



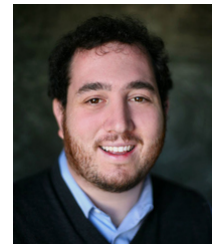
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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Pi'nehas
July 27, 2019 - 24 Tammuz 5779



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On Zealotry and the Pursuit of Peace

Torah Reading: Numbers 25:10 - 30:1

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 1:1 - 2:3

Our Torah portion this week recalls a man named Pinchas, the great-nephew of Moses, who engages in an act of vigilante violence. The Israelites are in the midst of a plague, brought down by God as penance for rampant acts of sexual immorality. Pinchas responds by capturing a couple in *flagrante delicto*, and executing them-- stabbing the pair of them through with his spear.

The Torah offers Pinchas praise-- he is rewarded for his action with God's eternal covenant of peace, and his decisive, bloody act puts an immediate stop to further dying. Calm is restored to the Israelite camp.

And yet, we instinctively recoil from Pinchas' brutal zealotry. We have to believe that it is not the only way that peace might have been obtained. We are horrified by this text of terror.

I believe we are not alone in that horror.

Two thousand years ago, the Sages of the Talmud selected portions from the Books of the Prophets, haftarot, to pair with our weekly Torah reading. In general, they chose selections that would bolster and amplify the message of the Torah that we had just read.

Except this week. This week they do something subtle, and – if we are paying sufficient attention -- quite profound:

For this week's haftarah they select the well-known story of Elijah-- another believer in the power of violence to get his point across. Our reading picks up just after Elijah had personally slain 700 priests of Baal and Asherah, following a public religious contest at the foot of the Carmel Mountain. Elijah is a man on the run-- chased far into the desert to flee retribution for his righteous killings. He runs as far as Mt Sinai, the place where all our stories begin, and there he encounters God who teaches him a life-changing lesson.

As Elijah hides in a cave in the mountain, thunder, lightning, whirlwind, and fire pass before him. The entire mountain shakes with the force of a mighty earthquake. But, the text teaches, God is curiously absent from any of these violent manifestations of nature's power. Then, finally, comes a *kol demama dakka* -- a still small voice, a sound just slightly more than silence. Elijah, who had always understood God to be manifest in displays of power and dominance, is stunned to realize that God is absent from the fire, from the whirlwind, from the explosions and the death. God is in the quiet, soft voice that echoes in the heart.

The Rabbis deliberately chose a haftarah that would serve as a radical counter-text for this week's Torah portion. Pinchas may put his faith in his spear, but Elijah is taught that God is found somewhere else entirely.

Read together these stories place us into a most discomfiting tension. At times, it may appear that the only answer lies in the sword, but that is never where God dwells. Our Sages are teaching us that while violence may sometimes be necessary-- in self-defense or to combat a great evil-- but necessary is not the same thing as holy.

We read Parshat Pinchas in the height of Summer, again in the depth of Winter we return to the same strategy and the same theme:

On the Shabbat of Hanukkah, when we celebrate the military victory of the Maccabees, who descended like hammers from the hills to wipe out their Greek enemies, we read a Haftarah whose famous words ring out: "Not by might, and not by power, but by my Spirit alone shall you live."

Our Rabbis were not meek pacifists-- they taught, "when one rises to kill you, kill him first"-- but neither were they willing to glorify battle or celebrate death. War may have its time and place, but it is always a tragedy to be quickly overcome. I often think of one of my heroes, Yitzhak Rabin, Israel's fallen Prime Minister and the great soldier of peace. Rabin spent a lifetime leading armies to achieve noble goals, but in his last years said again and again that any real soldier constantly prays for peace, and that true courage is finding a way to ensure a future where fewer young men on both sides of a conflict need to give their lives. "Military cemeteries the world over stand in silent testimony to nation's failure to honor the sanctity of life" he said in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech. "Enough," he said to the Israeli Knesset, "Enough of blood and tears. Enough!"

Rabin met his end at the hands of a brutal zealot, one who spoke openly about being inspired by the example of Pinchas. May we instead be students of our Sages, who taught that violence can never contain holiness, that righteousness is to be found in the voice of conscience that whispers in all our ears, calling us to find a new way forward together.

Ose Shalom b'imromav hu yaaseh shalom aleinu v'al kol israel v'al kol yoshvei tevel, v'imru Amen

May the One who ordains peace in the Heavens, make peace for us and all God's children, speedily and soon. Amen.

Rabbi Adam Greenwald, is the Executive Director of the Louis & Judith Miller Introduction to Judaism Program at American Jewish University. Before coming to AJU, he served as Revson Rabbinic Fellow at IKAR, a Los Angeles congregation often recognized as one of the nation's most creative and fastest-growing spiritual communities. Prior to ordination, he served two years as Rabbinic Intern at Congregation B'nai Israel in Tustin, CA and as Director of Education of the PANIM Institute's IMPACT: DC program. Rabbi Greenwald was ordained at the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in 2011.



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