

PINCHAS (NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)

Righteous Indignation vs. Abortion Clinics

2005 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

Did you read about 38-year-old Eric Rudolph? Rudolph, for religious reasons, is opposed to abortion. That opinion, to a great extent, is consistent with Jewish Law. (That, in spite of the fact that many Jewish groups, including Hadassah and the ADL, seem to believe in the so-called “woman’s right to choose.” See “Pro-choice Judaism".)

He is also opposed, for religious reasons, to intimate relationships between individuals of the same gender. Again, he’s not far off the mark.

Mr. Rudolph, due to his deep religious convictions, decided to “share” his faith with others. He did so by blowing up two abortion clinics, one bar, and the Atlanta Olympics. (I’m not sure about the Olympic connection.) He will spend the rest of his life in prison for killing two people, and injuring over 100 others.

And he’s glad he did it.

What could possibly lead a supposedly religious person with Bible-inspired reverence for human life to perform such dastardly deeds? How could a person opposed to the murder of pre-born humans justify the murder of already-born humans????

Some would try to justify his actions based upon last week's and this week's Torah Readings.

At the end of last week's Torah Portion, G-d was angry. Very angry. 24-thousand-casualty angry.

The Midianites and Moabites sought to neutralize Israel's Divine protection by undermining their morals. They reasoned that if they could somehow lead the Israelites to commit sins of idolatry and promiscuity, G-d would become angry with them and no longer protect them. This would allow Midian and Moab to attack the Israelites and destroy them.

The plan worked. The Israelite camp was in total disarray. The holy Camp of Israel had descended into an orgy of lust and heresy. G-d responded by releasing a plague against His nation that was killing people by the thousands.

No one, not even Moses, knew what to do. One of the tribal leaders, Zimri, led a Midianite prostitute straight to Moses, and confronted him with his plans to sin. Moses cried; he didn't know what to do. The Elders cried; they didn't know what to do either.

What a crime! What a terrible sin! Society was falling apart before their eyes, and no one knew what to do. No one, that is, except Pinchas, Moses' great-nephew. He grabbed a spear and killed Zimri and the prostitute. The plague, which had killed 24 thousand people, immediately ended.

Nowhere in the Torah does it say that a sin such as Zimri's is punishable by death. Idolatry is a capital crime; so is adultery. Intimacy with a prostitute is a vile, despicable act. But it is not punishable by death.

Yet, Pinchas, a pure-hearted fellow, saw corruption and immorality. It bothered him. It angered him. And so, in a spontaneous act of righteous indignation, he took the law into his own hands. He killed the perpetrators.

How did G-d feel about Pinchas' actions? Apparently, He was quite pleased. First of all, He stopped the plague. Also, as we see in the beginning of this week's Torah Portion, Pinchas was in line for a promotion. Although he was a descendent of Aaron, Pinchas was not yet a member of the Priesthood; that honor was for Aaron, his sons, and their FUTURE descendents. Pinchas was already living at the time his father and grandfather were elevated to the Priesthood. He was not included. Pinchas was a "common" Levite.

But not anymore:

G-d spoke to Moses, saying, "Pinchas, a son of Elazar, and a grandson of Aaron the Priest turned away my wrath from the Children of Israel when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so that I didn't destroy the Israelites in My vengeance. Therefore, say, I hereby give him My covenant of peace. There will be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal Priesthood because he took vengeance for his G-d, and he atoned for the Children of Israel. (Numbers, 25:10-13)

There you have it. Pinchas, a simple Levite, saw a sin being committed, and no one was doing a thing about it. He grabbed a spear and killed the sinners. G-d said 'atta boy!' and made him a Priest!

Is it okay to take the law into your own hands like Pinchas did?!! Should we go around punishing people who violate religious law and expect to be praised for it?

There is obviously more to the Pinchas story than meets the eye. A simple reading of last and this week's Torah Portions gives us a picture of a wide-eyed fanatic who impulsively seizes a weapon and angrily pierces those who don't see things his way.

Such a course of action would seem to justify all kinds of vigilantism. It allows sick people to bomb abortion clinics and attack people whose personal lifestyles differ with “mainstream” religious views. It allowed Japanese pilots to throw themselves at American ships and Muslim fiends to send babies to Heaven on their own way to hell.

This is not at all where Pinchas was coming from. In reality, it was quite different.

[DISCLAIMER: IT IS VERY IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND THAT THE EXPLANATION YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ IS ALMOST TOTALLY THEORETICAL. AS FAR AS I KNOW, THIS RULE HAS BEEN APPLIED EXACTLY ONCE IN HISTORY. THIS CASE, AS WE SHALL *SEE, IS THE EXCEPTION THAT PROVES THE RULE.]***

There is a law, not spelled out in the Written Torah, that has an extremely limited application. It states that if a person acts the way Zimri did, a “*Kanai*,” literally, a zealot, a person who is filled with righteous indignation, is permitted to kill the perpetrator.

Let me explain. As I mentioned above, there are many sexual crimes, such as adultery and bestiality, that are punishable by execution. (At least theoretically. Now what, you may ask, is the point of a capital punishment that is never carried out? See “*A Capital Idea*”.) G-d takes these sins very seriously. How different is Zimri’s act of cohabiting with a Midianite prostitute?

Therefore, a person whose dedication to G-d is unwavering and absolute would be permitted, in this particular circumstance, to carry out this “extra-legal” punishment. The catch is that one’s dedication must be beyond question, as we will see below.

(The Talmud states that while this is the technically the law, if someone asks if it should be carried out, we tell him NOT TO. Had Zimri killed Pinchas to thwart his attack, it would have been considered a legitimate act of self-defense. This law, as far as I know, has been applied exactly one time in all of Jewish history.)

Zimri arrogantly confronted Moses and declared that he was about to sin. Moses cried because he didn’t know what to do. The Talmud says that he didn’t know what to do because he FORGOT the law.

Pinchas approached his teacher. “Moses,” he asked “didn’t you teach us that in such a case, a zealot should take the law into his own hands and execute the sinner?”

Moses responded affirmatively. “Let he who states the rule,” he said, “be the one to carry it out.”

After Moses confirmed that Pinchas remembered the law correctly, Pinchas found a spear and did what he had to do. As you can see, this is a far cry from the interpretation of Pinchas as a hot-headed fanatic who became a loose cannon in the Camp of Israel. In reality, it was a carefully researched, measured response.

But that is not the end of the story. Zimri was an important man. He was a tribal leader, and his co-tribesmen were outraged. “Who does he think he is?” they demanded. “Pinchas, whose maternal grandfather (Jethro) used to fatten cattle for idol worship sees himself worthy of killing a Prince of Israel?” They wanted to kill him.

G-d stepped in to defend Pinchas:

*“Pinchas, a son of Elazar, and a **grandson of Aaron the Priest...**”* [G-d referred to him as the grandson of AARON, the righteous Priest, rather than the grandson of Jethro, the former idol worshipper.] *“... zealously avenged My vengeance...”*

G-d was endorsing Pinchas as a true “*Kanai*”, a zealot, a man whose heart burned with an absolute purity of righteousness and love of G-d. Had Pinchas been a lesser man, with less-than-noble intentions, he would not have been permitted to do what he did.

In fact, it seems that Moses himself was not in a situation to kill Zimri. Otherwise, why didn’t he do it himself? Pinchas reminded Moses of the law. Why didn’t he say, “Oh, you’re right! Thank you, I had forgotten. Now where’s my spear?”

Rather, Moses had a different response. “Let he who states the rule be the one to carry it out.”

Perhaps the reason Moses wanted Pinchas to carry out the sentence is that he himself was not qualified to. Moses had been insulted by Zimri; he therefore had a vested interest. The law calls for this act to be done by a zealot; one who is absolutely, unequivocally, selflessly jealous for the honor of G-d, without a scintilla of personal interest or other ulterior motive.

Now, how many people do YOU know who could fit that bill?

There is nothing wrong with having a strong opinion. There is nothing wrong with clearly and succinctly voicing one’s opposition to another’s immorality. For that matter, there is nothing wrong with actively pursuing legislation against immorality. But how dare anyone decide to take the law into his own hands and attack people who are following the law of the land?

Pinchas killed two people as an act of righteous indignation. Eric Rudolph, too, killed two people, and injured scores of others.

Pinchas is the exception that proves the rule. Anyone can be indignant. The hard part is being righteous.

Have a great Shabbos.

Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplowitz

