



THE PERSON

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IN THE PARSHA

Zealotry and Tolerance

Jewish people teach Jewish values to their children, and to all who wish to be informed about their faith. If one is asked “Should I or should I not?” we generally respond with clear and certain advice: “Yes, you should”, if the value is a positive one, or “No, you should not”, when the value in question demands inaction.

Strangely, however, there is one positive value in our religion to which we are not to respond “Yes, go and do it.” I speak of the value of zealotry.

Zealous acts are noble acts in our tradition. This is illustrated in the story begun in the last week’s Torah portion and concluded this week in the *parsha* named for the zealot Pinchas (*Numbers* 25:10-30:1).

Pinchas confronted a Jewish prince named Zimri in an act of idolatrous promiscuity with a Midianite woman named Kozbi. He “took a spear in his hand...And thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her belly.” For this he is commended by the Almighty Himself, who says, “Pinchas...was very zealous for My sake...Therefore...I give unto him My

covenant of peace...Because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.”

Clearly, zealotry is a divinely approved positive value. Yet, I ask you, dear reader, suppose you had witnessed such an immoral and defiant act about to take place and would come to ask me, your Rabbi, whether or not you should take up a spear and thrust it through the two sinners. Would I be permitted to encourage you to emulate Pinchas?

The Talmud, in a passage in *Tractate Sanhedrin* 82a, tells us that Moses himself was uncertain as to whether this act of taking human lives was permissible. Pinchas acted on his own. Indeed, the Talmud clearly states that if someone comes to inquire as to whether or not to commit such an act of extreme zealotry, he should not be instructed to do so. I, as a Rabbi, would have to discourage you from taking up the spear and taking the lives of even the most blatant of sinners.

Yet, elsewhere in the Bible and in postbiblical writings, we find others besides Pinchas who performed similar acts of zealotry. One of them is the prophet Elijah whose story is read in other years in the *haftarah* for this week’s *parsha* (*I Kings* 18:46-19:21). Elijah, whom our sages equate with Pinchas, says of himself, “I have been very zealous for the

Lord...The children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant..."

Yet another famous example is the High Priest Matityahu, whom we all recall from the story of Hanukkah. Of him we read, "Matityahu saw a Jewish man about to offer a sacrifice on an alien altar in the presence of the entire congregation, and he was zealous, and swiftly slaughtered the man... and smashed the altar to bits; thereby, he was zealous on behalf of the Torah just as Pinchas had done to Zimri." (*Maccabees I: 1:45-50*)

What a paradox! Three great heroes of the Jewish people, all praised highly for their zealotry. And yet, if any of us today were to inquire of a Jewish rabbi of the highest rank, or of a Jewish court, as to whether he could emulate them and zealously harm a sinner,

he would not receive permission to do so.

It is apparent that such acts of zealotry are limited to those whose motives are of the purest order, and who are moved by their sincere desires to restore the glory of God when it is publicly profaned. Zealotry is not for every man.

This is a most timely lesson. There are many members of the Jewish people today who are stirred by feelings of righteous indignation to protest actions and statements that, to them, seem blasphemous, immoral, or just plain wrong. But they dare not act, and certainly not act violently, against those actions or statements. They must first be certain that their motives are as pure and authentic as were the motives of Pinchas, Elijah, and Matityahu. And none among us can be so certain of our motives!

continued on next page...



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Our times call for a different approach entirely. Today, we must conform to an almost opposite Torah value; namely, tolerance.

Tolerance is preferable to zealotry. This is a lesson which can be found in the very text which tells of Pinchas' zealotry. After he commits his violent act, the Almighty concludes His statement of approval with the gift of "My covenant of peace." Many of our commentaries, notably that of the Netziv, emphasize that this covenant was given to Pinchas as a kind of corrective, as a way of demonstrating that, although zealotry is sometimes warranted, the ultimate Jewish value is peace.

For individuals who are sincerely motivated to be zealous, there is a helpful perspective which is recommended. That perspective encourages us to find holiness buried within heresy, and sanctity somewhere in the midst of sin. When human faults can be seen as transient aberrations which cloud so much that is good and noble, zealotry fades into the background, and kindness and compassion prevail.

This perspective is expressed so eloquently in the poetic words of Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, in his brief collection, *Midot*

HaRayah, page 84. I am indebted to my good friend, Yaakov Dovid Schulman, himself an eloquent and poetic soul, for providing me with a translation of this passage:

Tolerance:

When tolerance of points of view comes from a heart that is pure and cleansed of all evil, that tolerance is not liable to chill the flame of holy feelings containing simple faith—which is the source of all life. Instead, that tolerance broadens and magnifies the foundation of heaven-directed fervor.

Tolerance is armed with a very great faith. Ultimately, it realizes the complete impossibility of a soul being emptied of all holy life. This is because the life of the living God fills all life. And so, even where actions come out in a destructive fashion, where points of view collide into heresy, there still must be—in the midst of the heart, in the depth of the soul—the living light of hidden holiness. And this is apparent in the good aspects that we find in many corners, even on those ravaged avenues touched by heresy and corroded by doubt.

From the midst of this great, holy knowledge and faith comes tolerance, which encircles everything with a thread of kindness.

"I will assemble Jacob, all of you!" (Micah 2:12)

Words to remember, especially today. ■

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