

To understand the beginning of this week's parasha, we need to recap the ending of last week's parasha. The Israelites have completed their journey through the desert and are situated in Moabite territory.

Like the Europeans who came to America after 1492, this is a moment of "contact" between the migrant Israelites and the native Moabites. The Israelites who had existed in a kind of bubble for the duration of their wandering thus far, are for the first time, meeting another people.

Natural curiosity develops into serious intermingling, culminating in sexual contact between Moabite women and Israelite men. The boundary between the two peoples vanishes. Sexual contact leads to idolatry.

וַתִּקְרָאנָה לָעָם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכַל הָעָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לֵאלֹהֵיהֶן. כה"ב
They called the people for sacrifices to their gods; the people ate and bowed down to their gods. 25:2

While Israel had its own austere sanctuary and sacred cult it lacked the music, dance, magic and dramatic (often sexually explicit) rituals that would have been typical of idolatrous cultures, such as Moab's, not to mention visible images of accessible gods and sacred prostitution. Let's face it, with the Torah's emphasis on holiness, ethics, morality and one God to whom all human beings were accountable, Israelite monotheism was probably not as enticing (or as exciting!) as Moabite idolatry.

וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעֹר וַיִּחַר אַף ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. כה"ג
And Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Pe'or, so the anger of God flared up against Israel. 25:3

We can understand why God's anger **would flare up** against Israel. As explicitly stated in the Ten Commandments, God is **a jealous God-אל קנא**. And we recall that God has been angry at previous instances of Israelite apostasy, foremost among them, the Golden Calf. The text is not explicit in this moment, but we will learn later that because of Israel's idolatry and sexual licentiousness, God's anger has been unleashed in the form of a plague.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה קַח אֶת כָּל רֹאשֵׁי הָעָם וְהִקְעָה אוֹתָם לַה' נֹגֵד הַשָּׁמַשׁ וַיֵּשֶׁב חֶרֶן אַף ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. כה"ד
And God said to Moses: Take all the heads of the people and impale them to God, facing the sun, so that the flaming anger of God may turn from Israel. 25:4

God's demand is brutal and irrational. God is instructing Moses to kill and impale the leaders of the nation in what can only be understood as a form of propitiatory sacrifice that will atone for the people's apostasy and quell God's anger. Nowhere does the text say that Moses complies with this. On the contrary, in this state of anarchy, Moses

deploys the same strategy as he did in the Golden Calf, namely to kill the perpetrators:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל שְׂכֵטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרוּ אִישׁ אֶנְשֵׁי הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעֹר. כה"ה

Moses said to the officials of Israel: Let each-man kill [those off] his men who yoked themselves to the Baal of Pe'or! 25:5

There is a plague raging. There is idolatry and feasting and lots of fornication. The leadership of Israel is gone: Aaron, who intervened with incense in a previous plague is dead. Miriam is dead. All the original tribal chieftains are dead. Moses now turns to a new, untested generation of cowardly tribal "officials" and tasks them

with slaughtering the idolaters of their own tribes. They don't respond quickly, possibly out of their own fear or complicity. We recall that during the Golden Calf incident, the Levites went through the camp and slaughtered 3000 people. But even though Moses urgently calls for action here, a similar slaughter does not take place. At this precise moment, the Torah reports this startling incident:

וַהֲנָה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל אָחִיו אֶת הַמִּדְיָנִית לַעֲיֹנִי מִשֵּׁה וּלְעֵינֶיהָ כָּל עַדַּת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָמָּה בָּכִים פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. כה"ו
Now here, a man of the Children of Israel had come and had brought near to his brothers a [certain] Midyanite woman, before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the entire community of the Children of Israel while they were weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Appointment. 25:6

There is a plague raging in the camp. An Israelite man takes a Midianite woman in front of the entire assembly, and more importantly, in front of the holy sanctuary. While the text is not explicit in terms of their intent, it is pretty obvious what they are about to do. Perhaps this idolatrous sexual act would elicit a favorable response of the Moabite god and end the plague. It would be defiant in many ways:

1. A private sexual act taking place in the most public space.
2. An attempt to have the Moabite god usurp the God of Israel.
3. A brazen act of defiance against Moses, after all, Moses himself was married to a Midianite woman. In the midst of a raging plague, with Israel on the brink of a brutal massacre, with an idolatrous sexual act taking right in front of everyone's eyes, and most importantly, a leadership that has totally collapsed, young Pinhas steps forward.

וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקֶּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ. כה"ז

Pinhas son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest saw [it], so he arose from the midst of the community, and took a spear in his hand; 25:7

Pinhas is introduced with his priestly ancestry. As a priest he has been charged with preserving the sanctity of the sacred areas. With a brazen act of sexual idolatry taking place right at the entrance of the tabernacle, and the threat



that this will defile the sanctuary and imperil the life of Israel going forward, and no one else to step forward, he decides to act and literally take matters into his own hands:

וַיָּבֹא אַחֵר אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקֶּבֶד וַיִּדְקֹר אֶת שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת הָאִשָּׁה אֶל קֶבֶדָּהּ וַתַּעֲצֹר הַמִּגֶּפֶה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. כה:ח

he came after the man of Israel into the private-chamber, and he thrust through the two of them, the man of Israel and the woman, in her private-parts, and the plague was held back from the Children of Israel. 25:8

Pinhas commits an act of violence against the fornicating couple. We can assume that they don't survive, and their death functions as a catastrophic coda that terminates the ordeal. The plague ends, taking a huge toll of casualties:

וַיָּהִיו הַמֵּתִים בַּמִּגֶּפֶה אַרְבָּעָה וְעֶשְׂרִים אָלֶף. כה:ט
And those who died of the plague were four and twenty thousand. 25:9

Troubling for its zealotry, and compounded by the absence of due process, like all acts of extreme violence (think Cain killing Abel), it gets God's attention and is effective in both stopping the plague and preventing a greater massacre. And that is where this week's parasha begins:

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. פִּינָחָס בֶּן אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הָשִׁיב אֶת חֲמָתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּקָּנָאֹ אֶת קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכָם וְלֹא כָלִיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בַּקָּנָאֹתִי. כה:י-יא.

God spoke to Moses, saying: Pinhas son of Elazar son of Aaron the priest has turned my anger from the Children of Israel when he zealously acted for My zeal in their midst, so that I did not destroy the Children of Israel in my zeal. 25:10-11

Three phrases stand out in this verse. **he-he turned my anger.** We see a similar phrase when Rebekah tells Jacob to flee from his brother Esau and stay with Lavan for a period of time, **עד אשר תשוב חמת אחיך-until his anger subsides.** (Gen. 27:44). At the Golden Calf Moses implores God, **שוב מחרון אפך והנחם על הרעה לעמך-Turn away from your flaming anger, be sorry of the evil [intended] against your people!** (Exod. 34:12). **he zealously acted for My zeal.** Rash: **בנקמו את נקמתי — בקצפו את הקצף שהיה** **לקצף** **when he executed my vengeance, when he displayed the anger that I should have displayed.**

God's fury remains with God, but a human agent, Pinhas, acts here on God's behalf. **such that I did not destroy** the people in my zealous rage. Again, at the Golden Calf, God wants to destroy the people for their idolatry. He says: **עתה הניחה** **עתה הניחה** **So now,**

let me be, that my anger may flare up against them and I may destroy them (Exod. 32:10).

לכן אמר ה' נתן לו את בריתי שלום. כה:יב
Therefore say: Here, I give him my covenant of shalom.

How should we understand this? It seems bizarre that he would be rewarded for this. Robert Alter: *There is some ironic dissonance between Pinhas' bloody act of retribution and this covenant of shalom between his descendants and God.* Um, yeah.

Here are some other possible interpretations:

Quid pro quo.	Because Pinhas gave God peace in this terrible moment, God gives Pinhas an eternal covenant of peace as a reward.
Protection from vengeance.	Having committed an act of manslaughter, Pinhas would be vulnerable to retribution. The covenant of peace gives Pinhas divine immunity from retribution.
Pardon from disqualification.	Priests who shed human blood are forbidden to offer the Priestly Blessing. ¹ He maintains his status.
Remediation.	Having shown that he is prone to violence, the covenant of peace becomes a mechanism to restrain him and restrict the zealous impulse.
Therapeutic intervention.	Having killed two people, Pinhas would be unable to live at peace with himself. The covenant of peace would alleviate this trauma and protect future generations from its lasting effects.

The story is problematic on so many levels. Having taken matters into his own hands, having shed blood and received a reward from none other than God himself (!), Pinhas is a **perilous problematic paradigm of piety**. Might people be tempted to follow his example in a fit of zeal or righteous indignation? Does Judaism honor vigilantism? Among the themes in the rabbinic discussions that deal with these questions is a) Pinhas' uniqueness: he acted in a specific time and place and was an exceptional character of moral courage; b) theory and practice: some circumstances theoretically warrant vigilante action, but it remains forbidden in practice. Perhaps because the rabbis saw the dangers of zealous piety they regarded Pinhas with apprehension. Their opinion can be summed up in three Hebrew words: **שלא ברצון חכמים** **Pinhas did not act in accordance with the will of the Sages.**² Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS DAY 295
WE PRAY FOR THE HOSTAGES AND THEIR FAMILIES. MAY GOD HEAL THE WOUNDED AND PROTECT THE IDF IN GAZA AND THOSE UNDER ATTACK THROUGHOUT ISRAEL.

¹ This is based on a verse from Isaiah: *And when you spread forth your hands I will hide My eyes from you, and even if you increase your prayer, I will not hear; your hands are full of blood.* (Isa. 1:15). From this verse, Rabbi Yohanan said, **כל כהן** **לא ישא את כפיו** **Any kohen who has killed another human being is forbidden to lift up his hands, i.e. in the performance of the Priestly Blessing.** (Berachot 32b) A

fascinating halakhic literature deals with this issue, especially in cases of involuntary manslaughter, killing someone by accident, and soldiers who are kohanim who have killed enemies in battle. In all of those cases, halakhic authorities permit them to offer the Priestly Blessing.

² Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 9:7.