

A Priestly Coming of Age

A D'var Torah on *Parashat Pinchas* (Numbers 25:10 – 30:1)

By Marc Goodman

*“Pinchas ... heisheev et-chamatee mei-al b'nei-Yisrael
b'kan'o et-kin'atee b'tocham....”*

*“Phinehas ... turned My anger away from the Israelites by
displaying among them his passion for Me....”*

Parashat Pinchas – a Summary

Parashat Pinchas is lengthy and wide-ranging. It begins with God telling Moses that Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, staved off a plague that killed 24,000 in the camp when he impaled an Israelite man and a Midianite woman. (The impalement event, described in *Parashat Balak*, occurred at Shittim where the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women and making sacrifices to their god, Baal-peor.) God promises [the descendents of] Pinchas the priesthood for all times as a reward for his zealotry.

Parashat Pinchas informs us that the impaled Israelite was the son of a Simeonite chieftain and that the Midianite woman was the daughter of a Midianite tribal head. God instructs Moses to assail and defeat the Midianites because of the Baal-peor apostasy and the Midianite woman.

The parashah then describes a census of those 20 years of age and older (in preparation for war against Midian). At the conclusion of the census it points out that, except for Joshua and Caleb, none of those counted at Sinai (40 years earlier) were also included in the current census, because God had declared that they should die in the wilderness. Following the census God instructs Moses to allow the transfer of hereditary holdings to women in case there is no son.

God then tells Moses that he is to ascend the heights of Abarim to view the promised land, but that he will not enter the land because of his disobedience concerning the Waters of Meribath-kadesh in the wilderness of Zin. God instructs Moses to transfer some of his authority to Joshua and to cause Joshua to appear before Eleazar the priest for ordination, and the parasha then describes the ordination. The parashah concludes with a detailed description of the sacrificial rituals for all festivals.

The Pinchas Episode

The parashah is named for Pinchas because of its connection to the Pinchas Episode, which consists of the following sequence of events:

1. While camped at Shittim, the people sin against God by whoring with the Moabite women and sacrificing to their god, Baal-peor.

2. God sends a plague to punish the people.
3. God tells Moses to publicly impale all of the leaders to end the plague.
4. As Moses is telling the judges to slay all of the guilty, an Israelite man and a Midianite woman appear in full sight of the congregation of Israel at the Tent of Meeting.
5. Pinchas zealously impales the Israelite man and the Midianite woman.
6. The plague ends after the death of 24,000 in the camp.
7. God tells Moses that Pinchas staved off the plague by his zealous action and will be rewarded with a pact of friendship and the priesthood in perpetuity.

The Pinchas Episode raises some questions.

- All but the last event are described in *Parashat Balak*. Why did the Rabbis begin a new parashah in the midst of the Pinchas Episode?
- God originally demanded the death penalty for all of the leaders, but was satisfied with the execution of a single Israelite and a single Midianite woman. Why did God temper His justice?

These questions may appear to be unrelated, but their answers suggest a strong connection between them.

God's Reward to Pinchas

Parashat Pinchas begins with the statement that God will reward Pinchas with the priesthood forever because he saved the people from the plague by publicly displaying his zeal for God in front of the people. By beginning the parashah with this statement, the Rabbis de-emphasized the actual deed by not including it in the parashah along with the description of the reward. They instead emphasized that Pinchas was rewarded for saving the Israelites from God's wrath by his zeal for God.¹ By emphasizing the zeal of Pinchas as the justification for his descendents' hereditary claim to the priesthood, the Rabbis also emphasized that God demands that the priests exercise zeal in the performance of their priestly duties.

Tempered Justice

God told Moses to publicly slay the leaders for the people's sins against God. The leaders would have been the chiefs, who in tribal society would have borne responsibility for the behavior of those under them. Moses instructed the judges of Israel to kill those who bound themselves to Baal-peor. But weren't the judges that Moses instructed to kill the sinners, the very leaders that God told Moses to kill?

¹ It may be that the Rabbis were appalled by the actual deed and wanted to separate it from the very significant reward.

There appears to be a conflict between God and Moses concerning responsibility and consequences. God appears to say that the leaders should forfeit their lives to redeem Israel for its sins against God. Moses' instructions to the judges (leaders) make it appear that their responsibility is not to forfeit their lives, but rather to identify and kill the guilty individuals. God says that the people as a whole are responsible for their sins and their leaders must bear the consequences. Moses says that the individuals who sinned are responsible, and they must individually bear the consequences.

Of course we will never know what would have happened if the judges had carried out Moses' instructions, because Pinchas resolved the conflict. God's tempered judgment is actually a transfer of responsibility for sins of the people against God from the tribal leaders, not to individuals, but to the priests. The priests would perform the ritual mitzvot as zealous surrogates for Israel before God.²

Reward and Responsibility

Not only was the perpetual priesthood God's reward to Pinchas for his zeal, it was God's assignment to the priests the zealous responsibility for the people before God.

² The High Priest would enter the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur with a rope tied around his waist. The purpose of the rope was to allow his dead body to be retrieved if he didn't perform his duties with the proper zeal.