant.com/2007/07/06/broken-peace/. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Id.* [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rabbi Dr. Yehoshua Rabinowitz, Pinchas: A Midrashic View, Lectures on the Torah Reading by the faculty of Bar-Ilan University (citing Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer 47, and R. David Luzatto on same; Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas, 771; Sotah 13a, and Rashi on same; also Rashi on Baba Metzia 114b, s.v. Lav Kohen Mar, where he says, "this is according to the opinion that Elijah is Pinchas."). https://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/eng/pinchas/rab.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Eli Touger, *Touching the Core Pinchas*, (citing *Targum Yonason, Exodus* 6:18; *Yalkut Shimoni*, vol. I, sec. 671; *Zohar* II, p. 190b), adapted from Likkutei Sichos, Vol. II, p. 344ff, 609ff; Vol. IV, p. 1070ff; Vol. XVIII, p. 318ff. http://www.chabad.org/library/article\_cdo/aid/82726/jewish/In-the-Garden-of-the-Torah-Pinchas.htm. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Touger, *op. cit*. (citing Malachi 3:1; Pirkei d’R. Eliezer end of ch. 29). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Touger, *op. cit*. (citing Yalkut Shimoni, vol. I, sec. 71). [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Touger, *op. cit*. (citing Mishneh Torah, Hilchos Melachim 12:2). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)