YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA**

**Parashat PINCHAS**

**Sicha of HarAV Baruch gigi**

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In memory of Rabbi Moshe ben Avraham Shraga Furst *z”l*,   
*Niftar* 17 Tammuz 5771.  
Dedicated by his family.

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families   
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,   
whose *yahrzeit* is 21 Tamuz. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

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**Pinchas's Zealotry**

Summarized by Yonatan Oster

Translated by David Strauss

**Introduction**

Last week’s *parasha*, *Parashat Balak*, ends in the middle of a story: The people sin in Shittim with the daughters of Moav and Midyan, and Pinchas rises up in his jealousy for God and kills Zimri the son of Salu and Kozbi the daughter of Tzur, bringing the plague to an end. *Parashat Pinchas* continues with a description of how, in response to what happened, God enters with Pinchas into two covenants – "a covenant of peace" and "a covenant of an everlasting priesthood":

And the Lord spoke to Moshe, saying: Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, has turned My wrath away from the children of Israel, in that he was very jealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy. Therefore say: Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace; and it shall be to him, and to his seed after him, the covenant of an everlasting priesthood; because he was jealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel. (*Bamidbar* 25:10-13)

Regarding Pinchas's action and the reward he received for it, two points require explanation. First, what is the proper attitude to zealotry; should it be seen as an appropriate path? And second, what is the reward that Pinchas received; how can we understand these two covenants?

**Zealotry**

While Pinchas was grandly rewarded for his zealotry, other acts of zealotry in the Torah are not viewed positively.

Thus, Yaakov responded to the action taken by Shimon and Levi in Shekhem with rebuke: "You have troubled me, to make me odious to the inhabitants of the land…they will gather themselves together against me and smite me; and I shall be destroyed, I and my house" (*Bereishit* 34:30). Yaakov’s disapproval is not only about "what people will say," as one might think from this verse; many years later, on his deathbed, Yaakov made a point of noting his objections: "Let my soul not come into their council; to their assembly let my glory not be united… Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce, and their wrath, for it was cruel…" (*Bereishit* 49:5-7).

Negation of zealotry also appears in the words of God Himself. After the prophet Eliyahu acted zealously for the sake of God's name at the assembly on Mount Carmel, he fled from Izevel and declared: "I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword; and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away" (I *Melakhim* 19:14). Eliyahu’s zealotry on God’s behalf seems reminiscent of Pinchas, and indeed, *Chazal* highlight their similarity with the assertion that "Pinchas and Eliyahu are one" (Targum attributed to Yonatan, *Shemot* 6:18, and elsewhere). However, God did not praise Eliyahu's zeal, but rather instructed him to anoint Elisha as a prophet to replace him. Furthermore, the *Zohar* asserts (*Bereishit Lekh-Lekha* 93a; ibid. *Vayigash* 209b) that because of Eliyahu’s accusation, "for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant," it was decreed that he must come to every circumcision and bear witness to the fact that the people of Israel in fact continue to keep their covenant with God. Apparently, there was something inappropriate in Eliyahu’s zealous outburst against the people’s sins.

How is Pinchas different from others who acted zealously? Why does he merit reward, while Shimon and Levi are rebuked and Eliyahu is removed from the world?

**Heartache**

The Mishna in *Sanhedrin* (9:6) states that "if a man cohabits with a Syrian [heathen] woman, zealots strike him." That is, the law governing a man who has intercourse with a non-Jewish woman is that zealots among the people of Israel may kill him.

On the other hand, the Gemara elaborates:

If the zealot comes to take counsel [regarding whether to punish the transgressors mentioned in the Mishna], he is not instructed to do so. What is more, had Zimri forsaken his mistress and Pinchas slain him, Pinchas would have been executed on his account; and had Zimri turned upon Pinchas and slain him, he would not have been executed, since Pinchas was a pursuer [seeking to take his life]. (*Sanhedrin* 82b)

If a person comes before a court seeking permission to kill a person cohabiting with a heathen, the court will not instruct him to do so. And furthermore, if the offender defends himself by killing the zealot, he is exempt from punishment for the killing, because the zealot is regarded as a "pursuer" [*rodef*], whom one is permitted to kill. How are we to understand this contradiction? Why is it permissible to kill a person who is cohabiting with a heathen, yet we do not tell him to and the attempt even renders him a “pursuer”?

A similar contradiction is found in tractate *Shabbat* (4a), in a dispute as to whether or not we tell a person "sin, so that your fellow will gain thereby"; that is to say, whether a person may commit a minor offense in order to save another person from committing a more serious offense. The example discussed there relates to baking bread on Shabbat: When a person puts dough in an oven on Shabbat, the moment the bread is fully baked, the *melakha* (forbidden labor) of baking is completed, and he is liable for death by stoning for having desecrated Shabbat. Until the bread is fully baked, the bread may be removed from the oven, thus saving the baker from an offense punishable by stoning – but the detaching of bread from where it sticks to the oven is prohibited by Rabbinic decree. The question arises whether another person is permitted to detach the bread, thereby transgressing a Rabbinic prohibition, in order to save his neighbor from transgressing the Torah prohibition of baking on Shabbat.

The Talmudic passage in *Shabbat* indicates that we do not tell a person “sin, so that your fellow will gain thereby.” The *Rishonim*, however, have difficulty with this, because a different passage (*Eiruvin* 32b, dealing with *terumot* and *ma'aserot*) implies that it is indeed preferable to violate a light prohibition in order to save another person from violating a serious prohibition. I will not engage here with the many answers proposed by the *Rishonim*, but will mention just one that the Ritva suggests. According to him, there is no difficulty, because the passage in *Shabbat* only establishes that we do not “*tell* a person ‘sin, so that your fellow will gain thereby’" – but it is clear that this is the proper thing to do.

Thus, if a person goes to a rabbi and asks whether he may violate the prohibition against detaching bread from where it sticks to the oven in order to save another person from violating the prohibition of baking, the rabbi will not tell him that it is preferable that he detach the bread and save the other person from the more serious transgression. But if he decides on his own to detach the bread and afterwards tells the rabbi what he did, the rabbi will tell him that he acted appropriately. This gap requires explanation. Either the action is permitted, in which case he should be instructed to do so from the outset, or it is prohibited, in which case he should be told that he acted inappropriately. How are we to understand the difference?

Let me preface my answer with a personal story. A few years ago, I was walking through the streets of Jerusalem on Shabbat and a Jew passed by, muttering to himself "Shabbat...Shabbat...Shabbat." I thought at first that he was mentally disturbed, though he otherwise seemed completely normal. Afterwards, I understood what had happened and I learned a very important lesson from that Jew. We have gotten used to walking on Shabbat and seeing cars driving by, with Jews desecrating Shabbat. We have become indifferent to this phenomenon. That Jew refused to accept this reality, and so he walked down the street muttering to himself that today is Shabbat. The fact that Jews desecrate Shabbat bothered him terribly, causing him great heartache, and he muttered to himself so that he not become indifferent to Shabbat desecration.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Perhaps this can also teach us about the actions of a zealot who kills a person who cohabits with a heathen, or a person who detaches bread from where it sticks to the oven in order to save his neighbor from a more severe offense: There may be a situation in which a person sees his fellow man, God forbid, desecrating Shabbat or cohabiting with a heathen, and it causes him great heartache; he cannot come to terms with this reality. Without asking questions, he acts out of deep passion and an intense drive to change the situation. If this is the case, he acts properly when he kills or detaches the bread. If, however, he hesitates and comes to ask, that indicates that it does not bother him sufficiently; in such a situation, his zealotry is not pure and absolute, and he is therefore not permitted to take radical action. Zealotry is only proper when it stems from a true place of profound and deep-seated heartache.

**Good toward Heaven and Man**

This, however, is not enough; fanaticism has another condition. The Gemara in *Kiddushin* states:

"Say you of the righteous, when he is good"… Is there then a righteous man who is good and a righteous man who is not good? But he who is good toward Heaven and good toward man, he is a righteous man who is good; good toward Heaven but not good toward man, that is a righteous man who is not good. (*Kiddushin* 40a)

That is, a "righteous person who is good" is a person who is good both to Heaven and to man. These are two tracks along which a person must operate: to be good in the eyes of God and to be good in the eyes of men. Proper zealotry, in addition to coming from an aching heart, should come when the person sees the whole picture, in which he pursues both the honor of the Father and the honor of the son.

Eliyahu sought to rectify the insult to God's honor, but not the insult to the honor of Israel. He decreed three years of drought and slaughtered the prophets of Baal. Since he did not pursue the honor of Israel, he was ordered to anoint Elisha in his place.

In the case of Shimon and Levi, they did in fact come to rectify the insult to the son – as they acted zealously on behalf of their sister, in the wake of the offense committed by Shekhem the son of Chamor. But they were not concerned about the honor of the Father, the honor of Heaven that was desecrated by the breaking of the covenant that they had entered into with the people of Shekhem. Since they did not pursue the honor of the Father, they were reprimanded by Yaakov.

Pinchas was different in that he pursued the honor of both the Father and the son. As for the honor of the Father, God Himself testifies that Pinchas "was very jealous for My sake" (*Bamidbar* 25:11). That is, the zealotry was for the sake of God. As for the honor of the son, the Gemara relates:

An angel came and wrought destruction among the people. Then he [Pinchas] came and struck them down before the Almighty, saying: Sovereign of the Universe! shall twenty-four thousand perish because of these? As it is written: "And those that died in the plague were twenty and four thousand." Hence it is written: "Then stood up Pinchas, and executed judgement [*va-yefalel*]." Rabbi Elazar said: [*Va-yitpalel*] [he prayed] is not written, but *va-yefalel*, as though he argued with his Maker [on the justice of punishing so many]. (*Sanhedrin* 82b)

In other words, Pinchas's goal in killing Zimri and Kozbi was to stop the plague that had killed so many of the people. Only after he argued with God and killed them did the plague stop and the people survive.

Only when it is driven by a twofold concern for the honor of Heaven and for the honor of man (both the individual and the collective) can an act of zealotry be one of righteousness and truth.

Now we can understand why Pinchas merited two blessings – in correspondence to the two things he did. The covenant of priesthood symbolizes his pursuit of the honor of the Father, and therefore it is a covenant between him and God; the covenant of peace symbolizes his pursuit of the honor of the son, and the continuation of his following in the path of his grandfather, Aharon, who "loved peace and pursued peace" (*Avot* 1:12).

**Conclusion**

In today's world, great emphasis is placed on the rights and desires of the individual: everyone can do as he likes and follow whatever he thinks will be best for him. Let us not be indifferent to this reality. Even if we are barred from taking action, we must develop sensitivity and ache in our hearts for every person who deviates from the right path. And of course, we must pursue both the honor of the Father and the honor of the son. As long as the pain is felt, there is hope for change and repair as soon as that becomes possible.

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Gigi on Shabbat *Parashat Pinchas* 5781.]

1. In this context, mention should be made of what the *Chazon Ish* said about using electricity on Shabbat: "Even if it is in a manner that is permissible by strict law, it is forbidden to use it because using it involves a transgression of the prohibition of desecrating God's name, that he is not concerned about God's honor, since it is public use and he who works on Shabbat acts out of rebellion [against God], and one who benefits from his actions testifies, God forbid, that his heart is not pained by Shabbat desecration.May it be His will that they fully and speedily repent” (*Chazon Ish OC Mo'ed Hilkhot Shabbat*, 38, 4, s.v. *ve-kol zeh ke-she-ha-zerem*). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)