

Vengeance Isn't Jewish Pinchas - The Jewish Advocate

Along with many Jews around the world, I've spent the past few weeks in an anxious state of unknowing. We've watched the news coverage of the situation in Israel. We have come together as a community for vigils, praying that the three kidnapped boys would be returned home safely. Upon learning the devastating news of their murder, I was shocked - and I know that I was not the only one. We had hoped for - expected even - the impossible; we wanted those boys home alive, with their families. And in response to the tragedy, we did the only thing we could: we prayed.

Some other responses were noteworthy. The parents of the murdered boys have demonstrated a model of strength, compassion, and love. The Israeli government showed a remarkable understanding of the human psyche by gathering the night before the funerals, debating their options, and ultimately delaying action until their own heated tempers cooled and the nation mourned.

Then came the news that a Palestinian teenager, Muhammed Abu Khdeir, had been kidnapped and burned alive in Jerusalem. For a moment it was unclear who was responsible, but news came quickly that the perpetrators were extremist Jews - and the entire Jewish people hung our heads in shame. It is not, in any way, a Jewish response. Rabbi Daniel Landes, Director of the Pardes Institute in Jerusalem, wrote¹, "there is no greater *Hilul HaShem* [disgrace of God's name] than a charred corpse of an innocent, murdered by Torah inspiration. The tragedy of the innocent boys murdered by terrorists will haunt us for a long time. But it will not destroy us. Jewish revenge killings will."

Along with religious communities around the world, Israel's government also expressed outrage at this horrific act. Moshe Ya'alon, Israel's defense minister, strongly condemned the murder, saying "I am embarrassed and horrified at the cruel murder of the young Muhammed Abu Khdeir. These debased murderers don't represent the Jewish people or its values, and they must be treated as terrorists."²

This week's Torah portion, Pinchas, opens in the middle of a tragic and familiar story. Last week's parasha ended on a down note, atypical of most Torah portions. In the final chapter last week, we read about a revenge killing by Pinchas, who watched an Israelite have forbidden relations with a Midianite woman. Taking the law into his own hands, Pinchas killed them both.

Why doesn't parashat Pinchas, which encompasses the aftermath of that deed, also contain the murderous action itself? Because once the terrible act was over and done, the focus needed to be

¹ <http://www.haaretz.com/mobile/.premium-1.603044?v=A2FD701ED7DDB145B395B169D1D734A6>

² <http://www.timesofisrael.com/defense-minister-calls-for-jewish-killers-to-be-treated-as-terrorists/>

on rebuilding and peacemaking. The rabbis were so uncomfortable with the act of vengeance by Pinchas that many posited that Moses and the other Israelite leaders wanted to excommunicate him. This was prevented by a divine decree that declared Pinchas had acted on God's behalf. Vigilante justice - in particular revenge killings - have no place in Judaism; it was only by God's intervention that Pinchas was spared.

In God's pronouncement that Pinchas not be punished, God states that Pinchas has been granted "בריתי שלום", "My covenant of peace". This is a unique covenant within the Chumash - a swift, unsubtle reminder that God's plan is peace, not vengeance. God desires passionate belief, but not when it leads to murder.

Pinchas, son of Eleazer, grandson of Aaron, had forgotten the values of his people and his family. His grandfather, Aaron was known as a "*rodef shalom*", a pursuer of peace. When Aaron died, he was mourned by ALL the House of Israel (Numbers 20:29), an honor not even given to Moses, because he was the quintessential lover of peace. Midrash teaches that he was beloved by everyone; having saved people's marriages, made peace between quarreling neighbors, and smoothed over disputes between business partners. Perhaps it was on Aaron's merit that God interceded on Pinchas's behalf, knowing that he was rooted in peaceful values, even if he had stepped off the path of peace.

It is worth noting that the Torah goes out of its way to name both victims, the Israelite man (Zimri son of Salu) and Midianite woman (Cozbi daughter of Zur). Generally, we prefer not to embarrass those who have sinned. Perhaps this is the Torah's way of bringing peace back to them, acknowledging that although they did wrong, they also did not deserve their fate. It is incumbent upon us to remember their names, so that we do not repeat their mistakes - but more importantly, so that we do not repeat that of Pinchas.

It is said that a society should be judged "not by the crimes of a few, but by how that society deals with those crimes, condemns them, and takes action." So it is with the murdered teens in Israel - not the three, but all four. Just as we must always remember the names Naftali Frankel, Gil-ad Sha'ar, and Eyal Yifrach, we must also remember and honor the memory of Muhammed Abu Khdeir. Four boys - not three - were killed by religious zealots debasing God's word; it is incumbent upon us to ensure that God's message is not one of murder but of righteousness and peace. Just as the search for the Israeli teens brought together secular and religious Jews, may the outcome of these crimes bring together peace-loving people across the world.