

Vigorously Defending Core Principles

This week's is a very challenging Torah portion.

To set the scene, we look at the tail end of last week's *parashah*. The King of Moab had hired the prophet Balaam to curse the Hebrews, though the curses turned to blessings inside Balaam's mouth. Nevertheless, the Hebrews drew a curse on their own heads through bad choices of their own design.

Our text tells us that the Israelite men pursued improper relations with Moabite women, "who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god, and the people partook of them and worshiped their god" (Numbers 25:2). The Eternal's rage flares, and God orders Moses to publicly execute the people's leaders as a warning to the entire nation. But before Moses can comply, "An Israelite man brought a Midianite woman over to his companions, in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community who were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (Num. 25:6). He brings her into his tent, for illicit reasons we are left to imagine; and Pinchas, the son of the High Priest Eleazar, storms in and stabs both of them through their bellies. A plague that had been ravaging the camp halts; and, in this week's Torah portion, Pinchas is praised and rewarded for his vigilante justice. Indeed, God promises *הִנְנִי נֹתֵן לוֹ אֶת-בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם*, "Behold, I give him *briti shalom*, my covenant of peace" (Num. 25:12) and the eternal inheritance of the priesthood.

The story of Pinchas is one of the Torah's most difficult for us to read today. First, the brutal tale seems to celebrate summary execution. And second, Pinchas is praised for defending a principle we tend to revile today, namely, the sexual purity of the Israelite nation.

The easiest sermon for me to give would be to list all the ways in which this story does not align with our values today. To give that sermon, as many others have done, I would have to ignore almost every classical commentary in Jewish tradition, seemingly all of which join God in endorsing Pinchas's actions. Indeed, I might teach that the letter *vav* of the word *shalom* in *briti shalom*, "my covenant of peace" is broken in order to teach that the "peace" of Pinchas was actually shattered by his violence. But that would also ignore classical rabbinic commentary, which sees the broken *vav* as a reminder that priests need to be whole and pure, *just like Pinchas* (Daat Z'kenim on Num. 25:12), or even as a sign that Pinchas lived forever, free from the clutches of the angel of death (Sforno on Num. 25:12). It might seem that modern sensibilities simply have no room for the story of Pinchas; we define ourselves and our values against what we find here in the Torah.

There is, of course, some truth to that. Today's world is nothing like the world described in this story. Both our acceptance of diversity and our reliance on the rule of law — executed by human judgment and not divine fiat — suggest that the story of

Pinchas should be kept in the past. Still, I believe the core thrust of the story offers us an important lesson and challenges us to look at today's world from a different point of view.

First, let's be clear. It is never acceptable to attack someone because of who they choose as their sexual partner. If the Torah wanted every person who slept with a Midianite to be executed, Moses himself would have been killed before ever he saw God at the burning bush! His wife was a Midianite, and his father-in-law – a trusted advisor and friend – was the High Priest of Midian. Thus it cannot be the case that the Torah is opposed to Israelites marrying Midianites *per se*. Rather, the Torah is concerned with these relationships drawing the Children of Israel to worship foreign gods.

Indeed, passages in both Exodus (34:11-16) and Deuteronomy (7:1-4) are explicit about this. Unions with foreigners are forbidden because they lead to estrangement from the God of Israel. Throughout the Hebrew Bible, sexual infidelity and theological infidelity are linked: the prohibition against adultery applies not only to one's spouse but to God as well. And Pinchas doesn't act only against the Midianites. Later in the Book of Judges, Pinchas will take up arms against his own brethren, the Tribe of Benjamin, when they betray core Jewish values and, in turn, attack one of their own (Judges 19-21). It's not the identity that matters when facing wrongdoing – what matters is a person's behavior.

And let's be clear about one more thing. Killing another person, even a person committing a serious crime, is morally forbidden in almost any circumstance except self-defense. While the Torah is replete with instances of capital punishment, the Rabbis knew that the world they lived in was different from the world of the Torah – just as we know today! As flawed human beings, we can't know if another person *truly* deserves to die. Even if it appears beyond a shadow of a doubt that someone is guilty of a capital offense, our tradition leaves it only in God's hands to take human life. Capital punishment is all but erased from traditional Judaism, a position many – including myself – maintain still today.

So if the Torah isn't teaching us to be vigilantes, and if it's not teaching us to hate our foreign neighbors, what *is* it teaching us?

First, I think we can find in this story a challenge to determine which core principles are absolutely non-negotiable for us and our society. In the world of the Torah, idolatry was intolerable – and in a time with no long-term imprisonment, execution was the method imagined for erasing evil from the community's midst. But what about our world today? To take an example, the United States Constitution enumerates treason a capital offense, and many states regard murder as an unforgiveable crime. These two acts – treason and murder – each involve a betrayal. One is public and the other private, and both violate the safety and sanctity of life on the communal and personal levels.

Are there other such examples? Setting aside the question of public execution, we can still ask: What are the core, uncompromisable principles in the society we strive to build?

Now, I have some answers myself; and I'm sure you have some as well. One key difference between our society and the one imagined in the Torah is that ours is governed by diverse opinions. We have to work out our shared agreements on what's right and wrong and therefore need to be very careful about what we decree is absolutely out of bounds in a shared pluralistic society.

But the question remains. Pinchas acted alone, and we can ask ourselves: Are there any comparable circumstances that might lead me to take drastic measure to defend my highest ideals? And then, perhaps most importantly of all, I can ask: What am I doing to enact those ideals today?

Let's be honest: Pinchas is not the best role model we can pull out of the Torah. But his story is very memorable and, when we let it, goads us to ask hard questions of ourselves and our own moral commitments. Perhaps there is a 21st-century version of righteous, passionate action taken in defense of our most treasured values.

A midrash teaches that Pinchas was touched by God, indeed, that he served as an angel with a face enflamed; and he is among those of whom it is said גִּבְרֵי כֹחַ עֲשֵׂי דְבָרַי, "Mighty in strength who do God's word" (Ps. 103:20) (Leviticus Rabbah 1:1). Perhaps we can find our own time for angelic strength, standing up for what we believe is right and inspiring the passion of those we trust.