



**RABBI MOSHE**

**TARAGIN**

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## *Geulas Yisrael* Defending Zeal, Opposing Zealotry

Pinchas is roundly celebrated for his courageous intervention, and is lavishly rewarded with priesthood. Special circumstances call for special measures and his intervention halts a raging plague which had already claimed 24,000 lives. Yet, even Pinchas was almost reprimanded by the local courts for his dangerous extra-legal maneuver. Civilized society frowns upon vigilantism and zealotry. Snap justice carried out by lone individuals can plunge society into chaos and launch cycles of violence and revenge. Organized judiciary systems are established precisely to assure due process and to provide orderly prosecution of crimes. Taking the law into your own hands— even when accurate— imperils the entire system of law and order.

However, as dangerous as zealotry may be and as destructive as lone-wolf vigilantism is, social and religious apathy is equally dangerous. A zealot cares deeply about his values and their possible erosion. True, his passion overcomes his judgment and provokes socially corrosive and illegal behavior. However, it is simplistic to

dismiss the unhealthy fanaticism of a zealot while ignoring the deep passion and profound conviction which drive this behavior. By critiquing zealotry in others, do we also quench zeal within our own hearts? In condemning vigilantism are we scorning vigilance? By justifiably recoiling from unrestrained “kana’ut”, do we sheepishly adopt a more listless approach of ideological indifference?

Not only does a Pinchas care deeply about his own values, but he also views his life as interconnected with his community — which, in this instance, is spiraling in religious free-fall. Other onlookers ignored these deplorable ‘sinners’ allowing them to wallow in their own appetites and meet their Divine fate. For Pinchas, this disaster is “personal”, as this circus-like spectacle is desecrating the Shechinah, and vandalizing the shared fabric of religious experience. When we oppose vigilantism and adopt a “live and let live” approach, are we, in reality, severing shared religious experience and amputating our own religious life from the shared “religious commonwealth”?

Someone who hurls a stone at a Shabbat violator has crossed terrible red lines and has also violated multiple halachot. This type of violence is intolerable and justifiably causes revulsion. However, in our haste to revile this behavior, do we also check our own “passion temperature”?

Are we ourselves able to summon similar levels of passion, while better modulating our responses, so that they aren't violent or abusive? It is a delicate but important question- precisely because zeal can easily morph into hostile zealotry, harsh judgmentalism and cocky dismissiveness. How can we discern healthy passion from unhealthy zealotry? Here are three guidelines:

### **1. Anger or Sadness**

Angry people are often looking for easy targets to vent their rage and very few targets are as 'easy' as "religious sinners". If, when facing religious weakness in others, we are consumed with anger or resentment, it is likely that our so-called passion or zeal, in reality, masks smugness and self-righteousness. Anger and self-righteousness can never be justified and they can never serve a holy purpose. By contrast, sadness or painful disappointment is more often a manifestation of sincere religious commitment and of an enduring care for our shared religious commonwealth.

### **2. Beware of the hypocrites**

There is an old expression: "scratch a saint, find a sinner" ! Though this is a generalization, it does reflect a tendency of some to compensate for their own religious blemishes by spewing religious venom at others – specifically for the very same faults which they secretly harbor. Many onlookers questioned Pinchas precisely because his maternal grandfather Yitro was originally a paganist himself. Perhaps, Pinchas wasn't intervening out of deep concern but to "cover" his family's past history. Zealous sentiments are noble when they don't compensate for personal flaws or limitations. When zeal reflects a consistent lifestyle, it

is commendable. Too often puritanical zeal masks hypocrisy.

### **3. Overall Body of Work**

We can often gauge the validity of zeal by studying the overall "body of work". For example, the Satmar sect of Chassidim are virulently opposed to the formation of the Jewish State, based on the teachings of the original Satmar Rebbe, in his sefer Va'yoel Moshe. As an aside, it is important to note that mainstream Satmar chassidim overwhelmingly reject the despicable actions of a small minority of renegade Satmar imposers, who actively align with Israel's worst enemies. But even the general opposition to the State of Israel upheld by mainstream Satmar, causes great disappointment to supporters of Israel. Yet, anyone who has spent even a weekend in a NYC area hospital can attest to the remarkable chesed extended by the Satmar chassidim to any needy Jew. Satmar is astoundingly devoted to ahavas yisrael, as evidenced by their hospital activities, among numerous other chesed projects. As part and parcel of that devotion to the Jewish people, they are passionately resolved against the State of Israel, which they see as thwarting Jewish redemption. Even for those who disagree with Satmar, it should be easy to appreciate their care and to validate their zeal.

We are far removed from a world in which a Pinchas-type response would be imaginable. Furthermore, active zealousness in an age of religious and ideological diversity would be harmful. However, even when we don't actively respond, we mustn't diminish our passion and even if we don't actively intervene, we cannot abandon our conviction. ■