



THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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Safeguards Against Extremism

A story with important implications for our own times is referred to in the opening passage of this week's Torah portion, *Pinchas* (Numbers 25:10-30:1).

The background to the story is described in detail in last week's Torah portion, *Balak* (see Numbers 25:1-9). It is a sad tale, a shameful tale, but unfortunately a true tale.

It is a blatant description of decadence and grave immorality. The Israelites are attracted to the daughters of Moab. They join them in festive offerings to the gods of Moab, chief of whom was the *Baal Peor*, thus angering the Lord.

Suddenly, an Israelite man intimately embraces a Midianite woman in public; indeed, in the very presence of Moshe and the entire assembly. All are shocked, paralyzed, tearful.

Pinchas son of Elazar, son of Aharon the Kohen, sees the scene, and immediately, spontaneously, leaps up, spear in hand, and fatally pierces the bodies of both the Israelite man and the woman.

Things quiet down and thus concludes last week's narrative.

This Shabbat, as we open our *Chumashim*,

we discover the sequel to last week's disastrous drama. We become informed that the Lord spoke to Moshe with words of praise for Pinchas for having removed His wrath from the Children of Israel. The Lord affirms:

"Therefore, proclaim that I grant him My Covenant—peace!"

How are we to react to the story and to the sequel? Some of us may feel compelled to applaud Pinchas for his bravery and holy zealotry in defense of the Almighty and the honor of His people. Others might find his zealotry excessive and perhaps unduly impulsive.

Still others might adopt the reaction described in the Jerusalem Talmud (*Sanhedrin* chapter 9, paragraph 7); "Some say that zealots are permitted to attack those who consort with Aramean women; but we are taught that this is not the policy of the Sages and that Pinchas acted against the will of the Sages. Rabbi Judah ben Pazi insisted that the Sages sought to excommunicate Pinchas but were prevented by the instantaneous intervention of the Holy Spirit granting him, and his descendants, the eternal covenant of priestly peace."

The Babylonian Talmud (*Sanhedrin* 82a) delves into this issue at some length. I find this Talmudic passage to be particularly relevant to our times. This is because what biblical and rabbinic sources call *kanaut*, zealotry, is awfully close to what we call extremism. Thus, whatever the Talmud can teach us about ways to safeguard against zealotry can help us modify, and eventually control, extremism, whether it be left-wing extremism

or right-wing extremism, in political affairs or in religious ideology.

The voice of several of the “safeguards” against illegitimate zealotry in the Talmudic passage just mentioned is the great second century sage, known simply as “Rav”. He outlines three such safeguards:

The would-be zealot must be absolutely confident that his zealous intentions conform to *halacha*. That is, that they are consistent with the standards of justice and have judicial precedent. In Pinchas’ case, “*ra’ah maaseh v’nizkar halacha*”, he observed an act, and recalled a halachic precedent.”

That he has no personal bias against the offenders that would motivate his zealotry, that his motives were pure, unselfish, and unprejudiced.

That he acts spontaneously, without prior consultation with some neutral expert advisor. After all, “*ha’ba l’himalech ein morin lo*”, had he consulted with an authority he would have been advised NOT to do so.”

Only if these three conditions are met can he be excused and even complimented for his zealous outburst.

There is a fourth condition which can justify zealotry, a condition which I would describe as “cultural context”. It is enunciated by one of the supreme halachic authorities of the previous century, known as the Chazon Ish, Rav Avraham Yeshaya Kerelitz, zt”l, in his discussion of the laws of ritual slaughter. He refers to a Talmudic ruling which condones very severe punishment for one who violates certain Torah prohibitions. He notes that such harsh punishments could only be applied in times when the cultural context was one of universal piety and faithful commitment to all halachic restrictions. Then the outlier,

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as part of a minute minority, could be held accountable for his failure to conform to society at large. In our times, argues the Chazon Ish, when such levels of piety and meticulous Torah observance are, to say the least, not the norm at all, but all sorts of deviant behaviors are tolerated and even advocated, the individual who does not conform cannot be punished so harshly. Such individuals are simply conforming to the norms of their environment and are swept away by powerful cultural influences, and have in effect been “brainwashed”. Extremist actions against those with whom we may disagree cannot be justified in such cultural contexts. Zealots

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cannot take rash measures against “sinners” in a society where sin is just an “alternative lifestyle”.

So much for constraints on extremism. Let me conclude with some of the statements made by Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohen Kook, *zt”l*, about the deleterious effects that extremism has had upon the Jewish people during the entire course of our history. These statements are to be found in a very early book of Rav Kook’s, only recently finally published. The work is entitled *L’Nevuchei HaDor (For the Perplexed of the Generation)*. It is published by *Yediot Acharonot* and has stimulated much interest, discussion, and controversy. Here is his assertion, translated to the best of my ability: “The tendency toward extremism has caused pain to every beneficent sector—extremism in education and in actions, and also extremism in ideologies... We have reached a level of extremism that is sufficiently extreme to assert dogmas and policies which are clearly refutable from every perspective.”

Writing well over a hundred years ago, he is clearly referring to positions held then, and still not relinquished today, against the nationalist hopes and goals advocated by the Zionist movements. He insists that nationalism and patriotism are not at all inconsistent with our religious values and tradition, that we are a nation and not just a religion.

As in all of Rav Kook’s writings, there are sparks of prophecy that one can recognize and should at least contemplate, consider, and debate. One thing is for sure; extremism is not always beneficial. It must be tempered, controlled, and redirected toward cooperation and mutual understanding. We all must share in the Almighty’s gift to Pinchas—His covenant of *SHALOM!* ■



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