YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Pinchas**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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**In memory of Rav Michael Jay Bloom
who knew how to lead and whom to follow,
and who read his parsha, Pinchas,
over the years in numerous venues and communities.
Shanen and Akiva Werber and family**

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**“A Zealot and the Descendant of a Zealot;**

**A Turner Away of Wrath**

**and the Descendant of a Turner Away of Wrath”**

Summarized by Shmuel Fuchs

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

*Parashat Pinchas* opens with God’s response to Moshe in the wake of the action taken by Pinchas at the end of the previous *parasha*:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon 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. Therefore, say: Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace. (*Bamidbar* 25:10-12)

Why is Pinchas’s genealogy spelled out in such great detail? Rashi (*ad loc*.) explains: “Because the tribes spoke disparagingly of him, saying: Have you seen this grandson of Puti, the father of whose mother used to fatten calves for idolatrous sacrifices, and he has dared to slay a prince of one of Israel’s tribes? Therefore, Scripture comes and connects his genealogy with Aharon.” Rashi’s words are based on the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*:

It is written: "Then stood up Pinchas, and executed judgment [*va-yefalel*]." Rabbi Eliezer said: *Va-yitpalel* [he prayed] is not written, but *va-yefalel*, as though he argued with his maker [on the justice of punishing so many]. Thereupon, the ministering angels wished to repulse him, but He said to them: Let him be, for he is a zealot and the descendant of a zealot; a turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath. The tribes now began abusing him: See you this son of Puti [= Putiel], whose maternal grandfather fattened [*pitem*] cattle for idols, and who has now slain the prince of a tribe of Israel! Therefore, Scripture detailed his ancestry: Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest. (*Sanhedrin* 82b)

Still, it is not clear why it is necessary to consistently emphasize that Pinchas's lineage traces back to Aharon the priest. The designation, "a zealot and the descendant of a zealot; a turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath," also requires explanation. Is it not evident even without this description that the action taken by Pinchas was right, and even necessary?

**Between Israel and the other Abrahamic Nations**

It turns out that this is not the case. The Midyanim with whose daughters the people of Israel committed harlotry[[1]](#footnote-1) are our relatives, descendants of Avraham and Ketura, and the turning of the young men of Israel to their daughters was not expressly forbidden: first, because according to the plain meaning of the verses, the prohibition of intermarriage applies only to the seven nations of the land of Canaan; second, because the incident with the daughters of Midyan was not, strictly speaking, intermarriage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In short, the boundaries between Israel and the other nations of the Abrahamic family were not so clear, which means Pinchas's action was very problematic: Who appointed him to determine whether relations between Israelites and the daughters of Midyan were permissible or forbidden, and to take such drastic action in order to establish his position as the final word?

The *Amoraim* addressed this difficulty and offered several explanations of what really led Pinchas to his daring action:

Rav said: He saw what was happening and remembered the *halakha*…

Shmuel said: He saw that "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord" – whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one's teacher.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Rav Yitzchak said in the name of Rav Elazar: He saw the angel wreaking destruction among the people. (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

**“Zealot and the descendant of a zealot”**

I wish to discuss the last two opinions presented in the Gemara, beginning with Shmuel’s view that Pinchas took his action in order to prevent desecration of God's name.

Sometimes, the difference between blasphemy and sanctification of God's name is exceedingly subtle, and it is not so easy to know which action will decide the matter in which direction. Nevertheless, when Pinchas saw the situation in front of him – the young men of Israel engaging in harlotry with the daughters of Midyan, and in the process, even the prince of a tribe hurling accusations at Moshe[[4]](#footnote-4) – he believed that this could not possibly be the will of God and he felt an obligation to stand up and take action.

This is the meaning of the statement "zealot and the descendant of a zealot." Zealotry is the understanding that the current situation cannot possibly reflect the will of God, even if there is no explicit *halakha* to support this understanding. Making this determination, however, does not suffice; one must also stand up and take action to rectify the situation.

**“A turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath”**

Rav Yitzchak, on the other hand, connects Pinchas's action to the plague. In his opinion, Pinchas saw the plague smiting the people and realized that something had to be done to stop it – just as his grandfather Aharon took action to stop the plague that struck Israel after the sin of Korach and his company:

And Moshe said to Aharon: Take your fire-pan, and put fire in it from the altar, and lay incense on it, and carry it quickly to the congregation, and make atonement for them; for there is wrath gone out from the Lord: the plague is begun. And Aharon took as Moshe spoke, and ran into the midst of the assembly; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people; and he put on the incense, and made atonement for the people. And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed. (*Bamidbar* 17:11-13)

Halakha forbids burning incense outside the sanctuary, and to do so immediately after two hundred and fifty people who burned incense were burned in divine fire turned it into an even more dangerous action. Despite this, Aharon did not shy away from going outside the tent, standing between the dead and the living, and trying to atone for his people.

Pinchas also risked his life with his daring deed and even acted problematically from a halakhic perspective, so much so that the Gemara there (*Sanhedrin* 82a) writes that Pinchas was subject to the "law of a pursuer (*rodef*)"; Zimri or any other person would have been permitted to kill him. In addition, the Gemara states that had Pinchas sought counsel before taking action, he would have been instructed not to do so. Nevertheless, like his grandfather, he saw the terrible plague decimating the people and understood that he had to take action in order to stop it – even if by so doing, he would be putting his own life in jeopardy and even if it was not clear how proper his own action was.

This is the meaning of the second description of Pinchas, "turner away of wrath and the descendant of a turner away of wrath." Sometimes the way to turn away God's wrath is not self-evident, and not everybody is capable of understanding that in such a situation, one is obligated to stand up and take action in order to atone for the people.

[This *sicha* was delivered by HaRav Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Pinchas* 5780.]

1. It is clear that the people of Israel committed harlotry with the daughters of Midyan and not with the daughters of Moav. This is not the forum in which to expand on the matter, but note that the words: "And the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav" (*Bamidbar* 25:1) mean that they began to commit harlotry with the daughters *living* in Moav. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is important to note that even the reservations of the sons of Yaakov about assimilating with an uncircumcised nation, which arose in the incident involving Dina (*Bereishit* 34:14-15), do not apply here; the people of Midyan also practiced circumcision, as is evident from the account of Tzipora circumcising her son at the lodging place (*Shemot* 4:24-26). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Meaning, one is not required to consult his teacher before acting. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Accusing him of hypocrisy in having married a Midyanite woman himself; see *Sanhedrin* ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)