

TORAH
OF
Reconciliation

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פִּינְחָס PINCHAS

(Numbers 25:10–30:1)

Why Does Phinehas Receive a Covenant of Peace?

And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, has turned My wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was very jealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy. Wherefore say: Behold, I give him My covenant of peace.” (Numbers 25:10–12)

Who caused the anger of the Holy One, blessed be He, to be assuaged and the people of Israel not to be wiped out? I would say Phinehas.... The Holy One, blessed be He, said: “It is proper that he be rewarded, as it is said: ‘I give him my covenant of peace.’” (*Midrash Aggadah* [Buber], Numbers 25)

Phinehas witnessed an Israelite man engaging in a public act of promiscuity with a Midianite woman. Without hesitation, he took the law into his own hands, driving a spear through both of their bodies. After such a violent act, why does Phinehas receive the covenant of peace as his reward? His action embodies the opposite of peacemaking. His blessing bespeaks approval by God. The Midrash ventures that his action prevented much more far-reaching violence against the entire people. God was angry and was about to vent divine anger against a much greater number. The uncontrolled anger of God, a familiar motif in Torah, would not have distinguished between the guilty and the innocent. Phinehas’s act was limited to violators of the law. Limited violence, in this case, stood in the way of widespread anger and much greater losses.

The sages show ambivalence toward Phinehas. On the one hand, his act of violence is clearly praised in Torah, and he is granted peace and perpetual

claim to the priesthood. He is singled out for praise as few other biblical figures. There is an attempt to understand this view of Phinehas. On the other hand, his uncompromising zealotry could be problematic in any age. Both sides of this ambiguity are explored in Torah commentary. In what follows, the sages inquire into the dangers of Phinehas's behavior.

Nonviolence Is the Preferred Path

And he arose, and did eat and drink, and went in the strength of that meal forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. And he came there to a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and He said to him: "What are you doing here here, Elijah?" And he said: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." And He said: "Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord." And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and broke in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake; but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a still small voice. And it was so, when Elijah heard it, that he wrapped his face in his mantle, and went out, and stood in the entrance of the cave. And, behold, there came a voice to him, and said: "What are you doing here, Elijah?" And he said: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away." And the Lord said to him: "Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; and when you come, you shall anoint Hazael to be king over Aram; and Jehu the son of Nimshi you shall anoint to be king over Israel; and Elisha the son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah you shall anoint to be prophet in your place." (I Kings 19:8-16)

In the Torah's narrative, the priest Phinehas is praised. On his own initiative, he had stepped forward and executed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman. For his initiative, he is granted a covenant of peace.

The haftarah, the prophetic passage accompanying the Torah portion in the annual cycle of readings, more often than not underscores the message of the Torah reading. In the case of this selection from the book of I Kings, however, the narrative can be seen as a strong critique of Phinehas instead.

The bond between Torah and haftarah hinges on the word for "zeal" (*kina*). Phinehas is zealous for God, as is Elijah. The sages connect these two figures as though Elijah in a later generation is a reincarnation of Phinehas. Both are capable of acting dramatically and violently on behalf of God.

In the course of Elijah's sojourn on Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai), he is taught that God's Presence is not to be found in any of the three violent manifestations he witnesses: the wind, the earthquake, and the fire. Instead God is located in a "still small voice." The narrative seems to be attempting to instruct the prophet that service of God is also in gentle, quiet pathways, the opposite of those he had chosen when he slew 450 priests of Baal with his own hands. Rabbinic tradition imagines that Elijah is led very purposefully to Mount Sinai, identical with Horeb, and placed in the very cave where Moses once stood before receiving the Ten Commandments for the second time. In that very place, Moses heard the thirteen attributes of God, which affirm God's essence as compassion and forgiveness (see Exodus 34). What Elijah sees and hears is the same message presented in dramatic graphic fashion rather than in words.

Elijah, however, is unable to comprehend. After the wind, earthquake, fire, and the soft voice, he is asked essentially what he is about, the same question he was asked when he arrived on the mountain. He answers in the identical way he had responded initially: "I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away."

When God understands that Elijah is unteachable, that he has learned nothing from this experience, the prophet loses his vocation and is replaced by Elisha. He had completely lost the capacity to listen afresh to God.

This passage can be read as a rabbinic repudiation of Phinehas. The way of violence is not to be chosen even, or perhaps especially, when serving on behalf of God. If he is to emulate God, the prophet should pursue a more compassionate path.

This guided experience through which Elijah is led can be seen as a later commentary on the Sinai event itself. The narrative in Exodus contains the same violent elements that Elijah witnessed: fire and thunder, frightening sights and sounds. Earthquakes and winds seem intuitively part of the scene. Perhaps this later episode is suggesting that those sights and sounds were not manifestations of God. Rather the drama they created framed the subsequent revelation, which was manifest only in a small, barely audible voice. Perhaps the violent scene was only to call the people to attention, to quiet them to better be able to hear. Or their purpose was again to set up a contrast between that which could never contain the Divine Presence on the one hand and the opposite deep quiet which was the only way the Divine could ever be perceived.

The Torah praises Phinehas. The haftarah questions Phinehas by implication. Choosing and emulating a quiet, peaceful path is the way later sages sought to teach.

Phinehas's Peace Was Imperfect

“I give him my covenant of peace.” (Numbers 25:12)

Rabbi Judah said in the name of Samuel: Since the verse says “I give him my covenant of peace,” [it means the priest can serve] when he is whole but not when he is impaired. Yet the verse says *shalom*, “peace.” Rabbi Nachman said: The [letter] *vav* [in *shalom*] is cut [in half] (Talmud, *Kiddushin* 66b). This means that the verse teaches that...only [priests] who are whole are permitted. (Responsa *Tzitz Eliezer* 8:9, s.v. “This is because...”)

Very rarely in the Torah text is a letter cut in half. In fact generally an impaired letter would be reason to render a Torah scroll improper for use in public readings until the letter would be repaired! Only when the textual tradition mandates such an exception is it allowed.

In the narrative of Phinehas, his reward is the covenant of peace. The third letter of shalom, the *vav*, is cut in half. It is a *vav ketia*, a truncated *vav*. Traditional Torah commentators are mostly silent on this detail. Yet in light of the ambivalence found in rabbinical literature about the propriety of Phinehas's fervor, it might be possible that their reservations find expression in this strange detail. There is no doubt that the Torah text affirms Phinehas. It was only in later reflections that questions were raised. Should Phinehas serve as a model for behavior? Phinehas committed a violent act without any due process. His way was not the pathway of peace. Thus his reward might also reflect his own actions. The promise of peace he receives is impaired. Perhaps the implication is that his peace will be elusive, a reflection of the way he had chosen. Perhaps the Massorites, those who fixed the text and left instructions to impair the letter *vav* in the word *shalom*, were intent on leaving a sign revealing their distancing from Phinehas. In a small, unusual detail of the text, perhaps a very important message is encoded.

Israel Is Bonded in Prayer and Destiny with All Nations

And you shall present a burnt-offering, an offering made by fire, of a sweet savor unto the Lord: thirteen young bulls...twelve bulls... eleven bulls...ten bulls... (Numbers 29:13, 17, 20, 23)

The [number of bulls] is diminished each day. Their total is seventy corresponding to the seventy nations. (*Targum Jonathan son of Uzziel*, Numbers 29:13)

Among the offerings brought during the holiday of Sukkot there is a strange detail found in no other place in the description of holiday sacrifices. A diminishing number of bulls is required, beginning with thirteen and concluding seven days later with seven. The beginning and concluding numbers themselves are unusual. Rabbinic commentators find that the

total of bulls offered would be seventy, a number equal to the proverbial number of nations in the world. In this strange detail, the sages suggest a universalist thread woven through this holiday. Offerings were to be brought for the entire human family as a symbol of interconnectedness and responsibility. Their petition for a year of blessing was framed as a hope for all of humanity. In a season of atonement, these offerings suggest that the Jewish people bear some responsibility for everyone. The destiny of Jews is bound to that of all peoples.

Peacemaking Is the Ethical Anchor

Great is peace, for, even if a person has done a number of commandments but has not made peace, he has accomplished nothing. For we have found this [to be the case] with Jehu who uprooted idolatry from Israel, destroyed the dynasty of Ahab, and killed the wicked Jezebel; yet, since he did not achieve peace, it was as though he did nothing. And from what source [do we know] that he did not achieve peace? As it is said: "And Jehu said: 'What have you to do with peace? Turn around and ride behind me'" (II Kings 9:18).
(*Mishna of Rabbi Eliezer 4:75*)

The prophetic reading in the synagogue when this Torah portion is read is the narrative of the transition from Elijah the prophet to Elisha his successor and from the rule of Ahab to Jehu, who was to be the newly anointed king in the northern kingdom of Israel. The many violent acts attributed to Jehu are later recorded. He was unable, however, to also bring peace to his kingdom, and therefore he is judged as having accomplished nothing. There was no balance in Jehu's life. Violence had consumed him, and he no longer saw peacemaking as a compelling goal. His life, like Elijah's, is informed by violence. The sages judge that such a life has lost its moral compass. Making peace should always be the central goal.