

From the Rabbi's Desk
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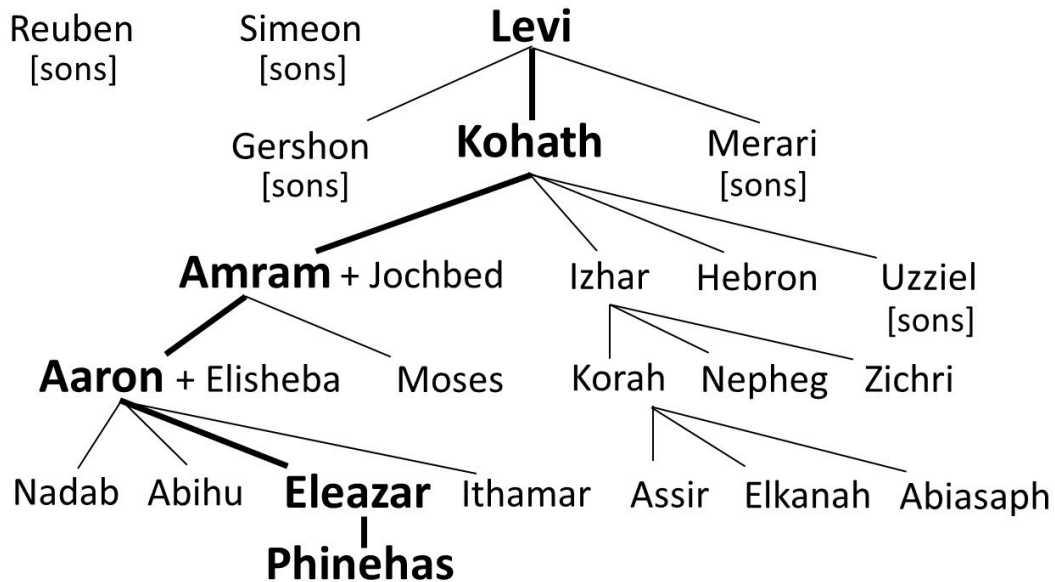
Stories with a Twist
[301]

The Tribes Began to Demean Pinehas
 (A Study in the Loneliness of the Proactive Leader)
 Insights into Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 82a



Background to Our Story

Levi's family Tree



Numbers Chapter 25: 1-15

¹ While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women,² who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god. The people partook of them and worshiped that god.³ Thus Israel attached itself to Baal-peor, and the Lord was

incensed with Israel.⁴ The Lord said to Moses, "Take all the ringleaders and have them publicly impaled before the Lord, so that the Lord's wrath may turn away from Israel."⁵ So Moses said to Israel's officials, "Each of you slay those of his men who attached themselves to Baal-peor."

⁶ Just then one of the Israelites came and 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. ⁷ When Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand,⁸ he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked.⁹ Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

¹⁰ The Lord spoke to Moses, saying,¹¹ "Phinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion.¹² Say, therefore, 'I grant him My pact of friendship. ¹³ It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.'"

¹⁴ The name of the Israelite who was killed, the one who was killed with the Midianite woman, was Zimri son of Salu, chieftain of a Simeonite ancestral house. ¹⁵ The name of the Midianite woman who was killed was Cozbi daughter of Zur; he was the tribal head of an ancestral house in Midian.



Let's Review the Biblical Story – What is the sequence of events? Who is

who in our story?

? What is your first reaction when reading the Biblical story?

The Text: Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 82a

"ויאמר משה אל שפטי ישראל וגו'.

הלך שבטו של שמעון אצל זמרי בן סלוא, אמרו לו: "הן דנין דיני נפשות, ואתה יושב ושותק? מה עשה? עמד וקיבץ עשרים וארבעה אלף מישראל, והלך אצל כזבי, אמר לה: "השמיעי לי!" אמרה לו: "בת מלך אני, וכן צוה לי אבי: 'לא תשמעי אלא לגדול שבָהֶם'". אמר לה: "אף הוא נשיא שבט הוא, ולא עוד אלא שהוא גדול ממנו, שהוא שני לבטן והוא שלישי לבטן".

תפשה בבִּלְוֵרִיתָהּ, והביאה אצל משה. אמר לו: "בן עמרם! זו אסורה או מותרת? ואם תאמר אסורה, בת יתרו מי התירה לה?" נתעלמה ממנו הלכה, געו כולם בבכיָה, והיגו דכתיב: "והמה בכים פתח אהל מועד".

וכתיב: "וירא פנחס בן אלעזר".

מה ראה?

אמר רב: ראה מעשה, ונזכר הלכה. אמר לו: "אחי אבי אבא, לא כך לימדתני בְּרִדְתָּהּ מהר סיני: הבעל את הנכרית קנאין פוגעין בו!" אמר לו: "קרינינא דאיגרתא איהו ליהוי פרוּוֹנְקָא".

Zimri said to her: He, too, referring to himself, is the head of a tribe; moreover, he is greater than Moses, as he is the second of the womb, as he descends from Simeon, the second son of Jacob, and Moses is the third of the womb, as he descends from Levi, the third son of Jacob.

He seized her [Cozbi] by her forelock and brought her before Moses.

Zimri said to Moses: Son of Amram, is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you say that she is forbidden, as for the daughter of Yitro to whom you are married, who permitted her to you?

The *halakha* with regard to the proper course of action when encountering a Jewish man engaging in intercourse with a gentile woman eluded Moses. All of the members of the Sanhedrin bawled in their weeping, and that is the meaning of that which is written: "And they are crying at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting" (Numbers 25:6). And it is written thereafter: "And Pinehas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw and arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand" (Numbers 25:7).

The Gemara asks: What did Pinehas see that led him to arise and take action?

Rav says: He saw the incident taking place before him and he remembered the *halakha*. He said to Moses: Brother of the father of my father, as Moses was the brother of his grandfather Aaron, did you not teach me this during your descent from Mount Sinai: One who engages in intercourse with a gentile woman, zealots strike him?

Moses said to him: Let the one who reads the letter be the agent [*parvanka*] to fulfill its contents.

And Shmuel says: Pinehas saw and considered the meaning of the verse: "There is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the Lord" (Proverbs

21:30), which the Sages interpreted to mean: Anywhere that there is desecration of the Lord's name, one does not show respect to the teacher. In those situations, one need not consult his teacher, but must immediately proceed to right the wrong that is transpiring. Therefore, he took the spear and took immediate action.

Rabbi Yitzhak says that Rabbi Eliezer says: He saw that an angel came and destroyed among the people in punishment for the sin of Zimri, and he realized that he must take immediate action to ameliorate the situation.

The Action

It is written with regard to Pinehas: "He arose from amidst the assembly and he took a spear in his hand" (Numbers 25:7). From here, where it is written that he took the spear only after he arose from the assembly, it is derived that one does not enter the study hall with a weapon. The assembly in this context is referring to the seat of the Sanhedrin.

Pinehas removed the blade of the spear and placed it in his garment [*be'unkalo*] and held the shaft of the spear like a walking stick, and he was walking, leaning on his walking stick, the shaft of the spear. And once he reached the tribe of Simeon he said: Where did we find that the tribe of Levi is greater than that of Simeon? If all the members of your tribe submit to the temptation of the women of Moab, I may do so as well. After hearing that statement, the members of the tribe of Simeon said: Allow him to enter; like us, he too is entering to attend to his needs and engage in intercourse with the Moabite women. They rejoiced and said: Apparently, the pious and God-fearing have permitted this matter, as Pinehas is one of them.

Rabbi Yoĥanan says: Six miracles were performed for Pinehas when he killed Zimri. One is that Zimri should have separated himself from Cozbi, and he did not separate himself. Had he done so, it would have been prohibited for Pinehas to kill him. And one is that Zimri should have spoken and alerted the members of his tribe to come to his assistance, and he did not speak. And one is that Pinehas directed the spear precisely to the male genitals of Zimri and to the female genitals of

Cozbi so that the reason that he killed them would be evident. And one is that Zimri and Cozbi did not fall from the spear. And one is that an angel came and raised the lintel of that chamber so that Pinehas could emerge holding them aloft on the spear. And one is that an angel came and caused destruction among the people, distracting them from interfering with the actions of Pinehas.

Pinehas came and slammed them on the ground before the Omnipresent and said before Him: Master of the Universe, will twenty-four thousand of the children of Israel fall due to these sinners? As it is stated: "And those that died in the plague were twenty-four thousand" (Numbers 25:9). And that is the meaning of that which is written: "And Pinehas stood and wrought judgment and the plague was stayed" (Psalms 106:30).

Rabbi Elazar says: It is not stated in the verse: And prayed [*vayitpallel*]; rather, it is stated *vayefalel*. This teaches that Pinehas, as it were, wrought judgment [*pelilut*] with his Creator.

The Aftermath of the Action

The ministering angels sought to push him away because he spoke harshly to God. The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them: Leave him be; he is a zealot, son of a zealot, from the tribe of Levi, who was zealous in avenging the violation of his sister Dinah; he is an alleviator of wrath, son of an alleviator of wrath, a descendant of Aaron, who alleviated the wrath of God during the plague that followed the assembly of Korah.

The tribes began to demean Pinehas: Did you see this son of Puti, so-called because his mother was one of the daughters of Putiel (see Exodus 6:25), and they interpreted homiletically: As Yitro, the father of his mother, according to one rabbinic tradition, fattened [*shepitem*] calves for idol worship, and he impudently killed the prince of a tribe of Israel without a trial.

In response, the verse comes and provides his lineage as "Pinehas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest" (Numbers 25:11).

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Moses: Be the first to greet Pinehas with a blessing of peace, to honor him before the people, as it is stated: "Therefore say: I

hereby give to him My covenant of peace” (Numbers 25:12), and it is stated: “And it shall be unto him and to his descendants after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and he atoned for the children of Israel” (Numbers 25:13), and this atonement that he facilitated is worthy of continuing to atone forever.



Explaining the Story - What is going on in our story? (Explain the sequence of events)

Comprehension and Analysis Questions

Prelude to the Action

? Why did Moses instruct the judges of Israel to slay the men who have adhered unto Ba'al-Peor?

? “The tribe of Simeon went to Zimri, son of Salu, their leader, and said to him: They are judging cases of capital law and executing us and you are sitting and are silent?” What was the expectation of the members of the tribe of Simeon?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did Zimri, son of Salu go and ask Cozbi, daughter of Zur to submit to him?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

? What was Zimri, son of Salu’s justification for why Cozbi, daughter of Zur should submit to him?

? How was Zimri, son of Salu challenging Moses?

Bonus ? How could Moses have answered to Zimri, son of Salu’s challenge?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why didn’t Moses answer to Zimri?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did the *halakha* with regard to the proper course of action when encountering a Jewish man engaging in intercourse with a gentile woman elude Moses?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Bonus ? Why did everyone start crying?

Extra Bonus ? "And Pinehas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the priest, saw and arose from the midst of the congregation and took a spear in his hand" (Numbers 25:7). In your own words, what did Pinehas see?

Extra Bonus ? Once Pinehas reminded Moses of the right course of action (the forgotten *halakha*) why did Moses let Pinehas take charge (Let the one who reads the letter be the agent [*parvanka*] to fulfill its contents)?

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

The Action

? Why did Pinehas remove the blade of the spear and place it in his garment when he went to Zimri ben Salu's tent?

? Why did Pinehas hint to the members of the tribe of Simeon that he was intending to sin as well?

Bonus ? Why were the members of the tribe of Simeon eager to let Pinehas in?

Extra Bonus ? Why was a miracle that Zimri should have separated himself from Cozbi, and he did not separate himself? Wouldn't it have been better if Zimri would have separated, thus sparing Pinehas the task of killing him?

Extra Bonus ? Why did Pinehas bring Zimri and Cozbi impaled before God (and the Assembly)? What was his goal?

The Aftermath of the Action

? Why did the ministering angels seek to push Pinehas away? **?** How does God defend Pinehas?

Extra Bonus ? Why did the tribes begin demeaning Pinehas? (hint: his lineage was just the excuse)

Answer.1 _____

Answer 2 _____

Answer 3 _____

Extra Bonus ? Why was it necessary for God to instruct Moses to be the first to greet Pinehas with a blessing of peace?

“The Twist” – Or the Lessons We Can Learn from These Texts

! Dammed if you do, damned if you don't! The challenging predicament of a proactive leader in a time of crisis.



Our story, the Talmudic version of Pinehas' act of zealotry, is a story about a story, or a story about how to read a story.

The Torah tells us in no uncertain terms, that it was only because of Pinehas' action that the plague that had killed 24,000 people was checked. And yet, the modern reader feels discomfort when reading the Torah verses. Didn't Pinehas have any other way to stop the plague? Shouldn't he have consulted with Moses? Who gave him the authority to take the law into his own hands? Truth being told, when contemplating zealotry, we all feel uneasy, to say the least.

Our Talmudic story provides us the (a) backdrop of our story: Zealotry didn't take place in a vacuum. Moses' authority has been challenged. Moses himself was impotent to act, and so were the rest of the leaders. People were crying in despair, the brazenness of the sinners was paramount, and yes, people were dying right and left. This was the stage in which Pinehas felt he needed to act. And yet, even though he "saved the day," nobody rushed to congratulate him, or even to thank

him. The angels wished to push him, the rest of the tribes demeaned him, and even Moses needed to be instructed to publicly recognize Pinehas.

Our story reminds us of something we know too well; that in times of crisis it is difficult to find men and women of decision who are proactive leaders. Not only that, but after these men and women of action "save the day," many times they still face condemnation and criticism from people who claim they could have done it better.

The bombing of Dresden and the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, the acceptance of German reparations by Ben Gurion in 1952, the acceptance of the Uganda scheme by Herzl in 1903, among many others, are examples of difficult decisions taken by proactive leaders in difficult times.

Our story is one that praises decisiveness in situations of uncertainty and paralysis while reminding us that decisive and proactive leaders are prone to face criticism and condemnation, primarily from people who were incapable or unwilling to take action.