

# Torah Table Talk

## Extreme Measures under extreme circumstances?

Parshat Pinchas Numbers 25:10-30:1

As Parshat Balak comes to an end, anarchy has broken out in the Israelite camp. Seduced by the foreign women, the Israelites begin to offer sacrifices to pagan gods. When an Israelite man and a Midianite woman begin to have sex in the entrance to the tent of meeting, Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron and a priest steps forward and impales the two transgressors with a spear, thus restoring peace to the camp. It is here that Parshat Balak comes to an end. This weeks Parshah opens with a promise in which God tells the people that he will make a covenant of peace with Pinchas, who turned back my wrath.

Pinchas is the classic example of zealotry. His example suggests that extreme measures may be called for under extreme circumstances. God appears to condone his act of violence but his promise of a covenant of peace suggests that the people were more ambivalent about Pinchas' actions. Is zealotry ever the right path to follow? Throughout the centuries, Jews have debated the legitimacy of Pinchas' behavior. Today we find his actions all the more troubling in the light of the acts of terror and zealotry taking place in all parts of the world.

Numbers 25: 10-13

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Pinchas ben Elazaar, ben Aaron the priest, has turned My wrath from the Israelites by displaying his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelites with my passion. Say, therefore, 'I grant him my pact of friendship. It shall be for him and his descendents after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took an impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.'

1. Why was it necessary for God to announce his pact of friendship with Pinchas? Do you think God is rewarding him for his actions or trying to justify his actions by saying after the fact that what he did was acceptable? What different would the interpretation of this verse make?
2. This passage should have been included at the end of last week's Torah portion so that it followed immediately after Pinchas' actions. Why do you think the sages chose to divide the story of Pinchas' zealotry into two parts? Does the story strengthen or weaken the justification for his actions?
3. Do you think Pinchas was justified in taking the law into his own hands? Is the use of violence ever justified?

### **Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin**

In reward for turning away the wrath of the Holy One blessed be He, God blessed him with the attribute of peace, that he should not be quick tempered or angry. Since it was only natural that such a deed as Pinchas' should leave in his heart an intense emotional unrest afterwards, the Divine blessing was designed to cope with this situation and promised peace and tranquility of soul.

1. According to Rabbi Berlin, what is one of the problems with allowing such extreme actions even when they seemed justified? Why did God make ‘a covenant of peace’ or ‘a pact of friendship’ with Pinchas?
2. When is it appropriate to use physical force in dealing with a crisis? What effects does this have on the person who acts in this fashion?

**Joseph Addison**

Zeal is a great ease to a malicious man, by making him believe he does God’s service, while he is gratifying the bent of a perverse revengeful temper.

**Thomas Fuller**

Zeal is fit only for wise men but is found mostly in fools

**Song of Song Rabba 1:1:9**

R. Phinehas ben Yair said: Zeal [in the study and practice of Torah] leads to fastidiousness, fastidiousness leads to cleanness, cleanness leads to abstinence, abstinence leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to pious conduct, pious conduct leads to the holy spirit, the holy spirit leads to the resurrection of the dead.

1. How do you feel about people who are overly zealous? Is this a good or bad thing? What good and what evil can come from zealous behavior?
2. What are you zealous about?

**Glossary**

**Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin** – He was a brilliant 19<sup>th</sup> century European Torah scholar. He was the head of the great Yeshiva in Volozhin and the author of a commentary on the Torah called Haemek Davar. Translation adapted from Studies in Numbers by Nehama Leibowitz.

***How to use Torah Table Talk***

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind  
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***