

At the beginning of our parashah HaShem gives Pinchas, son of the High Priest Eleazar, the enigmatic “covenant of peace.” (25:12) The story began at the end of last week’s parashah, when with one spear thrust, Pinchas killed an Israelite man and the Midianite woman he had brought to the *mishkan* when the Israelites were gathered there in mourning. Now we learn their names: Zimri, son of Salu, chieftain of the Simeonite tribe, and Cozbi, daughter of Zur, a national leader of a paternal house in Midian. (25:14-15). Although the Torah never explicitly mentions what they were doing, our midrashim relate that they were engaged in sexual intercourse. Midrash Tanchuma Balak 20-21: “She [Cozbi] said to him [Zimri], ‘Because I am a king’s daughter, I am surrendering to no one but Moses or Eleazar.’ He replied, ‘I also am as great as they are, and thus I am bringing you before their eyes.’ Then he seized her by her braid and brought her to Moses. He said to him, ‘Son of Amram, is this woman permitted or forbidden? If you say that she is forbidden because she is a Midianite, remember that the very woman who is under you as your wife is a Midianite; and who permitted you to have her?’ The ruling slipped from his mind. ... At the end of 40 years ... they had become lawless through unchastity. They weakened Moses and the righteous who were with him. Why were they weakened? ... So that Pinchas would come and receive his due. ... (Only a midrash would ignore the fact that Moses had married Zipporah before he had even met HaShem!) Then he went after the man of Israel into the tent, and ... he pierced both of them, the one on top of the other, through the unclean place, i.e., the private parts of them both.” The midrash attributes his unlikely aim to ten miracles. A much discussed anomaly in our Torah scroll alludes to the dichotomous nature of Pinchas’s vigilante behavior and his reward: Instead of being written in one piece, the letter *vav* in the word *shalom* (שלום) is broken into two, a mistake that would ordinarily make a scroll unkosher, but that is required here. For me, the broken *vav* symbolizes the fallacy of achieving peace solely through violence. Spelled without the *vav* (שלם), the word means *complete, perfect* – something this sort of peace can never become. Sadly, with our limited vision and reluctance to learn from the past it is unlikely that we imperfect human beings will ever be able to create perfect peace. Our brief interludes of peace have always been shattered by fresh outbreaks of violence ignited by zealots. Zimri’s ancestor Simeon and his brother Levi were the ones who brutally avenged their sister Dinah in Shechem, causing their father great distress. (Genesis 34:25-31) On his deathbed, Jacob castigates them both for their rash deed and predicts that they will be scattered throughout Israel. Indeed, the tribe of Simeon gradually declines and the Levites receive no land, and instead serve in the *mishkan* and the Temples. On Tuesday evening we entered the three-week period of mourning that begins on 17. Tammuz and ends on 9. Av. For the next 3 weeks, we look back with sorrow on the long litany of senseless acts of violence that continue to plague not only us, but also other innocent people around the world. But we dare not think our history deters us from engaging in violence ourselves. Like all humans beings, we too can be led astray. And no one can foresee how they will behave in extenuating circumstances. Not even Moses: Driven just like Simeon, his ancestor Levi, and his grandnephew Pinchas by righteous wrath, he had killed the Egyptian taskmaster for beating an Israelite slave. (Exodus 2:11-12) And we just read about his angry response to the Israelites’ incessant complaining and threats. The broken *vav* is an eloquent reminder that violence, even in the name of righteousness, inevitably leads to more violence. The Kotzker Rebbe teaches that because leadership requires patience, thought, and respect for the law, a zealot cannot be a leader. Taking the law into ones’ own hands sets a dangerous precedent. Violence should always be a last resort, and then, with forbearance and only in the name of justice. Sadly, there have always been zealots who make common cause with zealots of vastly differing persuasions, all willing to compromise their own values in the Machiavellian belief that the ends justify the means. Alliances based on the belief that the enemy of my enemy is my friend can be perilous. After a brief interlude following the end of the Soviet era, the cold war that began immediately after World War II has been rekindled by new permutations of old patterns. Ideological differences rarely permit true and lasting friendship. Equally pernicious are the horrifying acts of religious violence, those deadly outcroppings of fundamentalism that humanity stubbornly refuses to outgrow. In his book [Not in God’s Name](#), Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z’l remarks, “You cannot impose truth by force. That is why religion and power are two separate enterprises that must never be confused.” It is noteworthy that the word *shalom* appears countless times in our liturgy, and is also how we greet each other in Hebrew. *Shalom* implies that we are concerned with the wellbeing not only of those whom we encounter, but also with the wellbeing of the entire world. Moreover, it embodies a fervent hope that we may someday learn how to resolve our differences and achieve peace without resorting to violence. As Hubert Humphrey, Vice President under Lyndon Johnson, presidential candidate against Richard Nixon in 1968, and Senator from my home state of Minnesota so well said, “Peace is not passive, it is active. Peace is not appeasement, it is strength. Peace does not ‘happen,’ it requires work.” Peace is an ongoing process that requires patience, not impetuosity; and thoughtful action, not zealous violence.

Shabbat shalom!