

## A Few Thoughts on Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25,10 – 30,1; 1 Kings 18,46 – 19,21)

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Our parashah opens in a bewildering manner: “HaShem spoke to Moses, saying: 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.” (Numbers 25,11-12). This is not the opening of a narrative, as you would expect it at the beginning of a parashah, it is rather the conclusion of a narrative, summarizing what has happened before. Why does HaShem honour Pinchas so explicitly? We must consult the last verses of the previous parashah, Balak. And the story becomes even more bewildering. Zimri, an Israelite prince, openly and publicly fornicates with Cozbi, the daughter of a Midianite chief. “When Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite man into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite man and the woman, through the belly ...” (25:8) Now, wait a minute, this is murder. Pinchas slew a man on the spur of the moment, without trial, or offering previous warning, without legal testimony being heard, in defiance of all prescribed judicial procedures. (Nechama Leibowitz). Taking justice into his own hands constitutes a dangerous precedent. Our sages argue that only a distinguished man renowned for his piety and learning could act like that out of completely unselfish considerations and inspired by the purest motives, who had removed from his heart all private feelings of hatred. (Rabbi Kook) Kook compares Pinchas to the Talmudic sage Samuel Ha-Katan, who formulated the *birkat haminim* (Blessing against the Heretics) “For the slanderers let there be no hope ...” This bitter and vengeful prayer is part of the weekday Amida. However, many of us feel so uncomfortable with this curse that the British Reform siddur *Forms of Prayer* alters the wording from “For the slanderers ...” to “For slander ...” Pirke Avot (Chapters of the Fathers) tell us that despite this prayer Samuel Ha-Katan’s motto was “Do not rejoice when your enemy falls, and do not let your heart be glad when he stumbles”. (Proverbs 24:17). What was Zimri’s sin (and the sin of so many of the children of Israel)? They were enticed by the Moabites to worship Ba’al Peor, thus completing the intention with which Bilam was sent to destroy the people of Israel. This was more than mere idolatry; worshipping the Moabite cult of fertility was a deadly threat to their belief in the One (HaShem). This caused HaShem’s anger and the subsequent plague that killed 24,000 people. This plague (possibly bubonic plague) may have ravaged the Moabites at that time, and Zimri, openly defying the command for social distancing and coupling with a Moabite woman, thereby setting a lethal precedent, contracted the plague and carried the disease into the camp (Plaut on Numbers 25:9). The killing broke the chain of infection. Thus, says HaShem, ... “he 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.” (25:10)

This parashah teaches us that there are causes which pose such an existential and deadly threat, both spiritually and socially, that they must be fought by all means. This is a more than difficult and challenging task. Nobody involved will remain blameless. They will need expiation and hope, and they too, need to pray to receive HaShem’s covenant of peace, as was granted to Pinchas (25:12) But hesitating or deciding not to act does not save our innocence. Invoking an approach of radical and pure non-violence or pacifism is not only out of touch with reality, it’s a slap in the face to our ancestors who chose death as the ultimate option of Kiddush HaShem instead of allowing anyone to force them to desecrate HaShem.

That’s why this parashah speaks so vividly to me particularly against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine.

Shabbat shalom