



## **Pinhas, A Guide For Zealots, Misguided and Otherwise**

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Pinhas, the mighty zealot, his image and his name have inspired religious zealots for thousands of years. We all are familiar with his story.

As the Parasha relates, the daughters of Midian flock down on the Israeli camp with the intent to seduce Israeli men, weakening the Israeli resolve to attack their country. The Midianite women introduce the Israeli men to more than mere sexual pleasure. They introduce the men to Midianite idol worship.

As bad as things have become, one of the leading officials of the tribe of Shimon, Zimri Ben Salu succumbs to temptation and, without a bit of shame for his actions, brings a Midianite princess into his own tent for purposes of immorality. Pinhas, the son of Eliezer, the High Priest, is outraged by such a flagrant disregard of Torah law forbidding these unions.

Without taking any counsel with from his father, the High Priest or from his Uncle Moshe Rabbeynu, Pinhas enters into Zimri's tent while he is in the middle of having intimate relations with the Midianite princess, as pierces both of them together with a spear, killing them.

HaShem was impressed with Pinhas's act of zeal and is appeased from his anger towards Benei Yisrael. As a reward for his action, Pinhas is to be given the High Priesthood after his father Eliezer.

This story seems to be rather straightforward. It appears to be teaching us a lesson that zeal for HaShem sometimes requires of us acts of bloodshed against the arrogant blasphemer. We have to be willing to kill and be killed, all for the honor of HaShem. This is the pshat (simple meaning). Yet, is this really the true lesson?

It appears clear from the story that Zimri committed a great sin before HaShem and that he was punished by Pinhas. However, as with all things in our holy Torah, not everything is actually according to the pshat that we see with our eyes.



In his brilliant Torah commentary, the "Mei Shiluah" (Vol. 1, Pinhas, page 164), the Hasidic master Rabbi Mordechai Yosef of Izbitzia writes, "do not allow it to enter your mind, G-d forbid, that Zimri was a no'ef (sexual sinner), G-d forbid, because HaShem would not make a Parasha in Torah to be about a no'ef. Rather, there is a great secret in this."

According to the "Mei Shiluah" Zimri was a righteous man who had full control over sexual temptations. How then did he come to act as he did with Cozbi, the Midianite princess? Quoting the holy writings of the Ari'zal, the "Mei Shiluah" answers that Zimri recognized her as being his true soul mate! He was thus doing what he believed was what HaShem wanted from him. Moreover, it was Pinhas who was mistaken in not recognizing this! According to the "Mei Shiluah" HaShem only rewarded Pinhas because Pinhas believed he was doing the right thing, although this might not be true.

Indeed, according to Halakha (Jewish Law) if Zimri were to have fought back and killed Pinhas, he would have been legally exempt from any form of punishment. For Zimri to have killed Pinhas would have been an act of self defense, one that even HaShem would have to justify! Even further, we must ask, where did Pinhas get legal justification for committing an act that we must define as a political assassination?

The act of Pinhas has been incorrectly used as justification for all types of religious zeal. Indeed, Pinhas did commit an act of murder. Under Torah Law, Pinhas's zeal was no justification for his behavior. If HaShem did not intervene, saying that Pinhas had turned away his wrath and would thus be rewarded with the Brit Shalom, Pinhas then would have been charged with murder and would most likely have faced the death penalty.

Therefore, Pinhas's act was the exception to the rule. His murder of Zimri is clearly defined as a unique act at a unique time. One is not supposed to learn from this episode a lesson that a Jewish zealot is one who sheds blood. We have learned from Jewish history how so called Jewish zealots have brought nothing but harm and havoc down upon the Jewish people.

The Gemara (Gitin 56a) relates the events that led to the destruction of Jerusalem in 68 c.e. It is clear from the records that a group of zealots, known as the Biryonim, were responsible for the destruction of the holy city and the deaths of over one million Jews. These misguided zealots followed their own zeal and their own mistaken interpretations of Torah instead of following the edicts of the Divinely inspired holy Rabbanim of the time.

The city of Jerusalem was well supplied for a very long siege against the Roman army. The Rabbanim, with Rabbi Yohanan Ben Zaccai at their head, prophetically saw, that the



Romans would be victorious if full war was waged. Following the age-old Torah lesson of how Ya'aqov Avinu dealt with Esau his brother, the Rabbanim wanted to enter negotiations with the Romans (Esau's descendants) to avoid a holocaust.

The Biryonim, on the other hand, refused to follow the advice and prophecy of our holy Rabbanim. Instead, the Biryonim zealots set fire to all of Jerusalem's food storage facilities. The result was wide spread famine. Tens of thousands of Jews died of starvation because of these misguided zealots and their arrogant disregard for Rabbinic authority.

With relationship to misguided violent zealots, there is a shocking Midrash recorded in Sefer Otzar HaMidrashim (Vol. 2 page 557) which explains why the Rabbanim of Temple times were terrified of the original followers of the false messiah Yeshu HaNotzri (yimah shmo).

The original Christians, the Midrash says, were a violent group of political agitators. Far from being a pacifistic saint, the historical Yeshu was a political terrorist and a man of wanton violence. This side of him even comes through the white washed version of him presented in the Christian Bible. I have written about this in detail in another place.

It appears that the Biryonim who caused the destruction of Jerusalem and the first century followers of Yeshu might have been one and the same group. Judging from a 2,000-year history of Christian violence against Jews and Torah, it should not be too hard for us to believe that, as it is said, "fruit does not fall far from the tree." Christianity was and is a religion of violence as was its founder Yeshu who is quoted as saying that he has come, not to bring peace, but a sword. Indeed, his sword caused the deaths of millions of Jews.

It is apparent, therefore, that in spite of the episode of Pinhas, violent Jew versus Jew religious zealotry is not the way of Torah. Granted, there are times when a Milkhemet Kodesh (holy war) is declared such as when conquering the land from the Caananites in the days of Yehoshua or years later in the Hanuka story. Yet, in these and all other legitimate episodes the enemy has always been dangerous Gentiles, never fellow Jews.

The Holy Zohar (Shimini 36b) relates that when the Benei Yisrael are evil in G-d's Eyes, He will indeed punish them by raising up an enemy against them, be it wild animals or even a Gentile army. Yet, the Zohar states emphatically that G-d never raises up a Jew against a fellow Jew, unless that Jew is a Tzadik (righteous). It is not the role of a regular Jew, the holy Zohar states, to act as a zealot of Divine punishment against a fellow Jew. The Tzadik is the exception, yet the type of Divine punishment that the Tzadik brings upon the unrighteous Jew does not include individual acts of violence.



What must be emphasized here is that the definition of a Tzadik, as is clear from all Torah literature, is one who is learned in all HaShem's Torah, pshat and sod and is scrupulously observant of all HaShem's mitzvot. A Tzadik does not live for himself; he lives for the collective sake of Benei Yisrael. Thus, the number of true Tzadikim, whom HaShem would use as His agents to punish wicked Jews, is truly small. I suggest that there are only 36 such individual Jews alive at any one time.

The role of a Tzadik is indeed to admonish his fellow Jews and to inspire them, one way or another to do teshuva (repentance). The Tzadik, like a Biblical prophet before him, serves as a standard of blessing to the Jewish people. If a Tzadik punishes a rasha (wicked) Jew, it is the rasha's own fault. A Tzadik may indeed curse a rasha and pray that G-d bring down upon him his appropriate punishment. Yet, never does a Tzadik act as an agent of physical violence.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, Tana and author of the Zohar serves us a prime example. When he exited his cave of refuge after having to hide there for twelve years from Roman persecution, he meets Yehuda Ben Gerim, the man responsible for informing on him to the Romans in the first place. Rabbi Shimon proclaims, "such as this still lives!" Rabbi Shimon gazes upon Ben Gerim and Ben Gerim falls dead on the spot! Such is the power of a Tzadik! Heaven on the other hand was not too impressed with Rabbi Shimon's actions. A Heavenly Voice proclaimed that he return to his cave for another year, rather than bring further destruction upon the wicked.

When there might arise among us holy Tzadikim of the likes of a Pinhas Ben Eliezer or of a Rabbi Shimon Bar Yohai, then maybe there will be a place for violent religious zeal. Yet, who among our generation can we claim to be on that level? Indeed we have those holy Rabbanim today who are Tzadikim and yet in spite of all the temptations they face everyday to punish a secular, hostile to Torah Israeli public, the most any Rabbi has ever done is to condemn the wicked and pray for their fall. No act of political violence has ever been suggested by them, performed by them nor condoned by them.

If our Torah leaders, who are the Tzadikim and (according to the Holy Zohar) the only ones with authority to punish the wicked, do so only through the form of public outcry and prayer, then this must serve as an example and directive to us how to act.

There is no place for political violence or assassinations in Torah Judaism. Indeed, when Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was murdered, HaRav Ovadiah Yosef publicly declared the assassin to be a murderer under Torah Law and subject to the Torah death penalty. The assassin was by no means a Tzadik and, therefore, had no right or authority to act as he did. He embodied the spirit of the Second Temple Biryonim who brought death and destruction down upon all Israel. Let us not fall into the trap of being





Biryonim. Remember their descendants are the enemies of Jews and Israel to this day. Their way is not the Torah way.

Now as the political situation is most volatile, we G-d fearing Torah observant Jews must take a moment to pause and think how best we can serve our people. The situation in Israel and abroad among world Jewry is in a state of crises. Indeed, we need a Pinhas Ben Eliezer today; we need a thousand like him. Yet, today's zealots rather than be armed with a spear should instead be armed with the scroll, i.e., the Torah scroll.

Today's zealots must express their zeal in their study of Torah, pshat and sod, and then live their zeal by observing the mitzvot. Today's zealots must attack the modern Zimri's of those who wish to pervert Torah truths. We must fight the philosophies of the secular and their brood. Yet, our holy and sacred struggle is not one of violence, it is one of speech. We talk to the secular, engaging them in uncomfortable debate. We pray for them. This is most important. If we are zealots in our prayers as Pinhas was in his actions, we will indeed succeed in bringing back to Torah our lost brothers and sisters.