

Pinhas 5778

A Broken Peace

The story of Pinhas, the hero of this week's Torah portion, in fact began at the end of last week's:

1 While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, 2 who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god. 3 Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the Lord was incensed with Israel. 4 The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord, so that the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel." 5 So Moses said to Israel's officials, "Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor."

6 Just then one of the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. 7 When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, 8 he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked.

We need to understand this carefully. Notice, for example, the prescribed penalty - that the ringleaders should be impaled - and Moses' interpretation of it - the instruction to kill *anyone* who has transgressed. Notice, also, the way that Pinhas exceeds those instructions - personally impaling not only an Israelite but the woman with him, and not publicly, but inside the chamber.

While his actions check the plague, the rules have not been followed - not as prescribed by God and not as interpreted by Moses. Pinhas' zeal and outrage seem to have carried him away.

What are the consequences of his actions?

Here is what the Torah says:

10 The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 11“Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. 12 Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My pact of friendship...’ [brit shalom]

Say what? Pinhas broke the rules. How does he merit a pact of friendship?!

Well, we might say, he followed the spirit of the law. He just got carried away. God’s interest in prohibiting idolatry means that some of the details getting lost didn’t really matter. Yes, it’s vigilante justice, but it’s justice, isn’t it? The ends justified the means.

But to argue this way misses the lesson the Torah is trying to teach us about Pinhas. It is hidden in plain sight - on the very face of the Torah. Not once, but twice.

There are two peculiarities in the script of the Torah itself. If a scribe messes with them, his or her action will result in the Torah not being kosher, so they are important.

The first peculiarity is that in the very act of the covenant being granted, the letter yud in the name Pinhas is written *ze’ir* – unusually small.

That particular letter - yud - is often regarded as being shorthand for God. At the very moment of Pinhas receiving God’s gift, his own divine spark is diminished. His act has reduced him rather than helped him to grow; or to put it another way, he has grown through his act, but not to greatness.

The second is that the vav in the word shalom is *keti’ah*, which I think means ‘torn’ – it is quite literally broken in two. As the Torah scribe Jen Taylor Friedman puts it in her blog Hatam Soferet –

Unlike big and small letters, which are kosher but unusual, broken letters are Very Not Kosher, and vavs with broken legs risk being yuds, so having a broken vav is not just a cute little thing, it's deeply jarring, in that this is a non-kosher letter, dammit.

A non-kosher letter; a vav pretending to be a yud...playing God, just as Pinhas did by trespassing on to the territory of life and death? While he becomes guardian of the *brit shalom* for all eternity, his rage and his zeal can only ever achieve a broken peace.

Because rage is destructive. In the treatise called *Orhot Tzaddikim*, one of the works of *Mussar*, Jewish self-improvement, we read that *just as scurvy is a disease of the body, rage is a disease of the soul*. The author goes on to teach that rage makes us careless and unpopular; it destroys our relationships because of the grudges we bear; and when we pray, it blots out our concentration - *the Shekhinah cannot repose herself in the midst of rage*.

And this is the real judgment that is passed on Pinhas. He gets credit for acting in the spirit of the law - he won't be charged. But that broken letter indicates the cost of his actions. The pact of friendship that he has been granted will always be flawed.

You've heard me say often that we can understand the characters in Torah as being aspects of our own psychology. Each of us has an internal Pinhas. As we re-encounter his story today, what does he have to teach us about how to live our lives?

Well - we ourselves live in immoderate times. We inhabit a climate of rage – rage has become both normalized and pervasive. It's there in both our direct and our virtual interactions. As I read in an article recently, we are becoming 'rage junkies.'

It is tempting to succumb to those feelings of being justified, to telling ourselves that even if we didn't exactly follow the rules we kind of did the right thing, to allowing our emotions to blind us to the humanity of others. We fume and we fulminate, carried away by our own rectitude, which in turn is enabled by the rhetoric that swirls around us.

The story of Pinhas is here to teach us that rage comes at a cost. When we give in to it, we break something fundamental in ourselves.

But ah, we may think - can't we just ignore that breach or work around it? No. Again, it's right there on the face of the Torah. If we remove the broken vav from the word shalom, we are left with a fragmented version of the word 'shalem,' the word that means 'whole.'

And that is the challenge, in these enraged times. We have to acknowledge what our rage has broken. Only then can we consider if it is ever capable of repair.

Shabbat shalom.