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 Yaakov Medan**

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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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**Broken Zealotry**

Adapted by Immanuel Meyer

Translated by David Strauss

**“I Have Received a Tradition from You”**

In our *parasha*, Pinchas's action is described as zealotry, *kana'ut.* By its very definition, an act of zealotry is something outside the framework of Halakha, something that expresses closeness to God by way of an action that is contrary to Halakha.

However, Rashi on the *parasha* appears to place the entire episode within a halakhic framework. He describes how Moshe forgot the *halakha* and how Pinchas said to him: "I have received a tradition from you: One who has intercourse with an Aramaen woman, zealous people may attack him."

This is difficult to understand. How did a law suddenly escape Moshe? Is it possible that a law can escape someone who said: "Stay you, that I may hear what the Lord will command concerning you" (*Bemidbar* 9:8)? In the meantime, Moshe responds in the worst possible way to the events in the camp – with weeping. This is a passive response, wholly out of place. Indeed, it is like that of the people of Israel several decades later in Bokhim (at the beginning of the book of *Shofetim*) – weeping instead of standing up and taking action!

The reading in Rashi's source is slightly different. There it is stated that Pinchas said: "I have received a tradition from you when you came down from Mount Sinai." Did Moshe have nothing else to do when he came down from Mount Sinai and saw the sin of the golden calf, and he therefore entered the *beit* *midrash* and taught the law that if one has intercourse with an Aramaen woman, zealous people may attack him?!

**“When You Came Down From Mount Sinai”**

There seems to be something else going on here. We must first understand what happened at Mount Sinai.

In the famous verses beginning with the words, "And Moshe besought the Lord" (*Shemot* 32:11), Moshe persuades God not to destroy the people of Israel after the sin of the golden calf. He does this in five verses that contain two arguments: "Why should the Egyptians say" and the merits of the forefathers. These are two arguments that anyone of us could have presented. Indeed, this seems like an inappropriate manner in which to address God. "Anyone who says that the Holy One, blessed be He, is lax in the execution of justice, his life shall be outlawed" (*Bava Kama* 50a). God does not pardon so easily.

What Moshe tried to gain, and in this he indeed succeeded, was time. Give me two hours, and then destroy the people of Israel! Moshe runs from Mount Sinai with the tablets of the law in his hands, but time is running out. An hour passes, and he meets Yehoshua and continues to run with him. Another forty-five minutes passed, and they still don't reach the people of Israel. Moshe then decides to abandon the tablets and cast them down, so that he might be able to run more quickly. The tablets fall on the upper left hand corner – "You shall not murder," perhaps only on the word "not."

Moshe continues to run. He reaches the camp, and he has only five minutes left. He run, smashes the golden calf, burns it, and scatters its ashes. Then he cries out: "Whoever is on the Lord's side, let him come to me" (*Shemot* 32:26), and he sets out on a killing spree: "Slay every man his brother, and every man his companion, and every man his neighbor" (*Shemot* 32:27).

What is his goal? To save the people of Israel. Moshe understands that the only way to save the people of Israel is through the action that he performs. Killing thousands of Jews is what allowed the continued existence of the people of Israel.

Afterwards, Moshe appears before God and says: "Now, if you will forgive their sin; and if not, blot me, I pray You, out of Your book which You have written" (*Shemot* 32:32). These are the two possibilities: If I acted properly, God should pardon; if I did not act properly, then I am a murderer, in which case I truly should be blotted from the book which You have written.

Anyone who prefers a "nicer" Moshe can look at the Moshe of the sin of the spies or the Moshe of the story of Korach. There, for some unclear reason, Moshe loses his strength and fails to provide an appropriate response in a series of events. Similarly, in Kivrot Ha-Ta'ava, all that Moshe does is fall on his face.

However, at the end of *Parashat Balak*, Pinchas comes and says that this is precisely what he had learned from Moshe – not in the *beit* *midrash* and not in the framework of Halakha. When Moshe came down from Mount Sinai, he did not deliver a *shiur klali* to the people. In the framework of Halakha, nothing permits bloodshed, especially not on the scale of the blood shed by Moshe. *Chazal* speak of a court that was established to judge and execute each of the three thousand sinners, but according to the plain meaning of the text, the judicial process takes a long time, as does judicial execution (not to mention that a court that executes once in seventy years is called a tyrannical court)!

No one violated the Ten Commandments more than the one who brought them down from heaven. Pinchas learned from his grandfather's brother, Moshe, that if in order to save the people of Israel, it is necessary to kill evildoers, so be it. And this is what he did in the story of Zimri.

**A Broken *Vav***

After the incident involving Zimri, God informs Pinchas: "Behold, I give to him My covenant of peace [*shalom*]" (*Bemidbar* 25:12). The letter *vav* in the word *shalom* is broken off. What is the reason for this change?

The story of Pinchas does not end in our *parasha*. Pinchas reappears in the books of *Yehoshua* and *Shofetim*. In the story of Yiftach, *Chazal* ask why it is that Pinchas did not annul the vow taken by Yiftach. The answer that is offered is that the one would not go to the other for reasons of personal honor – Pinchas was the High Priest, while Yiftach was the savior of Israel.

When we read this *midrash*, the question is obvious: How could Pinchas have lived until then? The conventional answer is that Pinchas merited longevity, and "Eliyahu is Pinchas." But this explanation is difficult. Yiftach sends a conciliatory message to the king of Moav in which he notes that three hundred years have passed since the people of Israel conquered the area. Is it possible that Pinchas lived for three hundred years?

It seems that *Chazal* connected the two stories for a different reason. In the story of the concubine in Giv’a, we read about the killing of the people of Yavesh Gilad because they had failed to join the rest of Israel in the war in Mitzpeh. The people of Israel send twelve hundred soldiers, and they kill men, women that have lain with men, and children.

These verses are very reminiscent of the verses describing Israel's war against the Midyanites in *Parashat Matot*, but this raises a difficulty: In the case of the Midyanites, we understand that the severity of the war stemmed from the severity of the action of the Midyanites: "Harass the Midyanites and smite them" (*Bemidbar* 25:17). But how are we to understand the killing of the people of Yavesh Gilad? However severe the ban pronounced by the people of Israel, how is it possible that it could lead to the deaths of so many Jews?

It seems that the story of the killing of the people of Yavesh took place before the war at Giv'a (this is not the forum in which to expand upon the matter). Thus, we understand the reason for Israel's fall in that war: Pinchas inquired of the Urim and Tumim and received answers that led to destruction – owing to his spiritual unfitness after the episode of Yavesh. After he sinned with extreme zealotry toward the people of Yavesh, God did not answer his inquiries of the Urim and Tumim in a fitting manner. As the *midrash* says: "In time past, the Lord was with him" (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 9:20) – in time past, but not now.[[1]](#footnote-1)

This is the common thread that *Chazal* saw in the *parasha* of Yiftach and the story of the concubine in Giv'a. In both places, according to the *midrash*, a vow was taken that could have and should have been annulled, but this was not done.

Something similar almost happened another time, but there the error was clarified early enough. In the book of *Yehoshua* (22), we read how Israel embarked on a war against the two and a half tribes because they had erected an altar on the east side of the Jordan. There too Pinchas went out at the head of the army, but there the incident ended without tragedy.

Based on what we have seen, despite the fact that we praise the zealotry that must be demonstrated in certain situations, we must pay attention to the circumstances and set restrictions. Zealotry may be practiced only in cases in which the people of Israel are in critical danger – spiritual or physical.

Zealotry can be good as a one-time event. *Chazal* refer to such behavior as *migdar milta*, "fencing the matter." But this cannot turn into a way of life, as Pinchas saw it. Thus, we understand the reason for the broken *vav* in the word "peace."

[This sicha was delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Pinchas 5768 (2008). The adaptation was not reviewed by Harav Medan.]

1. As a result, the priesthood passed to the desendants of Itamar, Eli and his sons, which led to the destruction of Shilo. Later, after several generations, the priesthood passed to Tzadok, who was a descendant of Pinchas the son of Elazar. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)