

Torah Comments on Pinchas

For 7/16/11 14 Tammuz 5771

Fanatics – Good and Bad

A Jewish man and a Moabite woman are on lying top of each other in a public square. Along comes a Jewish leader named Pinchas, usually translated as Phineas. Phineas sees the couple and, almost instantly, he takes a spear and impales both the Jewish man and the Moabite woman, killing them both. For this homicide, Phineas is rewarded by God. His family will all be Priests, the highest status in the community.

Does the Torah condone murder? Of course not. Does the Torah encourage fanatics to kill almost impulsively? Yes, and no. Was Phineas justified in this killing? Traditionally commentators all say, yes. The Moabite woman, Cozbi, was the daughter of the leader of her people. The Jewish man, Zimri, was a leader of the tribe of Simon. The bonding of Zimri and Cozbi was a symbolic enactment of an alliance, in effect, a treasonous leaving of God and God's people, in order to connect with the idol worshipping Moabites. In effect, Zimri and Cozbi began a war against God and God's people.

Phineas counterattacked. Soon, the Jewish army would engage the Moabite army. Within the context of war, assassination may be permissible, if it is otherwise appropriate. Pre-emptive killing (all assassinations are pre-emptive) may be permissible, but the justification must be even stronger than killing in direct defense of oneself or one's people.

Fanatics are scary. Yigal Amir was a fanatic. Remember him? In 1995, he learned, from his Rabbi, that extreme methods might be justified in protecting his homeland, the Jewish state of Israel. Amir applied this lesson, and assassinated Prime Minister Yitzchak Rabin.

One way to understand fanatics is to consider them as "true believers," a brilliant phrase coined by author Eric Hoffer, who wrote the best selling book, The True Believer, in the 1960's. Hoffer explains that a "true believer" is a person who is so insecure, so "perpetually incomplete," that his only means to self-assurance is to "cling passionately to whatever (cause) he happens to embrace."

To a true believer, every cause becomes a “holy cause,” for which the fanatic is “ready to sacrifice his life.” That is why fanatics are scary.

Yet, some fanatics might be our role models. Consider the hero of this week’s Haftarah, the prophet, Elijah. Elijah’s first reaction to the idolatry of King Ahab and his wife, Jezebel, is not the aggressive violence of Phineas. Instead, Elijah retreats into the desert. On his retreat, Elijah hears God’s voice (parallel to Moses at the burning bush), urging him to return to public life, urging him to find new leaders, who will fight the idolatry of Ahab and Jezebel.

Most significantly for us, Elijah does not hear God in a booming, thunderous voice, the memorable voice, which our people heard at Mount Sinai. What Elijah hears is a “still, small voice.” What Elijah hears is the voice, which still calls to us – a muted, quiet, yet persistent call of God, a call to action. We are called to deliberate, that is, to study our tradition. Yet, after our deliberation, we are called to act.

Elijah is a role model, who fits our nature. If we want to act heroically, when the opportunity presents itself, we must first listen. We must first hear the call of that still, small voice. Elijah listened, and then acted. Phineas may also have listened (or not), and, before acting “impulsively,” considered the consequences. So did other “impulsive fanatics,” such as Rosa Parks. I hope that, if the opportunity arises, we would do the same.