YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Balak**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of Yitele bat Nathan Hacohen z”l

whose yahrtzeit is 11 Tammuz

By Family Rueff

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**The Zealotry of Pinchas and Its Impact on Future Generations**

Summarized by Hadar Horowitz

Translated by David Strauss

And the Lord said to Moshe: Take all the chiefs of the people and have them impaled before the Lord in broad daylight, that the fierce anger of the Lord may turn away from Israel. And Moshe said to the judges of Israel: Slay, each [of you], his men who attached themselves to Ba'al Peor. And, behold, a man of the children of Israel came and brought the Midyanite woman to his brothers, in the sight of Moshe and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, and they were weeping at the door of the tent of meeting. And Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, saw, and he rose up from the midst of the congregation, and he took a spear in his hand. And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. And the plague was stayed from the children of Israel. And those who died by the plague were twenty-four thousand. (*Bamidbar* 25:4-9)

The people are sinning with the women of Moav, and God instructs Moshe to mete out justice to the offenders. In response, Moshe acts "by the book" – he convenes the judges and instructs them to execute judgment upon the sinners. The Ramban explains that this execution of justice was carried out according to the usual rules of capital cases – the judges convened in courts of twenty-three, and presumably required two witnesses and a warning for each and every one of the sinners, as he writes:

Cases punishable by death [cannot be decided] by [only] one judge, but [require] a court of twenty-three judges… But the meaning of "each [of you], his men" is that the judges should kill all those who joined themselves to Ba'al-Pe'or, that is to say, each court should judge [the men of] its own tribe and its [groups of] thousands, as it is written: "So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men, and full of knowledge, and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds… and officers, tribe by tribe" (*Devarim* 1:15). (Ramban, *Bamidbar* 25:5)

While this slow process was underway, the plague raged outside. The laws of capital punishment are designed to deal with individual sinners, but they were unable to prevent the people’s debauchery with the Moavite women.

At this moment, Pinchas rises up and strikes down Zimri and the woman he was with – out of a zealous impulse, without any trial or judgment having been carried out before the killing. He makes a clear statement that *now is the time to act; we can ask questions later*. He understands that only thus can he prevent the continuation of the plague and the deterioration of the people. The zealot’s fundamental assertion is: The end justifies the means. The proper means, in a case of capital punishment, are the courts and all the laws that we know from tractate *Sanhedrin*. Pinchas is prepared to use improper means to ensure that the desired end will be realized.

These two approaches can be understood as stemming from the difference between the two halakhic concepts of "*hutra*" and "*dechuya*," "permitted" and "set aside." When there is a clash between two *mitzvot* or values, one might say that we examine the details of the *halakhot* and put them on the two sides of a scale to determine which is weightier. For example, Shabbat is an exceedingly important commandment, but it is sometimes overridden by other vital needs, such as the preservation of life.

Alternatively, one can look at the matter from beginning to end, examining not the details of the *mitzva* but rather its purpose, its root. For Shabbat and all other *mitzvot* were given to us so that we may live by them! Each mitzva was given so that we may live a life of Divine service and fulfill more *mitzvot*. It can be said, according to this view, that the mitzva of Shabbat does not merely end at a certain point in order to allow for life, but rather that the mitzva is fulfilled through the saving of lives (because saving lives will enable more observance of Shabbat in the future). Consequently, there is no need to be particular about the means by which this goal is achieved – transgressing Rabbinic prohibitions versus Torah prohibitions, for example – because, as we said above, "the end justifies the means."

It would seem that zealotry takes the second approach to an extreme. It does not examine the details of the commandments, it does not weigh the costs. It contemplates the great goal, the root of things – and without asking questions, it acts accordingly.

I have struggled all my life with the following question: What was the goal, the end which justifies the means, for whose sake Pinchas acted with zealotry? Two possibilities can be suggested, each of which defines the zealotry in a different way:

The first approach is to focus on the saving of the lives of the Jewish people. A plague is raging, afflicting multitudes of people, and Pinchas wishes to stop it at all costs. He therefore allows himself to perform an extreme act – for it is known that the nature of plagues is to continue to spread, and who knows what the cost in terms of lives would have been if Pinchas had not acted! His action saved the Jewish people from the threat of annihilation, as is stated at the beginning of the next *parasha*:

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 did not end the children of Israel* in My jealousy. (*Bamidbar* 25:11).

This understanding narrows the concept of zealotry to an action that is permitted only with the goal of saving many lives. Although our generation tends to recoil from the concept of zealotry, it can identify with this approach readily enough.

But it is possible that Pinchas acted for the sake of a different purpose, which may be somewhat hard to swallow – protecting the people of Israel from assimilation and intermarriage with the heathen nations around us.

Pinchas sees that Moshe is helpless in the face of the crisis, which reaches its climax in Zimri's act of defiance "in the sight of Moshe and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel." As the Gemara describes:

The tribe of Shimon went to Zimri ben Salu and said to him: Behold, capital punishment is being meted out, yet you sit silent! What did he do? He arose and assembled twenty-four thousand Israelites and went to Cozbi… He then seized her by her hair and brought her to Moshe. He said to him: Son of Amram, is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you say she is forbidden – who permitted to you Yitro's daughter’? [At that moment] Moshe forgot the *halakha* [concerning intimacy with a non-Jewish woman], and all [the people] burst into tears; hence it is written: "And they were weeping before the door of the tent of meeting" (*Bamidbar* 25:6). (*Sanhedrin* 82a)

It is not by chance that Moshe did not remember this *halakha* – for it had never been revealed to him in the first place! Nowhere in the Torah is a prohibition written against marrying a gentile woman. It is true that the Sages derived such a prohibition from a verse in *Malakhi*:

Yehuda has dealt treacherously, and an abomination is committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Yehuda, whom He loves, has profaned the holiness of the Lord and has married the daughter of a strange god. (*Malakhi* 2:11)

But no such prohibition is found in the Torah. The serious problem in the Israelites' licentiousness with the Moavite women was that they were thereby drawn after the Moavite gods and were serving idolatry, losing their Jewish identity. Pinchas' zealotry led him to decide that he would stop this deterioration – which Moshe lacked the tools to deal with – and simply kill Zimri.

Centuries later, Yechezkel prophesies a similar sin of assimilation. The priests had married foreign wives, who had undergone dubious conversion processes at best, and thus foreign priests were born who served in the Temple. Regarding this, God says:

And you shall say to the rebellious, even to the house of Israel: Thus says the Lord God: O you house of Israel, let it suffice you of all your abominations, in that ye have brought in foreign children, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, to be in My sanctuary, to profane it, My house, when you offer My bread, the fat and the blood, and they have broken My covenant, to [add to] all your abominations. And you have not kept the charge of My holy things; but you have set *for yourselves* keepers of My charge in My sanctuary. Thus says the Lord God: No foreign child, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into My sanctuary, for any foreign child that is among the children of Israel. (*Yechezkel* 44:6-9)

Who are the priests who were *not* guilty of this transgression? The sons of Tzadok, the descendants of Pinchas. They are the ones God wishes will minister to Him in the Temple:

But the priests the Levites, the sons of Tzadok, that kept the charge of My sanctuary when the children of Israel went astray from Me, they shall come near to Me to minister to Me; and they shall stand before Me to offer to Me the fat and the blood, says the Lord God; they shall enter into My sanctuary, and they shall come near to My table, to minister to Me, and they shall keep My charge. (Ibid. 44:15-16)

According to this, Pinchas' act was not merely a point-in-time rescue of lives, but a value-laden decision with long-term ramifications that would affect the entire Jewish people and the descendants of Pinchas for many years to come. His action contained a message for future generations: the vitality of maintaining the purity of the Jewish family and the importance of maintaining the lineage of the Jewish people.

Is this second type of zealotry justified? Is it permissible to circumvent the normal system of justice, to the point of taking lives, in order to prevent moral deterioration and spiritual danger? This is a question that is by no means simple. I find it difficult to decide.

This question has important ramifications today. One should of course not use any violence, but our generation is in grave danger of the destruction of the Jewish family. This threat comes from two directions: those who are lax about intermarriage and are creating a generation that is assimilating; and those who are undermining the very traditional pattern of the family.

In the face of these existential threats – and these are dangers that are present even in Israel and in our generation, not only in distant generations and in the Diaspora – there are those who seek to follow the path of zealotry, in the wake of Pinchas, even at the price of sharp schism and alienation. I am not party to this path.

I believe that one should resort to zealotry only when it is clear that it will lead to significant change, like Pinchas, who shocked the entire nation and halted the plague. But even if we reject the means, we must be aware of this serious problem of the destruction of the Jewish family, and find other ways to deal with it.

May it be God's will that the problem will be resolved in ways that do not require zealotry, and that we will see the fulfillment of the verse:

But you who clung to the Lord your God, you are all alive this day. (*Devarim* 4:4)

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Balak* 5779.]

(Edited by Sarah Rudolph)