

Pinchas - July 30, 2016

As individuals, there are many things we're passionate about. Some of us are voracious readers, carrying a book or Kindle with us wherever we go. Others are dedicated to particular charitable causes, or are deeply committed to specific mitzvot, like visiting the sick or showing up at shiva houses. Those with a more political bent have been drinking from a veritable firehose over the past two weeks; it's been quite a busy 10 days for those folks, between watching convention coverage from both parties, devouring news analysis, and pontificating about their candidate's views on Facebook to anyone who will listen.

But most of us aren't particularly zealous about any of these things. For the vast majority of people, the closest we come to extremism is that furious feeling of "I-can't-understand-why- you-don't-agree-with-me!" upon encountering someone with a different view. Usually on the Internet.

How on earth did we get offended before the Internet? This week's parashah helps us learn just that, by providing two very different stories of how people react to others who have offended them.

The first story actually begins as last week's parashah concludes - timing which is noteworthy in and of itself. Had we the opportunity to read it in its entirety, in one sitting, we would be more likely to remember it, and perhaps learn from it. The fact that we read the action last week and the response this week tells us that the rabbis would prefer us not use this story as a model for our behavior.

This is the story of Pinchas. The background is that the Israelites have spiritually lost their way; they've assimilated into the surrounding culture, mixing intimately with the

Moabite people. Rashi tells us that the Moabite women would seduce them, and mid-seduction would pull out their idols hidden within their robes, and insist that the Israelite men bow down to their idols. The Israelites quickly gave up on their faith and their values, and followed after their temporary physical desires.

And so God tells Moses to kill all the idol worshipers. Amid the killing frenzy, a man comes forward - in front of Moses and all the People - and brings with him a Midianite woman. Midianite, not Moabite - yes a foreigner, but not one of the people who were seducing the Israelites in both body and mind. Blinded by rage and emotionally wound-up, Pinchas takes matters into his own hands, spearing both the Israelite man and the Midianite woman through the stomach and killing them both.

Last week's parashah tell us that because of this action, the plague (God's punishment) was halted. Our reading *this* week begins with the search for an explanation as to why Pinchas's rash, irrational, and violent action halted the plague and earned him a permanent place in the Priesthood. It almost seems like God has rewarded him for being a vigilante and committing murder.

One explanation requires us to look at Pinchas's ancestry. We are told that Pinchas is Aaron's grandson (more specifically, that he is the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron). Aaron, as we know, is Moses's brother - the child of Yocheved, the Egyptian-born granddaughter of Levi, one of Jacob's 12 sons.

We trace his lineage because it is Levi (Pinchas's great-great-great-great grandfather) who holds the key to unraveling the mystery. Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz points to three episodes in the Torah where Levi or his descendents are described as impulsive, hot-headed, or religious zealots. First, Levi himself reacts with fury to the rape of his sister Dina; breaking with most of his siblings, he and Shimon enact revenge, killing all

the men in the perpetrator's town. Ultimately, their bad behavior inspires their brothers to disregard their own values, and they too participate by taking women captive and stealing property. Even when Levi and Shimon are castigated by their father, they remain indignant, saying: "Should our sister be treated as a prostitute?"

Later, we see that their reputation has stayed with them even to the end of their father's life. As he lays dying, Jacob calls his children together to bless them. Jacob's blessing for Levi and Shimon is:

Shimon and Levi are a pair;
 Their weapons are tools of lawlessness
 Let not my person be included in their council.
 Let not my being be counted in their assembly.
 For when angry, they slay men
 And when pleased, they maim oxen.
 Cursed by their anger so fierce,
 And their wrath so relentless.
 I will divide them in Jacob
 Scatter them in Israel. (Gen. 49:5)

The final example is given about the *descendants* of Levi - his *house* - and comes much later, after the incident with the Golden Calf. When Moses is told by God to kill those that participated in the idol worship, he calls out, "Whoever is for God, join me!" (Ex. 32:26) The Levites don't hesitate - they eagerly join in the bloodbath. Rabbi Steinsaltz writes, "Somewhat astoundingly, the plain meaning of this is that the tribe of Levi is praised for having killed people. To be sure, it was all done out of righteous zeal and for the sake of Heaven - but the fact remains that they are praised for a murderous rampage."

Every parent hopes that, through nature and nurture, they pass down to their children only their best traits; and every parents knows that this is a near-impossibility. Thus, it is not surprising that Levi passed his impulsiveness and grandiosity down through the generations. In fact, it is more surprising that Levi's grandson, Aaron, was the high priest - a man known for pursuing peace - while the rest of his tribe was hot-headed and war-like.

In light of that, we return to the question of God's reaction to Pinchas's actions; through this lens, we must reconsider whether eternal priesthood was actually a reward for Pinchas, or more akin to a punishment.

Instead, I'd like to suggest that it was neither a reward nor a punishment, but rather a natural consequence of Levi's and his descendants' tendencies toward violence. When a student sits in the back of the classroom, goofs off with their classmates, and fails to pay attention, some teachers might choose to punish him or her. Others, though, might be inclined to remove the troublemaker from problematic environment - that is, to reassign that student's seat, bringing him or her closer to the the teacher. Likewise, by granting Pinchas eternal priesthood, God is moving Pinchas's seat, and redirecting Pinchas's violent tendencies away from people and toward ritual sacrifice. This change prevents him from being part of the army when the Israelites go to war, and ensures that God can more tightly control Pinchas's daily life, ensuring that he will encounter holiness, sanctity, and blessings every day of his life.

So this permanent appointment to the priesthood is neither punishment nor reward; rather, it is an appropriate consequence for someone who cannot control his own impulses.

Today's parashah affords us a fascinating contrast with the story of Pinchas. For much of the Torah, women are not the *subject* of their story, but rather an *object* of someone else's - that is, they are rarely the ones taking action, and often the ones upon whom action is taken. Consider the two stories I've already mentioned, Pinchas and Levi; in each, the women who are mentioned (Dina and the Midianite woman) are people *to whom things happen*. This is a common theme in the Torah, and in fact it is a common criticism of literature and other forms of storytelling even today - that women not the agents of their own destiny.

This cannot be said of Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah - collectively referred to as B'not Tzelofechad, the daughters of a man named Tzelofechad. Although given that the women are the protagonists of the tale, it's arguable that it's merely for brevity that Tzelofechad isn't referenced as "Av Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah." In fact, the names of these five women are listed not once but twice in our parashah - first in the census, and then later when describing their bravery.

Despite being the source of the name B'not Tzelofechad, the only action undertaken by Tzelofechad in the parashah is dying with inheritable property. As the Israelites are dividing up the inheritance, the five women find themselves cut out completely; their father is dead (as presumably is their mother), and they have no brothers - thus, there is no one to inherit their father's land, since at this point in Biblical times, rules of inheritance ignored daughters. Sadly, this isn't as shocking as we might like it to be - it wasn't until 1850 (CE) that Iceland became the first country in the world to institute unconditional equal inheritance laws for women.

Instead of accepting circumstances as out of their control, the women went before Moses, Eleazar the priest (as it happens, Pinchas's father), the chieftains, and the whole assembly, AT THE TENT OF MEETING (meaning in front of God as well). They accompanied this unprecedented action with a moving statement:

“Our father died in the wilderness. He was not one of the faction, Korah's faction, which banded together against the Lord; --- but died for his own sin; and he has left no sons. Let not our father's name be lost to his clan just because he had no son! Give us a holding among our father's kinmen!”

They calmly and rationally stated the problem, argued for a solution, and rebuffed any potential argument. Moshe brought the case to God... and God agreed with the women. It was a precedent-setting request - and was one of the first instances of a glass ceiling being shattered.

Where Pinchas was reactive - and reactionary - the five sisters were proactive; where he acted impulsively, they demonstrated intentionality and thoughtfulness. Like his ancestors before him, Pinchas had no trust or love for the legal system, nor for God's justice; he enacted swift, brutal retribution with his own hands, and God dealt with him like a misbehaving child. Faced with a situation in which they were disenfranchised, B'not Tzelofechad worked within the established framework of the law, and experienced success even with the most important judge of all.

The message is clear: Judaism values thoughtful action over brash behavior. God knows that sometimes our passions get the best of us - but that doesn't mean God condones vigilantism.

There is one other connection between these two stories that's worth sharing.

Following the Pinchas story and God's "covenant of peace," the Torah actually states names of the man and woman that he killed. The Israelite man was Zimri son of Salu, and the woman was Cozbi daughter of Zur. I say their names out loud because I can - it's important for us to note that the Torah finds it fit to make sure we know who they were.

This contrasts greatly against an incident from chapter 15 of B'midbar, which we read a few weeks ago. In this parashah, we heard the story of a man who gathered wood on Shabbat and was stoned to death for his sin. Unlike with Zimri and Cozbi, the Torah chooses not to reveal his name; however, Rabbi Akiva, in the Talmud, tells us that this was Tzelofechad - that this was the incident that rendered Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah fatherless. Rabbi Akiva, after revealing the identity of the deceased, is then rebuked by Rabbi Yehudah ben Betera for doing so; had the Torah wanted us to know it was him, Yehudah ben Betera argues, it would have named him. So who are we to shame him in his death?

What makes these situations different?

The same distinction that we noticed between Pinchas and the five sisters is evident here, as well. Tradition tells us that within the story of the wood-gatherer are two moments of pause - two moments to stop, assess the situation, and act with forethought in order to allow for a better outcome. Rashi tells us that first, the people who found him gathering wood (and breaking Shabbat) warned him that he was committing a capital offense. He insisted on continuing, even though he had been

informed. This, Rashi says, satisfies the halachic requirement that one is not subject to the death penalty unless he ignores a warning and his act is seen by two witnesses. After the man refused to stop, the witnesses brought him to כל-העדעה, the entire assembly - the sages who served as Moses's court.

The Torah text tells us that he was placed into custody, for it had not yet been specified what should be done to him. No one acted rashly, the rule of law was followed (even as it was still being established), and he was given a fair trial.

With that level of thoughtfulness, the Torah tells us neither his name, nor the names of the people who - upon God's command - took him outside the camp and stoned him to death.

In the other situation, both the killer, Pinchas, and those that he killed, Zimri and Cozi, should have been able to be anonymous. Instead, the frenzied, chaotic scene that Pinchas helped create meant that he was not allowed to slink into anonymity; instead, he had to take responsibility for his actions. Deciding to play judge, jury, and executioner does not afford you the right to walk away from your actions unscathed. Because of this, we must remember his name, to avoid duplicating his mistake, and the names of his victims, lest we create more like them.

Recently, we've seen a few studies in the news that examine the ever-growing polarization of our news consumption. We each live in our own private echo chamber, rarely encountering people who disagree with us, unable or unwilling to allow our opinions to be swayed. With the rise of social media came the ability to easily filter out anything we don't like or agree with - further broadening the distance between each person's individual bubble, and giving rise to the ability to demonize the "other side" with fewer and fewer consequences. With all this strife as our daily backdrop, it is all too easy to find ourselves thinking more like Pinchas and less like the thoughtful sisters (who happen to share Tzelofechad as a father).

Those of you who remember a time pre-Internet - when you had to disagree with someone face-to-face - may recall that, for the most part, there was a feeling of mutual respect for both sides. Even if you disagreed with someone else's views, there was a good chance that you felt their beliefs came from a place of good intentions. This is unfortunately no longer the case; spending so much time in our bubble has given rise to the "other-ization" of anyone who doesn't agree with us - even if just on the fine print. And it is admittedly hard to assume genuinely good intentions on behalf of people with whom we disagree.

But just as the Israelites who came across Tzelofechad sinning in the wilderness paused twice to assess the situation, we too would benefit from taking a step back, considering the situation, and granting the benefit of the doubt to those we see as "other." Many of us see ourselves as change agents, but this week's parashah gives us two models for how to go about this: do we want to be Pinchas, or do we want to be Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tirzah? The choice is up to each of us - but it makes all the difference in the world.

Shabbat Shalom.