

ZEALOTRY FOR THE GOOD

by Rabbi Berel Wein

In the midst of the sadness and angst that envelops us yet here in Israel and throughout the entire Jewish world, the story of Pinchas, the righteous zealot, rewarded by Heaven for his act of zealotry and violence, intrudes. We are still reeling from the killings and rockets and losses that we have so recently suffered. So, what are we to make of this most puzzling incident recorded for us in our holy Torah?

The Talmud teaches us that it was only through miraculous Heavenly interventions that Pinchas was able to slay the Midianite princess and the Leader of the tribe of Shimon and escape with his own life still intact. And the fact that the Lord, so to speak, extends His Divine hand of friendship, priesthood, peace and position to Pinchas, certainly shows God's acquiescence to Pinchas' act.

Yet the Talmud and Jewish tradition are of the opinion that only Pinchas' act of zealotry is to be admired. All other acts of unilateral zealotry in Jewish society in later generations are to be shunned. The prophet Elijah, who in Jewish tradition is identified somehow with Pinchas, is chastised by Heaven to moderate his zealotry and despair regarding the acknowledged evils of Jewish behavior in his time. Instead, he is assigned to be present at all circumcision ceremonies, Pesach sedorim and to be the prophet of Jewish redemption and reconciliation.

He becomes the witness to Jewish loyalty and continuity. In effect, his zealotry is to be rechanneled into positive energy and eternal goodness. Elijah becomes thereby the fulfillment of God's commitment to Pinchas of peace, nobility and eternal greatness. It is this redirection of zealous energy to positive force that lies at the heart of God's commitment to Pinchas.

The Talmud teaches us that we cannot exist as human beings in this world by attempting to eliminate completely our negative instincts - our yetzer hara. Our task, rather, is to redirect those instincts and forces that define us as human beings into positive and productive activities and behavior.

One of the fundamental weaknesses of other faiths has been their attempt to completely negate the natural impulses that are part of all human nature. Celibacy and long states of meditation are not the tools of lasting spiritual enhancement and human continuity. Engaging our instincts and energy and channeling them into positive projects and holy endeavors is the wish of the Torah.

The zealotry of Pinchas and Elijah should be exploited for good causes - the priesthood and public service, compassion for others and a sense of Jewish unity, eternity and holy mission. It is the

transformation of Pinchas from the man of violence to the man of peace that is the message of the Torah in this week's parsha. The story of Pinchas is recorded for us in the Torah to teach us that such transformations are possible and indeed necessary for the ultimate good of the Jewish people and humanity generally. The Jewish story is that Pinchas becomes Elijah and Elijah becomes the harbinger of Jewish redemption and eternity.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com