

Parshat Pinchas – Shabbat Mevorchim 30 July 2016

When I think of this weeks Sedra of Pinchas I am always torn, I have mixed feelings. Last week, Pinchas together with B'nai Yisrael have witnessed an act of gross indecency in full view of everyone.

Everybody is stunned. What do you do? How do you react when the Torah explicitly forbids an immoral act? Yet these two individuals brazenly go against everything for which the Torah stands?

Do you, on one extreme join in? Do you ignore it? Maybe it will go away, but then again by my overlooking it, could it be interpreted as a quiet acquiescence of something that is wrong? Or do you do something to put a stop to it?

This was the dilemma in which Moses, the leader par excellence of the Children of Israel found himself. Whilst he and others are thinking about what ought to be done, Pinchas takes action, he takes a spear in his hand and he kills the two perpetrators of the immoral act. I think he has made it clear that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable.

That is the end of last weeks Sedra.

The story is left in suspended animation until the start of our Sedra.

Did he do the right thing? Was he appropriate in his reaction to the architects of these crimes? Was he correct to have taken the law into his own hands?

So you read the Torahs response to the actions of Pinchas. He receives all the accolades. He is given the covenant of peace and he and his descendants are given the covenant of priesthood.

Why? - Because he was zealous for G-d.

On the surface of things Pinchas did well, he has taken the initiative. In the famous words of Ethics of our Fathers...In a place where there is no man, stand up and be the man. In this situation, it is Pinchas who has been there and stood up for what is right. He has fought G-d's war through an act of violence!!

I remember a few years ago whilst studying in Yeshivah in Jerusalem, the Ramot road passed within a mile of the Yeshivah.

For those people who do not know, there are areas where on Shabbat - cars do not go. The reason is that they are mainly places where religious Jews live and it would be wrong to drive through those areas on Shabbat.

However, there was a road that by-passed the area and went to the town of Ramot, on the outskirts of Yerushalayim.

Every Shabbat; cars used to go past this road - and a group of people would walk from Meah Shearim dressed in their golden bekishers and throw stones at the cars travelling on the road below. And they would scream out Shabbes!! Shabbes!!

This would happen every Shabbat afternoon and since I was a young adventurous Yeshivah bachur on a few occasions I would come to watch the action.

The police were out in full.

Were they right in what they used to do?

I suppose that-if you were to read this week's Sedra peripherally, you could maybe read into this that the Torah permits such actions from Pinchas.

It's the same situation, people are breaking Hashem's Torah and we've got to do something about it ... If not, then we are in danger of a general watering down of Torah, a break up of Judaism in Jerusalem. Someone's got to stand up and speak out and do something about it. And that man is a Pinchas.

So is there a place for zealotry today of the nature of a Pinchas? Can one justify the use of violence to register your disapproval?

In the Haftarah which is read if Pinchas occurs before 17th Tamuz- so it's not read this year. We read about Elijah who tried to uproot idolatry in Israel and had murdered some of the followers of Baal - in zealousness for G-d.

And he runs away

He suddenly finds himself transported to a cave in Har Choreb - (which is Mount Sinai where the Torah was given)

And G-d is passing through.

And there he experiences a fierce wind which tears through the mountain- but Hashem is not to be found in the wind.

And after the wind an earthquake

Hashem is not to be found in the earthquake

Then after the earthquake - fire

Hashem is not to be found in the fire

Then after that came the *Kol demamah dakah*

A delicate whisper.

And that is where Hashem is to be found.

So what is the message?

Hashem is telling Elijah that it's in the calmness and forethought where appropriate action is to be found. It's not in the violence of an earthquake or in the hot headedness of a fire.

So we come back to Pinchas, his actions were appropriate for that moment, that place in time and by that person of the stature of Pinchas, but not for the future.

It is for that reason that even though Pinchas is praised, in our very same sedra he is passed over for the leadership of the next generation by Joshua. Why was that? Because there is no justification to use violence as a means to bringing people closer to Hashem.

Shabbat shalom