**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**PARASHAT HASHAVUA**

**Rav Yishai Jeselsohn**

**PARASHAT PINCHAS**

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In memory of Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham Shraga Furst z”l   
Niftar 17 Tammuz 5771. Dedicated by his family.

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families   
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,   
whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz. Yehi zikhro barukh.

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 In memory of my beloved parents   
Adia Bat Avraham, Alice Stone, z"l,   
whose yahrzeit was 2 Tammuz,

 and Yaakov ben Yitzchak, Fred Stone, z”l,   
whose yahrzeit is on 25 Tammuz.

Ellen & Stanley Stone, their children and grandchildren   
Jacob & Chaya, Micah, Addie, and Ruby; Zack & Yael, Allie, Isaac, Nate;   
Ezra & Talia, Shai, Ami, Lielle; Yoni & Cayley, Azi, Kovie;   
Eliana & Marc, Adina, Emmy, Shira, Yisrael Meir, Simcha Zelig;   
Gabi & Talia, Adriana

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**The Zealotry of Pinchas**

**I. The Selection of the Tribe of Levi, and of Pinchas in Particular**

The selection of the tribe of Levi in the Torah is a bit of a mystery. An account is given in *Parashat Bamidbar* without any explanation of why they were chosen:

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn that opens the womb among the children of Israel; and the Levites shall be Mine; for all the firstborn are Mine: on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I made all the firstborn in Israel sanctified to Me, both man and beast; Mine they shall be; I am the Lord. (*Bamidbar* 3:11-13)

The reason for the original selection of the firstborns is described in detail, but the reason for choosing the tribe of Levi in their stead is completely absent from the verses. Rashi connects their selection to the unique act of zealotry performed by the tribe of Levi after the sin of the golden calf, as the Torah describes:

Then Moshe stood in the gate of the camp, and said: Whoever is on the side of the Lord, let him come to me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together to him. And he said to them: Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Put you every man his sword upon his thigh, and go to and fro from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor. **And the sons of Levi did** according to the word of Moshe; and there fell of the people that day about three thousand men. (*Shemot* 32:26-28)

In response to this action, Moshe instructs the tribe of Levi:

And Moshe said: **Consecrate** **yourselves** [*mil'u yedchem*; lit., fill your hands] today to the Lord, for every man has been against his son and against his brother, that He may also bestow upon you a **blessing** this day. (*Shemot* 32:29)

Rashi explains the nature of the blessing as well as the nature of the consecration:

"Consecrate yourselves" – You who are killing them [your own relatives] will by this very act install yourselves as priests of the Omnipresent God. (Rashi, *Shemot* 32:29, s.v. *mil'u*)

It is possible that Rashi bases this understanding on a verse elsewhere in the book of *Shemot*, when God instructs Moshe in the making of the special *bigdei kahuna*, clothes for the priests:

And you shall put [the garments] upon Aharon your brother, and upon his sons with him; and you shall anoint them and **consecrate them** [*u-mileta et yadam*], and sanctify them, that they may minister to Me in the priest's office. (*Shemot* 28:41)

This verse indicates that the term *milui yad*, lit. is an expression denoting consecration specifically for the priesthood.

It is possible that the connection between the sin of the golden calf and the sanctity of the tribe of Levi is also alluded to when Moshe blesses the tribes in *Parashat Vezot Ha-Berakha*:

And of Levi he said: Your *Tummim* and Your *Urim* be with Your holy one, whom You did prove at Masa, with whom You did strive at the waters of Meriva; who said of his father, and of his mother: I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brothers, nor knew he his own children; for they have observed Your word, and keep Your covenant. (*Devarim* 33:9)

Rashi explains:

When they sinned in the matter of the golden calf and I said, "Whoever is on the side of the Lord, let him come to me," all the sons of Levi gathered themselves to me, and I ordered them each to kill his mother's father, he being an ordinary Israelite, or his brother on the mother's side, or the son of his daughter whose husband was an ordinary Israelite, and thus did they do. (Rashi, ibid.)

While the Torah does not offer an explicit reason for the priesthood of the tribe of Levi as a whole, our *parasha* explains what is behind the priesthood of Pinchas. Here, the connection between the priesthood and zealotry is not restricted to the domain of the commentators, but is clearly written in the verses:

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[[1]](#footnote-1) for My sake among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say: Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel. (*Bamidbar* 25:10-13)

The recurring connection between zealotry and the priesthood requires examination: Does a person become consecrated by way of killing members of his own people? And not only members of his people, but his own relatives!

We will try to understand this connection following a deeper understanding of Pinchas' act of zealotry.

**II. The Difference Between a Zealot and a Pursuer [*Rodef*]**

The Gemara in tractate *Sanhedrin* describes how Pinchas came to this act of zealotry:

"And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, saw it." Now, what did he see? Rav said: He saw what was happening and remembered the *halakha*, and said to him [Moshe]: O great-uncle! Did you not teach us this on your descent from Mount Sinai: He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots? He replied: He who reads the letter, let him be the agent [to carry out its instructions]. (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

The law governing one who cohabits with a heathen woman is not explicitly stated in the Torah, but it was known by tradition that he is punished by zealots. This law is very interesting – what kind of punishment is this? If the person deserves to be punished, he must be punished; if not, he should be left alone! Since when do we allow zealots to carry out punishments?

In addition, the principle the Gemara attaches to this law, that "if one asks, we do not instruct him," requires explanation. If this is indeed the law, why do we not instruct people to act accordingly? Moreover, in the case at hand, Moshe left the execution of the punishment in the hands of Pinchas, arguing that it was he who mentioned the law. What kind of argument is this? Why did Moshe not take action himself?

It seems that the idea of zealotry involves such complexity because it lies on the border between something that is good and praiseworthy and something that is problematic and forbidden.

Murder is a severe prohibition that appears in the Ten Commandments; its seriousness is self-evident. On the other hand, zealotry is a noble deed deserving of great reward that, to our great surprise, also includes "My covenant of peace." The fine line between them is hinted at in the words of the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*:

Rav Chisda said: If [a zealot] comes to take counsel [whether to punish a transgressor described in the Mishna as subject to action by zealots], we do not instruct him [to do so]. It has been stated likewise: Rabba bar Bar Chana said in the name of Rabbi Yochanan: If he comes to take counsel, we do not instruct him. Not only this, but if Zimri had separated from [his mistress] and Pinchas killed him, Pinchas would have been executed on his account; and had Zimri turned and slain Pinchas, he would not have been executed on his account, since Pinchas was a pursuer [seeking to take his life]. (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

The two laws that the Gemara teaches us here show how thin the line is between zealotry and murder. The first law is that it is forbidden to issue instructions to carry out an act of zealotry. This is not a law that is taught in the *beit midrash* and that one performs as one who is commanded to do so. An act of zealotry must come from within the person.

The second law shows that the zealotry must come at a precise time, for if Pinchas had been off by a second, he would have been considered in the category of a murderer and Zimri would have been permitted to defend himself and kill him.

**III. What characterizes zealotry?**

As we have seen, the line between zealotry and murder is extremely fine. The *Or Ha-Chaim* tries to understand this subtle matter, including three indications of true zealotry. Hiscommentary to our *parasha* represents his general exegetical approach quite well; he reads the verses in a most precise manner and derives important principles from them.

The *Or Ha-Chaim* opens with a precise reading of the words: "**has turned** My wrath away **from** the children of Israel." The description of "turning away" implies that the wrath already existed. This is also indicated by the word "from [the children of Israel]" – meaning there had already been wrath upon the people of Israel:

This means that after God's anger was upon them, Pinchas succeeded in removing it from them. This is a great compliment [to Pinchas]. (*Or Ha-Chaim* 25:11)

And the *Or Ha-Chaim* adds another layer of meaning:

The Torah further intends to say the good thing Pinchas did in terms of the act itself, that he “turned away the wrath of God,” because anger is a branch of sadness and distress and God will enjoy much satisfaction from the turning away of His wrath. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

We may note that the verse mentions two benefits resulting from the actions of Pinchas:

a. He turned My wrath away from the children of Israel.

b. I did not consume the children of Israel.

The second benefit is quite clear: God refrained from destroying Israel, stopping the plague before even more people died. But what is the special benefit of turning God's wrath away? Is this not the same benefit?

The *Or Ha-Chaim* explains that turning away God's wrath is an independent benefit, which itself gives God great satisfaction. It is the act of zealotry that "pacifies," as it were, God's wrath.

This point seems to be related to the nature of zealotry. We saw above that zealotry does not come from instructions given from above; “we do not instruct people to do so." As we noted, this status requires explanation – if it is the *halakha*, why don't we instruct people to do so? Such a halakhic status can be interpreted in several ways. One of them is the understanding that there are certain laws that must be carried out because they are *correct*, and not necessarily because we are *commanded*.

The *Seridei Aish* was asked why we do not recite a blessing over the mitzvaof *mishloach manot*, sending gifts of food to others on Purim. In his responsum, he touches on this element:

And furthermore, it seems to me that the purpose of *mishloach manot* is to increase peace, love, and friendship, as the *Chatam Sofer* writes in *Orach Chaim* 196. Now, even though regarding all the *mitzvot* we say: Greater is he who is commanded and fulfills [the command than he who fulfills it though not commanded] (see *Kiddushin* 31a) – and we recite the blessing "and commanded us" – in the case of *mishloach manot*, it is better that one should give of his own free will, out of a feeling of love for his fellow Jew, and if he gives only because of the command, he reduces the measure of love. The same is true about charity, that if one gives out of compassion or out of love for Israel, he is better than one who gives based on the command and compulsion. And see what the Rambam writes in *Shemoneh Perakim* (chap. 6) about the dispute among the philosophers whether it is better to act based on a command or based on inner desire, and the Rambam's position on the matter. It is also possible that it is for this reason that a blessing is not recited for honoring one's father and mother. (*Seridei Eish*, no. 9)

There are certain *mitzvot* about which it can be said that if one performs them only because he was commanded to do so, this impairs the special nature of the mitzva, part of which involves the free will from which it stems. This is the case with *mishloach manot*,which is meant to increase love, as well as in the case of charity, which should stem from compassion, and in the case of honoring one's parents.[[2]](#footnote-2)We can say that zealotry is also such a law: it must come from a deep religious emotion. If a “zealot” acts in response to a command, the force and standing of the act are weakened.

The Torah describes Pinchas' reward for being "very jealous for My sake among them." The *Or Ha-Chaim* is precise about every word and derives three signs of true zealotry:

The phrasing of "in that he was very jealous for My sake" and "among them" is precise. These factors each contributed to giving Pinchas the power to turn away God's wrath – by way of three things:

**First**, Pinchas displayed personal jealousy on behalf of God by **endangering his life** for the sake of God's honor, as indicated in [*Chazal*’s] words. This is the meaning of what is stated [in the verse]: *be-kan'****o***, "that **he** was jealous," with the pronoun [i.e., the suffix *vav*] (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

We saw above that if Zimri had turned upon Pinchas and slain him, he would not have been executed for that, based on the law of a pursuer (*rodef*); "If someone comes to kill you, rise up and kill him first" (*Sanhedrin* 72a). In addition, the Midrash relates that Zimri was killed in the presence of the entire tribe of Shimon (as we will see below), and we know that the tribe of Shimon knew how to use its power when it wanted to – so there was an even greater risk in Pinchas’ actions against their leader. Thus, we see that zealotry must involve personal risk. This is learned from the words, "in that he was very jealous."

**Second**, his jealousy was purely “for My sake,” **not as a means to any ulterior motive**. This is a complete mitzva,which pleases God more than anything [else] a person does. This is the meaning of what is stated [in the verse]: "My jealousy" – with the pronominal suffix referring to God. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

This seems to be the most significant point. Zealotry must be pure and free from any personal motives. Jealousy for God means concern for His honor. The moment that feelings of envy, desire, or honor become intermingled in this jealousy, it is no longer true and honest zealotry.

These first two points are related, since if one’s act of zealotry endangers one’s life, that is a good sign that from a material point of view, there is no real benefit to it and it would in fact be better to avoid it. In a case where zealotry might cause a person to lose everything he has, it stands to reason that he is acting exclusively for the sake of heaven.

**Third**,Pinchas’ act was not hidden from human eyes; rather, he sanctified the name of God **among the congregation [in full view]** of his whole nation, as *Chazal* state (*Sanhedrin* 82a) that the whole tribe of Shimon had surrounded the tent where Pinchas stabbed the two of them [Zimri and Kozbi], killing their prince before their eyes. This is the meaning of what is stated [in the verse]: "among them." (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid.)

Zealotry for God is beneficial on two levels: First, it removes evil from the world, and second, it sanctifies the name of God. The sanctification of God's name must take place in the presence of a congregation, as portrayed in the Gemara in *Sanhedrin*, and therefore zealotry, too, reaches a new level when it is carried out in public. In addition, public zealotry attests to the sincerity and the point of truth which led to it.

Thus, the main point we saw is that the zealotry must come from a point of truth and sincerity. It is for this reason that it cannot come by way of a command, and that it must be free of any ulterior motive.

**IV. The Special Virtue of Turning Away God's Wrath**

We saw above that Pinchas' actions led to two benefits for Israel: he both turned away God's wrath and prevented the destruction of the people. The verse separates these two benefits with the phrase “in that he was very jealous for My sake among them”:

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 did not consume the children of Israel in My jealousy. (*Bamidbar* 25:11)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* pays attention to the separation of these two benefits, explaining it in the wake of the three signs of zealotry that we saw above:

"So that I did not consume." We must understand why the Torah writes the cause, "in that he was very jealous for My sake among them," between the two effects, "has turned My wrath away" and "so that I did not consume." For it should have written: "When he was very jealous for My sake," "he turned My wrath away" "so that I did not consume." Or alternatively: "He has turned My wrath away" "so that I did not consume" "when he was very jealous for My sake."

The Torah wanted to demonstrate that once God's anger had been aroused against Israel, it could not be turned away without the presence of the three factors in Pinchas' deed that we just enumerated. But as for saving the Jewish people from total annihilation, it is possible that God would have allowed a small portion of the Israelites to survive even if Pinchas' deed had not comprised all the three elements we described. (*Or Ha-Chaim*, ibid)

The *Or Ha-Chaim* distinguishes between the two benefits: In order to prevent the total destruction of the people of Israel, perhaps the act itself of destroying the wicked would have sufficed. But the turning away of God's wrath came as a result of Pinchas' zealotry, which itself stemmed from the depth and greatness of pure love for God, devoid of any personal interest. Such pure love can pacify anger. Sin comes from man's "sincere" desires, and therefore the repair is sincere love for God.

**V. He Who Reads the Letter**

The *Or Ha-Chaim's* explanation sheds new light on the Gemara in *Sanhedrin* and Moshe's decision to have Pinchas be the one to execute the act of zealotry.

First of all, we saw that zealotry can only quell anger when it comes from true love for God. It is when the will for zealotry erupts from the soul that it can appease the wrath of God – and this came from Pinchas.

In addition, the people could have claimed about Moshe that he had personal interests of one type or another. The Gemara in *Sanhedrin* describes the discussion that took place between Zimri and Moshe:

He seized her by her coiffure and brought her before Moshe. He said to him: “Son of Amram! Is this woman forbidden or permitted? And should you say she is forbidden – who permitted for you the daughter of Yitro?” At that moment, Moshe forgot the *halakha* [concerning one who is intimate with a heathen woman], and all the people burst into tears. Hence, it is written: "And they were weeping before the door of the tent of meeting." (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

The people might have suspected that Moshe was acting not out of pure motives, but out of a desire to take revenge against Zimri! Therefore, it was Pinchas' jealousy that could serve as the true jealousy that appeases wrath.

Now the connection between the priesthood and zealotry is clear: only one who can serve God out of pure love, devoid of any other motive, may be His servant.

The ability to distinguish between true zealotry and false zealotry is relevant not only to the realm of zealotry itself, but to a person's ability to be honest with himself and to understand what his true motives are. This is a great undertaking in the world of character development.

May we merit to succeed in this enterprise.

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. English editor’s note: The Hebrew root *kuf, nun, aleph* is translated in this *shiur* somewhat interchangeably as “jealousy” and “zealotry” (etc.). In some cases, the different terms stem from different forms of the Hebrew root, but due to various factors in the translation of the *shiur* from its original Hebrew, that may not be consistent. In any case, for the purposes of this *shiur*, the terms should be taken as essentially equivalent. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It should be noted that one could disagree with or expand upon each of these points, but this is not the forum for such a discussion. See *Arukh ha-Shulchan Yoreh De'a* 240:3. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)