Pinchas | When is Zeal, Real

Moshe Taragin

Pinchas is applauded for his courageous intervention, and he is lavishly rewarded with priesthood. Special circumstances call for special measures, and he heroically halted a raging plague which had already claimed 24,000 lives. Additionally, he quelled a public desecration of Hashem’s name, or, as we refer to it, a *chilul* Hashem.

Yet, even Pinchas was reprimanded by the local courts for his dangerous extra-legal maneuver. The Talmud Yerushalmi asserts that the excommunication of Pinchas had already commenced, at which point, Hashem intervened and validated Pinchas by announcing his reward. Even Pinchas, the renowned zealot is treated with ambivalence by Chazal-and for good reason!

Civil society frowns upon vigilantism and zealotry. Snap justice carried out by lone individuals can plunge society into chaos and can launch uncontrollable cycles of violence and revenge. Organized judiciary systems assure due process and the organized prosecution of crimes. Vigilantism is discouraged not only because self-directed intervention may be hasty or erroneous. Any self-initiated justice – even when accurate – imperils the entire system of law and order.

Zealotry or Apathy

As perilous as zealotry may be and as corrosive to society as lone-wolf vigilantism may be, there is also a danger of social and religious apathy. A zealot cares, and he cares deeply about the erosion of values in the broader society. True, his passion overcomes discretion, and erupts into aggressive and even violent behavior. Violence and aggression should never be condoned. However, it is equally myopic to criticize a zealot while ignoring the deep passion and profound convictions which cause this undesirable reaction. By discouraging zealotry, do we also dismiss zeal? In our justifiable recoil from unrestrained “kana’ut”, do we sheepishly adopt a quieter and more listless approach regarding our own belief systems? Do we fall into ideological indifference?

Interconnectivity

Not only does a Pinchas care deeply about his values, but he also views his life as *interconnected* with the larger community, which he currently observes in moral freefall. Other people may have observed this deplorable sin, and may have “looked the other way”, allowing the sinners to wallow in their own appetites and, eventually, face divine justice. For Pinchas, this disaster is *personal*, and he cannot look away. Zealots keenly sense their connectedness to society and our joint and common fate. They are riled when our common “interest” is compromised by sinful behavior. People of temperance who adopt a “live and let live” approach, often sever themselves from the “commonplace” and withdraw from the notion of shared experience.

Someone who hurls a stone at a Shabbat violator has crossed terrible red lines and has also violated multiple halakhot. This type of violence is intolerable and, justifiably, causes revulsion. However, as we hastily-and correctly revile this behavior, do we also check our own “passion temperature”? Are we able to summon similar levels of passion, while carefully modulating our responses and sentiments so that they aren’t violent or abusive? Is our religious experience also collective to the point that we are disappointed when other Jews betray our cherished values and compromise our “shared experience”?

It is a delicate but important question – precisely because zeal can easily morph into angry violence, strident judgementalism and cocky dismissiveness. Below are a few guidelines to help differentiate between healthy ‘zealousness’ and dangerous zealotry:

1. Anger or Sadness

Angry people are often looking for easy targets to vent their anger and frustration. Very few targets are as ‘easy’ as religious sinners. If our emotions are overcome by anger and antagonism, it is likely that our zeal, in reality, masks ugly emotions such as smugness and arrogance. By contrast, if the sight of religious malfunction causes sadness or disappointment, it is likely that our zealous passion stems from sincerity and religious earnestness. Discerning between anger and sadness is an important barometer for the navigation of life’s morally delicate situations.

1. Zealotry Masks Hypocrisy

There is an old expression: “scratch a Saint, find a sinner”! Though this is a generalization, it does reflect a tendency to cover our own religious blemishes by spewing religious venom at others. Chazal remark that after his intervention, Pinchas was publicly mocked due to the idolatrous background of his maternal grandfather Yitro. Since Pinchas had roots in the ancient pagan world, he may not have been the best person to oppose those who were drawn to this pagan exhibition. He was ultimately accused of hypocrisy and of masking his own pagan roots through his vigilance toward pagan sinners.

Zealotry is noble when it doesn’t *compensate* for our own personal flaws. Often when we acknowledge our own failings and our own inadequacies, our zealotry toward others cools down.

1. Overall Body of Work

The sincerity of zealotry can sometimes be checked by studying the overall “body of work”. The Satmar sect of chassidim are virulently opposed to the Jewish State, based on the teachings of their original Rebbe. Yet, despite their caustic opposition to the state of Israel, their broader commitment to the Jewish community is stellar. Anyone who has spent even a weekend in a NYC area hospital can attest to the remarkable chesed extended by Satmar chassidim to any needy Jew. This astounding passion for Jews frames their zealotry in a more positive manner. Though many Jews disagree with their ideological positions and even the way those positions are expressed, it should not be too hard to appreciate their caring and to validate their zeal, even without condoning their opinions or their manner of expression.

We are far removed from a world in which a Pinchas-type response is even imaginable. Active zealousness in an age of religious diversity and of ideological differences would be harmful and, ultimately, counterproductive. However, our tempered responses cannot be based upon absence of passion or lack of conviction. We must care deeply but must, just the same, learn to modulate our responses to register our disapproval but not to assail or assault another Jew.