

ATONEMENT FOR THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL*

לְכֵן אָמַר הִנְנִי נֹתֵן לוֹ אֶת־בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם:
וְהָיְתָה לוֹ וּלְזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו בְּרִית כְּהֻנַּת עוֹלָם
תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קָנָא לֵאלֹהָיו וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

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.

Therefore say—Let every generation know: The Moabite and Midianite kings had learned they could defeat Israel by turning the people away from God, by tempting them to commit sexual sins, which would first destroy family morality but ultimately the whole people. One king aimed to seduce the Israelite leaders by using his daughter Kosbi, who enticed Zimri, a prince of the tribe of Simeon. She and others seduced thousands into the worship of Ba'al Peor, which required defecating on their idol, as a condition of giving themselves sexually (Rashi 25:1-3). Pinchas knew the law from Moses—"one who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots"—and since he had discerned its letter, he was to be the agent to carry it out (Sanhedrin 82a). He rose up and slew Zimri and Kosbi—Zimri had taken Kosbi into a tent before Moses and all the people, to belittle the law—and by his action Pinchas stayed the plague that God had begun to destroy Israel. *Behold, I give him My covenant of peace*—Pinchas earned the eternal grant of peace because he restored the "peace with God and His law," ensuring the resumption of real peace among the people (S.R. Hirsch). In recognition of the cost to those who take a life for God's sake, "the Divine blessing was designed to cope with this situation and promised peace and tranquility of soul" (Z.Y. Berlin). *And it will be for him and his seed after him a covenant of eternal priesthood*—Pinchas had acted as a priest, sanctifying that which had been desecrated by Zimri and Kosbi, and which lay unredeemed by the immobilized people and their inert leaders. Like his grandfather, Aaron, he was a pursuer of peace, knowing that "sometimes, in order to make peace, a person must be Rodef Shalom—chase away the peace" (Chasam Sofer). In his act of atonement for the whole people, he became the forebear of all high priests. *Because he was jealous for his God*—Pinchas slew Zimri and Kosbi for the sake of heaven, motivated by his ardor to maintain the love of God for the children of Israel, and their sanctification as a holy nation. He was zealous from the knowledge that spiritual death always leads toward physical death. *And made atonement for the children of Israel*—The children of Israel had remained passive in the presence of radical evil that could destroy the spirit of the covenant, which was still fragile, and thus they were estranged from their God and the law that Moses had related to them: Pinchas' act enabled them to be at one again with the Torah and its Divine Author.

* Numbers 25:12-13 (in Pinchas)