



The Zealous Leader • Parshat Pinchas

We admire zeal - a sense of fervor, ardor, and eagerness pursued with intensity – and are also afraid of it. Ken Byler, in his article “Zealous Leadership” (April 29, 2019), writes about zeal appeal. We need people to be zealous champions for causes, but we don’t want them to be fanatical, inflexible, or intolerant. Byler observes that we rarely see good examples of zealous behavior today in leaders: “In today’s workplace zeal seems strangely absent. It is rare to find a leader or employee whose passion shines bright as they flawlessly execute their appointed duties. When zeal does emerge, it is a breath of fresh air in an otherwise stale and listless environment.” He finds zeal most in people who love what they do. To find or rekindle that enthusiasm we need to tap into our calling again and again.

Zeal is both a problem and a solution in this week’s Torah reading. As the book of Numbers inches to a close, a significant number of Israelites began to unravel morally. Men fornicated with Moabite women and worshiped foreign gods. The stresses of desert life and wilderness leadership were taxing. The encampment was on the brink of losing its spiritual core. God was angry and told Moses to rid the camp of the wrongdoers. Then, in mid-conversation to resolve the problem, Moses was stunned by an act that rang of complete zealotry and anarchy: “Just then a certain Israelite man came and brought a Midianite woman over to his

companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting” (Num. 25:6).

The rebellion was no longer on the margins but right in front of Moses’ eyes and exactly where Moses received divine revelation. Nothing was sacred. There was no shame. Every boundary was pushed. The people wept at who they had they had become. Moses was silenced.

Jonathan Haidt argues in *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, that “...when a group of people make something sacred, the members of the cult lose the ability to think clearly about it. Morality binds and blinds.” Here, a member of the leadership elite broke every rule in a very public way. The group was blinded. They began to see their illicit behaviors as normative. This may explain Rabbi Yosi bar Yehuda’s reasoning in a statement recorded in the Talmud: “When a person commits a transgression the first time, he is forgiven; a second time, he is forgiven; a third time, he is forgiven; but the fourth time, he is not forgiven” (BT *Yoma* 86b). Sin enough times, and it becomes acceptable in your mind. Do the same sins as those around you, and you feel validated. Aristotle and Rabbi Yosi agreed. Habituated bad behavior can become part of one’s character.

Suddenly, in the thick of the crowd, an unexpected leader took control of the chaotic situation: “When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite man into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite man and the woman, through the belly” (Num. 25:7-8). Pinchas stopped adultery and idolatry with one act of astonishing violence. Passionate sin was met with passionate rectitude. For this, God rewarded Pinchas with a covenant of peace.

We are left puzzled and upset. We are disturbed that the Israelites reached this low point and also distressed that it was stopped in this way. We are uncomfortable that violence was rewarded, even if there were positive outcomes. The means do not always justify the ends.

In *Not in God's Name*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks alerts us to what happens when there is an imbalance of power that leads to this degree of passion: “Violence is what happens when you try to resolve a religious dispute by means of power. It cannot be done. Trying to resolve ultimate issues of faith, truth and interpretation by the use of force is a conceptual error of the most fundamental kind... You cannot impose truth by force. That is why religion and power are two separate enterprises that must never be confused.”

When reflecting on this story from a distance, however, we can see more clearly the heat of the moment that produced the heat of the response. The dangerous cocktail of eros, profanity, public duplicity and groupthink right in front of Moses meant that someone besides Moses had to defend the integrity of the Torah unambiguously. That individual met shock with shock to stop what was happening and provide the space for change. Someone needed to lead with commitment. “Commitment requires hard work in the heat of the day;” writes John Gardner in his book *On Leadership*. “...it requires faithful exertion on behalf of chosen purposes and the enhancement of chosen values.”

There is one detail that is often ignored when studying this story that may hold a key to understanding it. Pinchas was a *cohen*, a priest. He was committed, like his father and grandfather before him, to a life of service and to the continuity of a mission. He was not allowed any contact with death except in the rarest of circumstances. His role was not to put his hand out to others holding a spear but to hold his hands out in blessing. It was out of his character and against his job description to act this way.

But crisis situations can call for extreme stopgap measures. Situations like this, therefore, cannot be judged by the moment but by what happens *after* the moment. By awarding Pinchas with a covenant of peace, God was saying to him, to Moses, and to the encampment, that his act of courage saved the day in the short-term but would never work in the long-term. God was, in effect, telling Pinchas that his ultimate task was to return to the work of peace – of blessing and service. The Netziv, Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, contends that for Pinchas the *brit shalom* was a way of removing such impulsive and violent tendencies that become an ever-present danger to one who has committed murder.

The demands of leadership can take us temporarily out of our lane, but an enduring commitment to our values puts us back in it.

What are you zealous about? When has that passion fueled your drive and when has it been a source of trouble? How can you channel it in constructive ways?