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PINCHAS AND THE PROMISE OF GOD'S PEACE

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We read in *parashat hashavua* (weekly Torah portion) Balak: "And behold, one of the children of Israel came and brought among his brethren a Midianite [heathen] woman [and they had sexual relations] in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel. . . . And when Pinchas saw [this] . . . [he] rose up from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand . . . and thrust both of them through. . . ." (Numbers 25:6, 7-8)

And in the next *parasha*, Pinchas, we read: "Therefore say: Behold, I give him [Pinchas] My covenant of peace. And it will be for him and his seed after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he was jealous for his God and made atonement for the children of Israel." (Numbers 25:12-13)

How did this extraordinary confluence of sex and violence come about? And why is it that a man who, seemingly on his own initiative, causes the violent deaths of two people is given a "covenant of peace" and a "covenant of eternal priesthood"?

To understand these events, it's necessary to have some familiarity with the historical context in which they occurred:

The Moabite and Midianite kings had learned they could defeat the nation of Israel by turning its people away from God, by tempting them to commit sexual sins, which initially would destroy their family morality but ultimately the whole people.

At first blush, the modern mind recoils from this seemingly retrograde strategic assumption. Our first reaction may be that, certainly, it's not possible to defeat a nation by undermining the morality of its families. We have yet to acknowledge any linkage between individual morality, family integrity, community strength, and unified national purpose, notwithstanding the last half-century's decline of American social influence and cultural

leadership in the world. And yet the examples of their interconnectedness are all around us, especially in the country's urban centers. Their connection is suggested in several questions we might ask ourselves—to wit:

1. Are immoral extra-marital affairs significantly correlated with the breakdown of marriages?
2. Is marital breakdown significantly correlated with high divorce rates?
3. Are high divorce rates significantly correlated with various psychological, mental, and emotional problems and, in turn, with juvenile delinquency and adult crime?
4. Are family disintegration and the dysfunctions that accompany it significantly correlated with *community* breakdown, particularly in urban areas?
5. Is the breakdown of communities in urban areas significantly correlated with a weakening of the nation, contributing to a power bind and undermining our capacity to act as a unified polity in respect to national social policy?

But let's return to the Midianites, who so hated the Israelites that one of their chiefs recruited his own daughter into prostitution to lure the Israelites into sin. (Numbers Rabbah 21:3) This one chief (Tzur) aimed to seduce the Israelite leaders by using his daughter, Kosbi, to entice Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon. Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo ben Yitzchak, 1040-1105) tells us that Kosbi and other young Midianite women seduced thousands of Israelite men into the worship of their god, Ba'al Peor, which required defecating on their idol, as a condition of giving themselves sexually. (Rashi commentary on Numbers 25:1-3) The devastating result was that the Israelites suffered a plague that took 24,000 lives. (Numbers 25:9)

Zimri, flaunting the law, had taken Kosbi into a tent in the sight of Moses and all the people. On the one hand, the Midrash explains that this was a time when “the people’s shamelessness became more and more widespread.” On the other hand, we learn from Akeidat Yitzchak (Rabbi Yitzchak ben Moshe Arama, 1420-1494) that, “. . . Only a few people were guilty of indulging in immoral acts, yet the Torah treats the matter as if there had been a wholesale collapse of morality. However, just as the act of a single individual at the right time and in the right place can redeem a whole nation, so can acts of individuals bring about national misfortune. The relationship of the individual to the community is the key to the entire matter. When one individual can disturb the equilibrium of the whole community, then another individual can also restore such equilibrium.”

Pinchas knew the law from Moses. In effect, if an Israelite man and a heathen woman are having sex in public, witnessed by at least ten other Israelites, a “zealot” is permitted to kill the two of them while they are engaged in the act. (Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah, 12: 4, 5) Pinchas asked his teacher to confirm that he, Moses, had taught him the law in question. Pinchas had presumed to point out the law to Moses who, apparently, had forgotten it—whereupon Moses said to him: “He who reads the letter, let him be the agent [to carry out its instructions].”

The essence of the law was that, “there shall be no consecrated harlot of the daughters of Israel,” because heathens do not recognize the sanctity of the marriage bond. (Sanhedrin 82a)

On the one hand, those who are critical of Pinchas for killing Zimri and Kosbi focus on several points: he acted precipitously rather than instigating a formal legal process; he failed to offer Zimri and Kosbi any opportunity to halt their offensive behavior and repent for it; he had not been threatened personally in any way; and acting on his own initiative, he simultaneously monopolized and undermined legitimate legal process.

On the other hand, by rising up and killing Zimri and Kosbi, Pinchas stopped the plague that God had launched to destroy Israel. What also distinguishes his action as zeal for the good is that he killed Zimri and Kosbi for the sake of heaven, motivated by his desire to maintain the relationship between God and Israel, and Israel’s sanctification as a holy nation. Pinchas probably understood the consequences of idolatry. That is, he probably recognized that the challenge to Israel was not simply to jettison the practice of physically bowing down to the representation of a false god, but to reject a god that did not require a commitment to righteousness, truth and justice, freedom, peace, and kindness—knowing the ultimate effect that would have on Israel.

According to Or Hachayim (Rabbi Chaim ben Attar, 1696-1744), Pinchas’ “. . . jealousy was purely on God’s behalf, he had no ulterior motive.” And from Rashi (on Numbers 25:10) we learn that, “The term *kanah* [קָנָה—jealousy] always denotes one who strives to take vengeance for the sake of something.” So, very possibly, Pinchas was zealous because he knew that spiritual death, in this instance abandoning the moral spiritual demands of the God of Israel, leads towards physical death.

The purity of Pinchas’ motives may well be demonstrated by his willingness to risk his own life by killing Zimri. He might have suffered revenge for killing an Israelite prince. Zimri could have justifiably killed Pinchas in self-defense. And Pinchas could have been charged with Zimri’s murder if Zimri and Kosbi had already ceased having sex when he attacked them. (Sanhedrin 82a) In these respects, he was indifferent to the consequences he might suffer for his actions.

Pinchas behaved as a priest, acting to sanctify that which Zimri and Kosbi desecrated, which lay unredeemed by the immobilized people and their inert leaders. The children of Israel had remained passive in the presence of radical evil that already had begun to destroy the spirit of the covenant among them, which was still fragile. They were, in effect, estranged from their God and the law that Moses had related to them, so Pinchas’ act enabled them to be at one again with the Torah and God.

In his act of atonement for the whole people, Pinchas became the precursor of all high priests. In recognition of the cost to those who take a life for God’s sake, “the Divine blessing was designed to cope with the situation and [it] promised peace and tranquility of soul.” (Z.Y. Berlin)

Even with myriad midrashic and rabbinic explanations of why Pinchas was given the covenant of peace, we’re left with a vague sense of miasma. What kind of God, we ask ourselves, condones murder for nothing more than a sexual sin?

Rabbeinu Bachya (Rabbi Bachya ben Asher, 1255-1340) teaches that, “According to the plain meaning of the text [“Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace”—הֲנִי נֹתֵן לוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם], God meant that he [Pinchas] need not fear the vengeance of members of Zimri’s family who would want to avenge his death.”

Rabbi Samson Rafael Hirsch (1808-1888) teaches that, Pinchas earned the eternal grant of peace, elevation to the priesthood (which served to atone for the sins of the people), because he restored “the peace with God and His law.” Like his peace-making grandfather, Aaron, Pinchas was a *pursuer of peace*. Because, as the Chasam Sofer (Rabbi Moshe Sofer, 1763-1839) teaches, he knew that “sometimes, in order to make peace, a person must *rodef shalom*—chase away the peace.”

Rabbi Hirsch further teaches us in this vein: “God did not promise His peace to the weak and the complacent, to the advocates of a *laissez-faire* philosophy who take up a good cause only after it has gained universal popularity and hence is no longer in need of defenders. Nor did He choose as His partners in the covenant . . . those who proclaim ‘peace at any price.’ Instead, God promised His covenant of peace to those who, in their own lives and actions, demonstrate the zeal symbolized

by the spirit of Pinchas. These are precisely the individuals whom the peddlers of pseudo-peace condemn as disturbers of the peace; they are the individuals who speak out, in the name of God, against every form of opposition to God’s Law. . . . For peace can be attained only if His Law reigns supreme.” (From the *Collected Writings*, “Pinchas-Eliyahu.”)

By rescuing the law, Pinchas rescued the peace of God’s justice, thus assuring the nation’s future.

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