



DVAR TZEDEK

Parshat Pinchas 5768

By Rabbi James Jacobson-Maisels

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Just before *Parshat Pinchas* begins, Israelite men have begun sleeping with foreign women. These relations have brought the Israelites to worship foreign gods and have caused, in response, a Divine plague to break out in the Israelite camp. God and Moshe then command the Israelites to slaughter the idol worshipers among the Israelites. In the very next verse, we learn that Zimri ben Salu (an Israelite) and Kozbi bat Tzur (a Midianite) publicly display their relationship as Zimri takes Kozbi back to his tent to sleep with her. Our *parshah* opens with the conclusion of the bloody tale as Pinchas slaughters Zimri and Kozbi and ends the plague.¹

The surface meaning of the story seems to indicate that Pinchas has acted properly and saved the Israelites. However, R. Mordechai Yosef Leiner of Izbica, a Polish Chassidic Rebbe, turns this understanding on its head. He argues that Pinchas is profoundly mistaken. Though it seems that Zimri is acting improperly according to the acknowledged law, he is, according to R. Leiner, following a deeper divine will, which compels him to violate the accepted standards. R. Leiner teaches that Zimri and Kozbi are cosmic soul-mates and that their joining together is part of the mystical process of *tikkun*, healing the cosmos, often understood in Kabbalah as the erotic union of masculine and feminine. It is rather Pinchas who, in his immature zealotry and rash judgment, acts wrongly and tragically, failing to see the deeper motivation and attunement of Zimri and Kozbi, failing to see their righteous civil disobedience—their attempt to participate in the healing of the world—for what it is.²

And so it seems that both Pinchas, according to the *pshat* (simple meaning) of the text, and Zimri, according to R. Leiner's understanding, perform acts of radical activism. In the midst of values upturned, they stage their rebellions fervently by taking the law into their own hands and acting on their own beliefs. Yet it seems that both Pinchas and Zimri, though seeking to push their community to adhere to a moral standard, ultimately produce destructive consequences.

This story is a cautionary one for activists, radical or otherwise. In our pursuit of justice, of shaping a world that embraces our sense of morality, how do we ensure that our actions are not rash and clouded, but rather mindful and clear? How do we ensure that these moments of radical activism bring healing and not destruction? Though we might all, with R. Leiner, see appropriate places for civil disobedience, how do we ensure that our actions embody courageous resistance and not oppressive zealotry?

R. Leiner suggests two qualities that can bring us closer to a place of certainty as we make choices about how to act in the world. The first is humility. We should develop a wise, balanced humility that recognizes our own human frailty rather than a crushing "repulsive humility," as R. Leiner terms it, which makes us see ourselves as worthless or incapable of action.³ Humility helps us recognize our fallible human nature and keeps us aware of the fact that there is always the possibility, in some way or element, that we have misjudged our circumstances. Humility leaves us no

¹ Bamidbar 25

² Mei ha'Shiloach, *Parshat Pinchas*, vol. 1, *va'yaar Pinchas*

³ Mei ha'Shiloach, *Parshat Beshalach*, *v'lo sham'u*

less committed, but rather bolstered with the ever present possibility of re-examining our commitments to both ideals and action.

The second precursor to ethical action is a deep process of introspection, by which one attempts to make sure that no misplaced ego-driven motives—anger, revenge, self-righteousness, image, fame, fear, desire, etc.—are in fact motivating one's actions.⁴ Appropriate action, R. Leiner teaches, can only be discovered by courageously going within and investigating the place from which our struggle for justice emerges.

Such introspection and humility can prevent us from acting rashly based on our anger and misguided self-certainty. When we do decide to act, we must act with the purity, compassion and clarity that bring healing rather than division. When we approach activism with humility and deep introspection, we have done our best to ensure that our choices will be right. The true political activist, then, must also be a spiritual activist. Only thus, our *parshah* teaches, can we avoid the pitfall of zealotry and wisely dance through the different modes of political action in order to bring justice to our world.



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⁴Mei ha'Shiloach, *Parshat Va'yigash*, vol. 1, *va'yomer Yisrael rav od*

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