

A PEACEFUL HERO

by Rabbi Berel Wein

Pinchas is a tainted hero. Rashi records for us that the tribes of Israel, especially the tribe of Shimon, complained that someone who is a descendant of "one who fattened calves for paganism and dares kill a head of a tribe in Israel" should not be entitled to any honors. The Lord, so to speak, comes to his defense and grants him the gift of the priesthood - to him and his descendants - and also the supreme blessing of peace.

The Torah records his genealogy as being from Elazar and Aharon and not from the one who "fattened calves for idolatry." Yet, even this restoration of status and Godly confirmation of the rectitude of Pinchas is also somewhat reserved.

In the word "shalom" that marks the covenant of peace granted to Pinchas by God, the letter "vav" in this word, as it is written in the Torah, is split and cracked. He is not granted the full blessing of peace but rather a diminished portion of it. Our rabbis taught us that this is because his heroics involved violence and the taking of human life, albeit in a just and holy cause.

Peace obtained through violence and the death of others, even if those deaths are unavoidably necessary and completely justified, is always somewhat tarnished, cracked and split. Pinchas is thus completely vindicated and rehabilitated by the Torah, but a lingering resentment against his act of boldness and zealotry remains.

Pinchas reappears later in Jewish history in the book of Shoftim/Judges. There he is the High Priest and according to some opinions, the leader of the Sanhedrin as well. The Talmud records for us the tragic story of Yiftach and his daughter - in which Yiftach vowed to sacrifice the first living creature that would confront him when he returned home after the successful war against Bnei Ammon, and was first greeted by his daughter.

The Talmud is of the opinion that Yiftach's vow could have been annulled legally by the court of Pinchas. But Pinchas insisted that Yiftach come to him to obtain such an annulment while Yiftach felt that this would be an affront to his position as the "shofet" judge and temporal leader of Israel. So nothing was done, the vow remained, and the innocent life of Yiftach's daughter was snuffed out on the altar of pride. So Pinchas is slightly tarnished in this story as well.

The eventual complete redemption of Pinchas occurs when the Talmud equates him with the prophet Eliyahu. It is therefore Pinchas/Eliyahu who accompanies the Jewish people throughout the ages and the troubles. He is present at every brit milah and at every Pesach seder. He is the

harbinger of our complete redemption, the one who will bind the generations together and is the symbol of hope and the glorious future of Israel and humankind.

It is as Eliyahu that Pinchas receives the undisputed heroic stature that the Lord grants to him in this week's parsha. May we see him speedily in our days.

Shabat Shalom.

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