

Pinchas – Shabbat 12 July 2015

Our portion this week begins where last week's portion left off. The story so far... Zimri, head of the tribe of Shimon, takes Kozbi, the Moabite princess into his tent. A brazen act of infidelity is committed in the presence of all Israel. Pinchas stands up whilst everybody else sits still. He takes a spear and he kills both of the perpetrators of the crime in front of all Israel.

At the outset of our Sedra, Pinchas receives all the accolades from God. "He has turned away My wrath from the Children of Israel, and behold I will grant him My covenant of peace"- Here comes the \$64,000 question. The Torah speaks of "Loving your neighbour as yourself"- and it also speaks about the need to pursue peace. Yet Pinchas after witnessing this shameful act in the eyes of all Israel, without waiting to consult with contemporary leaders, in an act of pure zealotry kills one of his own brethren, a leader of the tribe of Shimon. Despite all this, God did not merely forgive Pinchas, but declared that Pinchas had done the right thing and rewarded him for his righteous indignation? Furthermore, what are we to learn from this, that it is alright to use random acts of violence when the Torah is violated?

The Talmud records an opinion of Rebbi Bar Pezi that this act was indeed opposed by the sages in his generation and that he should have been excommunicated had not a Divine voice resounded praising Pinchas for his deed. So why should Pinchas be rewarded?

The answer is that it was not because of anger or intolerance that Pinchas took their lives, but he acted on the principle that the existence and the welfare of the entire community is of greater consequence than the individual. If the perpetrators of the crime been allowed to get away unpunished, it would have meant the break up of the Jewish people. Pinchas had a long term view. He knew the future was dependant on this one deed.

The methods of Pinchas are entirely closed to us. The idea that one could actually kill a person for the sake of Heaven is merely a hypothetical concept. However the message is still there; that one needs to be a wise guy to understand the consequences of ones actions and where they will lead.