

Parashat Pinchas sermon July 2017

Bard Cosman

Trigger Warning: This *d'var Torah*, and the Torah portion it describes, contain language and images which almost all civilized people will find offensive.

Our boys marched to war singing. Their marching song was about an immortal zealot, an impassioned avenger who committed acts of shocking boldness and flamboyant violence against enemies who, by their wickedness, had forfeited any claims they might have on mercy, or indeed on life. If our boys could muster a fraction of that zealot's self-confidence and blood-lust, they could win victory and usher in an era of peace and plenty, when goodness and decency would reign unopposed. "His soul goes marching on," they sang.

This was 1861, and the zealot in question was a radical abolitionist named John Brown. Before the War, John Brown went to Kansas and murdered 5 pro-slavery settlers, trying "to strike terror into the hearts of the slaveholders," as one of his followers put it—an unrepentant terrorist, by the strict definition of the word. Captured after the standoff at Harper's Ferry, Brown was hanged for treason and murder, and right-thinking Northerners had a hard time deciding whether Brown was a hero or a villain. The Secret Six, John Brown's financial backers, had to run away to Canada, temporarily. All was forgiven when the Civil War began a year later, so Brown became an immortal hero and martyr, and the intended inspiration for the marchers from Massachusetts. "John Brown's body lies a-mouldering in the grave, but his soul goes marching on." Suddenly versions of that John Brown Song were on everybody's lips, making it the *Yerushalayim shel Zahav* of the Union's war.

Like so many features of American and Christian culture, this has a Jewish origin. We too have an immortal zealot, an impassioned avenger who commits flamboyant acts of terrorizing violence against sinful enemies who don't deserve mercy. In Parashat Balak last week, we saw Pinchas ben Elazar take a spear and, with miraculous strength, skewer two people who were *in flagrante delicto*, as the Edomites would say. This week's parashah is named after our hero Pinchas, and it reveals the names of the hunks of meat on Pinchas's human-kebob: On the shaft of the spear is Zimri, a leader of the tribe of Simeon, and taking point position is Cozbi, a Midianite princess. OK, that's in bad taste, but so is the story itself, profoundly and intentionally, from its inception. It is impossible to escape the ghoulish mockery of sexual intercourse implied in Pinchas's spearing the two lovers with one thrust. And therein lies the terror element: it says to Israelites, in their dealings with other tribes: penetrate

not, lest you be penetrated. In the Midrash Rabbah, the rabbis detail the course that the spear took through the anatomies of Zimri and Cozbi, and they clearly understand that this is supposed to be an obscene story.

It is also a story of heroism, of action in the face of adversity and societal paralysis. According to Midrash, always charmingly anachronistic, Pinchas was in the Sanhedrin, just one citizen out of many, when they were debating what if anything they could possibly do about the speculations of people like Zimri, and the resulting plague that had taken the lives of 24,000 Israelites. Pinchas arose from the debate without a word, hiding the spearhead in his shirt, and using the spear-shaft as a walking stick. In the words of John Brown, “These men are all talk. What we need is action—action!”

“Man,” says the poet, referring to civilized man—“Man propounds negotiations, Man accepts the compromise. / Very rarely will he squarely push the logic of a fact / To its ultimate conclusion in unmitigated *act*.” Civilization, in this case, is rabbinic Judaism; we Jews are a religious civilization—People of the Book, who in our civilized way, prize argument and respect opinion. But sometimes we have trouble deciding upon action, so we debate and deliberate—and then there’s uncivilized Pinchas, quietly walking out of the meeting room, with his hands in his pockets. Is that man really one of us?

The word Hashem uses to praise Pinchas is *kin’ah*, or zeal: “*b’kan’oh et-kin-ati*—with his zeal he wreaked my vengeance” is an approximate translation (Num 25:11). The same root, meaning ‘zealous’ or ‘passionate,’ with a connotation of ‘vengeful,’ is what ties the haftarah to Pinchas’s Torah portion: in the usual haftarah for Pinchas (today’s is different, because we’re in the ‘3 weeks’ period), you see Elijah, running from the queen’s police and feeling sorry for himself. Elijah complains to G-d in self-justification: “*kanno kinneiti laShem*—I have been exceedingly zealous for G-d.” Yes, he sure had been—Elijah had just killed 450 prophets of Baal. As Meshi, a contemporary commentator, points out, it was just that zealous violence that got Elijah fired from his prophet’s position by Hashem, the only one among the prophets to be told by G-d to ‘hang up his gloves,’ so it might be that the haftarah is chosen to criticize rather than simply to complement the Torah portion. But among historical commentators, Pinchas and Elijah have so much in common that the rabbinic tradition can be summarized by the statement, Pinchas *is* Elijah [Pirke R El 47; Targ Yer on Num 25:12].

Let’s see how Pinchas’s zealous act mattered. There is a plague going on, and thousands of Israelites have already died. The plague is brought by Hashem in response to the Israelite men’s whoring with Moabite and Midianite women, the so-called Sin of Ba’al-Peor. All the Israelite leaders, including Moses, recognize there’s a big problem, but only Pinchas is inspired to take action. And as soon as he spears Zimri and Cozbi, the plague ceases abruptly. 24,000 have died, but the almost-human-sacrifice of Zimri stops the plague cold.

A political assassin is typically concerned that his message gets across correctly, and a terrorist is constantly concerned that she is really striking fear into the target audience; knowing these things, one can almost hear the voice of Pinchas. It's the voice of a performance artist, trying to maximize the shock value of his work. "What should I call this installation?" asks Pinchas, raising the two corpses aloft on his spear, with his miraculous strength. "How about *All's Fair in Love and War*? But perhaps that's in bad taste—how about *Still Life with Transgression*? Would anybody like to see a second run-through?" *Nothing* Pinchas does can be within the bounds of propriety—that's his trademark. And yet, the commentators hold their noses and praise Pinchas for obeying a little-known law that even Moses the lawgiver had forgotten. Tractate Sanhedrin cites a law, tailor-made for Pinchas, that says if an Israelite man cohabits with a Midianite woman, then any zealot may freely kill him, as long as it's in done public and done with selfless, zealous passion. Pinchas gets praise for knowing this law and carrying it out to the letter. In other words, not to put too fine a point on it, Pinchas carries the law on the tip of his spear. Or, to put it scientifically, a Pinchas-like entity creates a local distortion in the Law Continuum such that all of its actions become legal. As the poet says, he's "that other Law we live by."¹ But, holding their own, the rabbis also say that if Pinchas were to have asked for advice, they still would have said 'no—don't kill Zimri—that would be murder.'

Now let's carry that one more logical step: the rabbis are admitting that they, or their avatars in the imagined past, would actually not have sanctioned Pinchas's rash and inspired act of violence, the very act that saved the Jewish people. But if Hashem was waiting for just this act to end the plague, then absent the act, the plague should continue. Maybe 44,000 Jews would die; maybe they would *all* die—after all, Hashem did state that he was about to destroy the Jewish people (Num25:11) until Pinchas intervened. So the rabbis are saying something quite astonishing: that they would not condone violent action of this sort, even though the fate of the whole *Klal Yisrael* hung in the balance. And that's why Pinchas, like Elijah, had better be immortal: not in every age, thank Goodness, but in many ages, situations arise in which the deliberative governing body of Jewish leaders just isn't up to ensuring Jewish survival, and to their credit, they admit as much. When survival is threatened, the Senate, as it were, suspends itself and appoints a Dictator, as it were. And they say "Please, strong man of action, do what whatever you strong men of action do. If it's bloody or dirty or in bad taste, just call us back when it's over."

And indeed, at times of existential threat, strong and zealous women of action have arisen and have made our enemies spill their blood and brains. Judith, Yael, Deborah, and Yiftach, the Maccabee brothers—lineal descendants of Pinchas, by the way—the Bielski brothers, the fighters of Irgun—take your pick as we approach the contentious present.

¹ This and previous quotation from Kipling, "The Female of the Species," 1911.

Lawless people answering to a higher calling, violating social norms, acting passionately and with bloodshed, sometimes even blood-lust, for the sake of the People's survival—incarnations of Pinchas ben Elazar. They don't always win their fights: think of the Zealots in the Great Revolt against the Romans. But there is something immortal about them. When the rabbis say "Pinchas is Elijah," it does seem like Pinchas has a strong share in Elijah's fabled immortality.

And there is another timeless attribute of Elijah, which is heralding the Messiah. Does Pinchas do that too? With his zeal and taste for violence, Pinchas should fit right in with Jewish eschatology. The wars that precede the Messianic Era are a good place for a bloody-minded zealot with prior field experience—as we'll see in next week's Torah portion, Pinchas went along as the religious commissar on the expedition to exterminate the Midianites (Num 31:6), and later he performed that same function in the punitive war against the Tribe of Benjamin (Judges 20:28).

While it is not explicit in Jewish lore that Pinchas heralds Messiah, at least some Americans have given him that role. Let's go back to that song, "John Brown's Body." To follow it, we have to know that in the Christian dispensation, John the Baptist is specifically identified as Elijah (Matt 11:14), with Jesus of course representing *meshiach*. The original "John Brown's Body" had been a simple and crude ditty, written by soldiers for soldiers, with lines like "we will hang Jeff Davis from a sour apple tree," but it did contain the core idea that John Brown's soul was marching with the army. This inspired two American intellectuals, William Patton and Julia Howe, who separately rewrote "John Brown's Body" to include more sophisticated theological explications of the Union cause.

William Patton's version contains the lines, "John Brown was John the Baptist of the Christ we are to see / Christ who of the bondmen shall the liberator be." Not great poetry, but pay attention to the theology. Since John the Baptist is Elijah, Patton is making the claim that John Brown is Elijah. Think about that—Elijah has already come, so this was the war that should bring the advent of the Messiah! We say we too hope for that blessed event. As we sing in "*Eliyahu Hanavi*," *bim'heirah v'yameinu, yavo eileinu*—may he come speedily, and in our days.

And then Julia Howe's version of the John Brown Song, the apocalyptic "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which doesn't mention John Brown by name, has at its theological core a promise of Divine favor for exterminating the enemies of G-d: "I have read a fiery gospel writ in burnished rows of steel: / "As ye deal with my contemners, so with you my grace shall deal." In plain English, G-d says "As you destroy my enemies, so I'll reward you." Christian commentators struggle to find a New Testament source for this militant guarantee of grace for those who kill G-d's enemies—some even consider it sacrilegious. But we know just where to find that source, don't we? Page 918, verse 12: *Lachen emor, hineni noten lo et-briti shalom*, or

in the sonorous tones of the King James Bible, “Wherefore say: Behold, I give unto Pinchas my covenant of peace: And Pinchas shall have it, and his seed after him, even the covenant of an everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his G-d” (Num 25:12-13). Note that this wasn’t a lifetime service award for Pinchas, whose lifetime of service came afterward: this was an explicit response to the single episode when the hot-headed young Levite harpooned Zimri and Cozbi.

Some argue that “Battle Hymn of the Republic” was an unrelated lyric that was just set to the catchy marching tune of “John Brown’s Body,” but was not about John Brown at all. That’s how I learned the story, anyway—but that’s awfully disingenuous: John Brown had six secret financial backers, one of whom just happened to be Julia Howe’s husband Sam! Of course she was writing about John Brown, her late-lamented personal friend, client, and martyr to her cause. And Howe was doing exactly what her abolitionist colleague William Patton had done two months earlier, laying out a theological argument for the crusading Union soldier, offering John Brown as an example to emulate, and celebrating him as a Biblical hero. Knowing that Patton had already equated Brown to Elijah, Howe was now equating Brown with Pinchas, and dreaming that an army of Pinchases might descend with their righteous spears on the Zimris and Cozbis of the Confederacy. “Burnished rows of steel” indeed—each one, she hoped, adorned with two slaveholders’ corpses.

So, by the transitive property of historical zealots, if John Brown = Elijah (Patton) and John Brown = Pinchas (Howe), then Elijah = Pinchas. These lyrics show that the rabbinic principle, *Pinchas is Elijah*, was very much alive in the America of the 19th Century. And now, in this century? At least it’s worth remembering whom you’re inviting into your home when you set out the cup for Elijah, or when you sing *Eliyahu* at the conclusion of Shabbat. It’s Pinchas the political killer; Pinchas the terrorizer; Pinchas, the blood artist; Pinchas, the immortal rescuer of our people. Shall *he* come speedily, and in our days?