

Parsha Ponders

Pinchas | July 25, 2024 | 20 Tammuz 5784

*Pinchas, the controversial Kohen*¹

פינחס בן-אלעזר בן-אהרן הכהן השיב את-חמתי מעל בני-ישראל בקנאו את-קנאתי בתוכם ולא-כליתי את-
בני-ישראל בקנאתי: לכן אמר הנני נתן לו את-בריתי שלום

Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen removed My wrath from upon the Jewish people, when he carried out My jealousy amongst them, [such that] I didn't destroy the Jewish people in My jealousy. Therefore, I say that I give him My covenant of peace²

This week's *parsha* picks up from where the last one ended. There was a terrible scandal in the Jewish nation, where many were committing illicit relations with Midianite women, and worshipping their idols. Zimri, the head of the tribe of Shimon, brazenly took a Midianite woman and was with her publicly. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, took the law into his own hands, took a spear, and killed them both.

Our *parsha* begins by calling him the grandson of Aharon. This is stressing his lineage, in order to counter whispers that were beginning to spread amongst the Jews³. Some were saying that Pinchas takes after his grandfather from his mother's side⁴, who fattened cows to offer them to idols. Who does he think he is, killing a prince amongst the Jews? To show that this ancestry was irrelevant, Hashem emphasized that Pinchas was correct in his actions. He is, after all, a descendant of Aharon. What exactly was the back and forth over here, that the Jews were considering him a descendant of his mother's father, and Hashem considered him a descendant of his father's father⁵?

The Jews were intending to scorn Pinchas. This violent bloodthirsty act of killing Zimri and his mistress must have come from the character traits of his mother's father. They were so implanted in him that it actually led to him killing a prince of the Jews. Therefore, the verse testifies that the opposite is true. The strength it took to commit this act of justice came specifically from Aharon HaKohen. Aharon's attribute was to always chase and pursue peace⁶. Therefore, any zealotry that came from a pursuit of peace must be good. As a result, he was rewarded with Hashem's covenant of peace.

Even though Pinchas was a Kohen, he wasn't always a Kohen. Our Sages tell us⁷ that when Aharon and his sons were given the status of Kohanim, Pinchas wasn't included. One opinion is he only became a Kohen once he killed Zimri. Rav Ashi holds that it was only later in the times of Yehoshua, when he brought peace amongst the tribes of Israel. Even though the verse in our *parsha* says that Hashem gave Pinchas a covenant for him and his children to be Kohanim⁸, Rav Ashi would say that it was simply an assurance that once he becomes a Kohen, it will be an eternal inheritance for his descendants⁹.

One could ask a question on this latter approach¹⁰. The very verse which says that Hashem gave him a covenant of being a Kohen says that it was as a reward for being zealous for G-d! Meaning, in his killing

¹ Based on MiShulchan Eliyahu Baruch to Numbers 25:11

² Numbers 25:11,12

³ Rashi ad. loc., quoting Sotah 43a, Bava Basra 109b, and Sanhedrin 82b

⁴ See Sotah and Bava Basra, where the intent is that his grandfather was a descendant of Yisro and Yosef

⁵ Rav Eliyahu Baruch quotes the following from his teachers Rav Nochom Partzovitz and Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz

⁶ Avos 1:12

⁷ Zevachim 101b

⁸ V. 13

⁹ Rashi to Zevachim *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ Maharsha ad. loc.

of Zimri. It's explicit then that he became a Kohen then, and not later. However, some explain¹¹ that in fact Pinchas was worthy at that point to become a Kohen. The problem was that the Jews weren't willing to let him become a Kohen, since he killed a prince of Israel. It was only once Pinchas established peace amongst the tribes in the times of Yehoshua that they accepted him and anointed him as a Kohen.

We see from here that indeed, Pinchas was rewarded with becoming a Kohen when he killed Zimri. We can add that the tribes weren't willing to accept him, because they thought his killing of Zimri was stemming from his ancestry that was antithetical to being a Kohen. It was only once he established peace amongst the tribes that they realized that he indeed was a worthy descendant of Aharon, who always pursued peace. Retroactively then his act of killing Zimri was what gave him the reward of becoming a Kohen¹².

Good Shabbos

¹¹ Tosafos *ad. loc.* s.v. הוויא

¹² Rav Eliyahu Baruch ends with two issues on this approach. One is that the verse stresses that it wasn't only Pinchas' act of zealousness which earned him this reward. It's also that he saved the Jews from annihilation. Another issue is that our Sages (Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 29; Yalkut Shimoni Melachim § 217) relate that Hashem rebuked Eliyahu (who is Pinchas) for always being zealous, as we see with his being zealous when he killed Zimri. If it's so great that he carried out Hashem's justice, why is he being criticized for his zealousness? A possible approach is based on Chofetz Chaim 1:10:3, who cites Sha'arei Teshuva § 219. There, he says if one says *loshon hara* about another in a permissible manner, but then later says it in a forbidden manner, then it retroactively ruins the first instance and shows he never had proper intent. He develops this further in his Shemiras HaLashon I Sha'ar HaTevunah Chapter 17, quoting Hagahos Semak 82:6, that in cases where one is permitted to kill another (to save a life, for example), they have to be very careful not to ever be guilty of killing another without permit. That would retroactively show that they were bloodthirsty and even the first *mitzvah* was in fact a transgression. So too here, perhaps Pinchas' later zealotry, which wasn't proper, revealed his initial zealotry was incorrect.

My *chavrusa*, R' Menachem Gavert, suggested a slightly different approach. Pinchas' trait of zealotry should have developed in a positive direction. Since it went in a bad direction, even the initial act, although in essence good, was revealed to have been a negative thing, as it started his downward path