

# ZEALOTRY: HOW FAR TO GO

*by Rabbi Berel Wein*

Pinchas is not an overly popular figure in Jewish life and among his own generation. The people of Israel were angered by his act of violence in killing the head of the tribe of Shimon without giving the matter due judicial process. It is because of this type of murmuring that the Lord Himself, so to speak, blesses Pinchas personally and grants him the gift of priesthood and of peace.

Pinchas' motives are challenged by the people but they are vindicated by God. But it takes God himself, so to speak to quiet the objections to Pinchas and his behavior. And it is noteworthy therefore to emphasize that we do not find any other further act of holy zealotry mentioned in the Torah or approved of by Jewish tradition

Pinchas and his behavior become the exception and not the rule in Jewish life and tradition. Zealotry is a very difficult characteristic to gauge correctly. How much are personal quirks involved in such zealous behavior? Jewish history and society is littered by the victims of religious zealotry who were felled by personal attacks clothed in the guise of religious piety and zealotry.

The zealot often covers his own weaknesses and self-doubt by attacking others. That is why the people of Israel questioned the motives of Pinchas in killing Zimri. Because of this, it is obvious that only God, so to speak, could save Pinchas from unwarranted criticism and public disapproval. But in so doing, God, again so to speak, warns us of the dangers of zealotry. He will not step in again to rescue the zealot from public and historical disapproval.

We meet Pinchas again later in Jewish history, again at a moment of personal tragedy. He is the High Priest and head of the Sanhedrin at the time of Yiftach, the judge of Israel. Yiftach has made a foolish vow that whatever or whoever comes forth first from his house to greet him upon his return from the successful war that he waged to save Israel from the oppression of Bnei Ammon will be sacrificed to God.

The daughter of Yiftach, not knowing of her father's vow, rushes out of the house to welcome home the returning hero. Eventually Yiftach fulfills his vow and kills her on the altar. This entire horrible story could have been averted.

The rabbis in the Talmud tell us that Yiftach could have had the vow annulled retroactively by appearing before Pinchas and his court and requesting such an annulment. But ego and hubris interfere, even at the cost of the life of one's own child. Yiftach refuses to humble himself - after all he is the leader of Israel - to appear before Pinchas and ask for the annulment.

Even though Pinchas is aware of the vow, he also refuses to lower himself - after all he is the high Priest and the head of the Sanhedrin - to travel to Yiftach to effect the annulment. As the Talmud ruefully observes, because of this display of personal pique and ego, an innocent person is killed. Pinchas' reputation is therefore tarnished by this incident. Perhaps this is another reason that we do not find the zealotry of Pinchas repeated and complimented again in the Torah.

Shabat shalom.

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