

Torah Table Talk

Answering God's Call: Zealotry, Pros and Cons

Parshat Pinchas

Numbers 25:10 – 30:1 / I - Kings 18:46 – 19:41



*Dedicated by Frances and Buddy Brandt
in memory of their grandson, Oren Jacob Brandt-Rauf
"He was the perfect child"*

Elijah fell from the heights of vindication to the depths of despair. Having defeated the prophets of Ba'al in a cultic duel, the prophet was now a wanted man. Jezebel, the queen of Israel, put a price on his head. Elijah fled to the wilderness defeated and alone. After meeting an angel who gave him food and water, he made his way to Mount *Horeb* (Sinai) where he had an awesome encounter with God. It is not in the mighty phenomena of nature that he finds God but in a *kol d'mamah daka*, in a soft murmuring sound that Elijah found the Eternal One. Like Pinchas, Elijah was a zealot. Just as Pinchas stopped a divine plague by killing the culprits who engaged in an illicit act in the presence of God, so Elijah killed the prophets of Ba'al who challenged Israel's covenant.

Later the sages would say that Elijah and Pinchas were not only alike but the same. Their souls were mystically interconnected as are the souls of all people who show such extreme zealotry. Should zealots be rewarded? In an age when zealotry is often destructive and even deadly, it is hard for us not to be somewhat ambivalent about such extreme behavior. Yet God rewards both Elijah and Pinchas for their actions. We are left to wonder whether there are times when such zealotry can be condoned.

I Kings 19:11 – 14

And lo, the Lord passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the wind; but the Lord was not in the wind. After the wind an earth quake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake. After the earth quake, a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire. And after the fire a soft murmuring sound.... Then a voice addressed him: Why are you here Elijah? He answered, "I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken their covenant, torn down your altars, and put your prophets to the sword. I am alone and they are out to take my life."

Mekhilta Bo Pischa 1

There were three types of prophets. One insisted on the honor due the Father as well as the honor due the son*; one insisted upon the honor due the Father without insisting upon the honor due the son; and one insisted upon the honor due the son without insisting upon the honor due the Father. Jeremiah insisted upon both the honor due the Father and the honor due the son, for he said, "We have transgressed and rebelled; and Thou hast not pardoned (Lam. 3:42). Therefore his prophecy was doubled, as is said, "And there were added besides unto them many like words" (Jer. 36:32). Elijah insisted upon the honor due the Father but did not insist upon the honor due the son, as is said, "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts" (1 Kings 19:10). Consequently, what was he told? "Go, return on thy way to the wilderness of Damascus...and anoint (Elisha) to succeed you as prophet" (1 Kings 19:15-16) -- because I am displeased with your prophecy.

Jonah insisted upon the honor due the son but did not insist upon the honor due the Father, as is said, "But Jonah rose up to flee into Tarshish from the presence of the Lord" (Jon. 1:3). What is written about him? "The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time" (Jon. 3:1)--He spoke to him a second time, but not a third.*the father is God and the son is the nation of Israel.

Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 29

Elijah the Prophet, in his zeal for fulfillment of this mitzvah, took a child and ran away to a cave. When the Almighty discovered him there and asked Elijah what he was doing in the cave, Elijah replied: "I was zealous for the Lord God of Israel in seeing that the children of Israel are transgressing Your covenant with them. So I have come here to see that this circumcision is performed." Whereupon the Almighty said to him: "By your life!

Inasmuch as you have been zealous for the commandment of Milah, every time a circumcision is performed, you will give testimony to the children of Israel that they shall preserve this mitzvah."

Michele Klein, A Time to be Born pp.184-85.

At the *Brit Milah*, a special chair, called *Kisei Eliyahu ha-Navi* (Chair of Elijah) is designated for Elijah the Prophet. In some communities a regular chair is used and covered with a special cloth embroidered with the name "Elijah the Prophet." The designation of a Chair of Elijah is derived from a tradition that relates to the days when King Ahab (who reigned over the northern Israelite kingdom from c. 874-852 B.C.E.) abandoned Israel's covenant with God. Elijah speaks out in pain: 'I am moved by zeal for the Lord, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant.' Later tradition equates Elijah's zeal for the covenant with his concern for the specific commandment of circumcision, since circumcision is the symbol par excellence of the covenant.

Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1:38

Similarly it is written of Elijah: And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Thy covenant (I Kings 19:14). Said God to him: 'Is it My covenant or thy covenant?' He then said: 'They have thrown down thy altars.' Said God to him: 'Are they My altars or thy altars?' He then said, 'And slain Thy prophets with the sword.' Said God to him: 'They are My prophets; what concern is it of thine?' He then said: 'And I, even I only am left, and they seek my life to take it away.' See now, what is written there: And he looked, and behold there was at his head a cake baked on the hot stones - reza'fim (19:6). What is meant by reza'fim? R. Samuel b. Nahman said: Ruz peh (break the mouth): break the mouths of all who belittle my children.

Zohar III, 73b

See now that first it is written "Elijah, what are you doing here?" Then it is written "I have been very zealous for the Lord, G-d of Hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant..." (by failing to circumcise their sons.) G-d replied, "I vow that whenever My children make this sign in their flesh [i.e., whenever there is a circumcision], you will be present, and the mouth which testified that the Jewish people have abandoned My covenant will testify that they are keeping it." Thus we learn that Elijah was punished by the Holy One for vilifying the Jewish people.

Rabbi Neil Gilman, Zealous Defenders of the Covenant July, 2003

The choice of the episode from the life of Elijah to accompany the story of Pinchas is no accident. In fact, the Midrash claims that they are the same person: "Pinchas is Elijah." Both stories deal with Israel's violation of God's covenant, and both Pinchas and Elijah are zealots in condemning Israel and defending God's honor. The pairing of these two personalities continues in the liturgy for brit milah, the ritual of circumcision. Many versions of the brit milah liturgy open with the first three verses from this week's portion in which God rewards Pinchas for his zealotry by promising him "a pact of friendship" and "a pact of priesthood for all time." In both of these phrases, the Hebrew for the English term "pact" is "brit." And in every version of the ritual, the infant is placed on the throne of Elijah. According to a Midrash, Elijah appears at every brit because he accused Israel of having forsaken the covenant. As a "punishment," he is now forced to witness every single brit milah.

Questions to Ponder

1. Both Pinchas and Elijah commit murder in the name of the Lord. Are there times when zealotry is justified? If so when? What is the difference between zealotry and anger?
2. According to the Midrash, how are Jeremiah, Elijah and Jonah different from one another? Why does God favor Jeremiah over the other two? If the job of a prophet was to chastise the nation and convince people to give up their evil ways why do the sages criticize Elijah. What should a contemporary preacher or rabbi learn from this?
3. Elijah confronts a series of cataclysmic events but in the end he encounters God as a kol d'mamah daka, a silent murmuring sound, or as a still small voice (in the King James translation of the Bible.) How can something both be silent and murmuring? How does Elijah's experience compare with his intense zealotry?
4. What does it mean to hear God's voice as a "silent murmuring sound?" Do you believe people can have such an experience of God's presence today?

5. Why is Elijah a guest/participant at every Brit Milah ceremony? Is this a special honor or is it really a punishment. How do the interpretations of Elijah's connection to the Brit differ in Pirke D'Rebbe Eliezer and in the passages in Shir Hashirim Rabbah and the Zohar?
 6. What issues are you passionate about? What problems in the world make you really angry? How can you direct your zeal in a positive and constructive way? Can you imagine circumstance in which you might become a zealot like Pinchas or Elijah.
 7. Should we consider Elijah and Pinchas heroes? Why or why not?
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and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”*