

PINCHAS (NUMBERS 25:10-30:1)

A Covenant of Pieces

2010 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

Family and friends have gathered for the special event. The apprehensive mother has handed her precious eight-day-old son to the godmother. The godmother has given the baby to the godfather who brings him into the room.

The Mohel welcomes the Guest of Honor: "*Boruch Haba! Blessed is he who arrives!*"

Then the Mohel continues by reciting the beginning of this week's Torah Portion:

"G-d spoke to Moses, saying, Pinchas, son of Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest turned My anger away from the Israelites when he zealously took up My cause among them, so that I did not destroy the Israelites in My jealousy. Therefore, tell him that I have given him My Covenant of Peace." (Numbers, 25:10-12)

Who was Pinchas? What did he do that saved Israel from G-d's wrath? And what is his connection to a Bris?

We met Pinchas at the end of last week's Torah Reading. Last week we read about the attempts of Balak, the Moabite king, to undermine G-d's Divine Protection of Israel. (See "Of Television, Toilets, and Idolatry") Balaam the Sorcerer advised Balak that if he wanted to cause G-d to be angry with Israel, he should find a way to corrupt their morals. If he could somehow entice Israel to compromise their rejection of idol worship and promiscuity, he would be able to break up their special relationship with G-d.

Balak was very impressed by the idea. He sent his own daughter Kozbi to join a band of Moabite and Midianite prostitutes to lead Israel to sin. Balak's daughter had a special assignment – Moses. While Moses, of course, had no interest in Kozbi's illicit advances, she did manage to attract Zimri, one of the tribal leaders.

It was a terrible situation. The Camp of Israel, previously known for its holiness and morality, became an orgy of prostitution and idol worship. Zimri led Kozbi straight to Moses, and brazenly confronted him. In the presence of the Sages of Israel, he brought the princess/prostitute to his tent.

Balaam's advice had proved to be on the mark. The Moabites no longer had to wage war against Israel; G-d was doing it for them! He sent a plague into the camp, and people were dying by the thousands.

What should they do? Moses didn't know. The Sages of Israel didn't know. Moses' great-nephew Pinchas viewed the scene with dismay. Israel was falling apart before his eyes. No one seemed willing to stand up for G-d's honor. After a brief consultation with Moses, Pinchas took a spear and killed Zimri and Kozbi. The plague ended immediately. Twenty-four thousand people were dead.

"Pinchas, son of Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest turned My anger away from the Israelites when he zealously took up My cause among them, so that I did not destroy the Israelites in My jealousy."

Sometimes it is proper to be silent. Sometimes one should quietly do the right thing, and ignore the wrong doings of others. This was not one of those times. Israel is supposed to set an example of decency for the world to follow. The exact opposite was taking place. Pinchas saw corruption in the Camp of Israel, and no one else seemed willing or able to do anything about it. This grandson of Aaron, the man of peace, (See "The Kiss of LIFE") picked up a spear and carried out an act of war.

What was Pinchas' reward for his "act of war"?

"Therefore, tell him that I have given him My Covenant of Peace."

Covenant of Peace? He picks up a spear, creates a human shish kabob, and ends up with a Nobel Peace Prize?!

Pinchas, although he was the grandson of Aaron, was not a Kohain -- Priest. He had already been born when Aaron and his sons became Priests. Anyone born to a Priest after that point was a Priest by birth; Pinchas had missed that opportunity. As a result of his actions, Pinchas now earned his own membership into the Priesthood.

By virtue of Pinchas' willingness to step into the fray, he demonstrated his love for G-d and Israel. When his grandfather Aaron saw an argument between two people, he used to involve himself and try to make peace between the parties. Through his act of violence, Pinchas returned Peace to the relationship between G-d and Israel.

*I have given him My Covenant of **Peace**.* In the Torah scroll, the word "*Shalom*" – *Peace*, is written in an



unusual way. The letter "Vav" is split. A regular "Vav" is basically a vertical line with a small head on top. Partway down the vertical line, the "Vav" in "*Shalom*" breaks momentarily,

and then continues down. (Imagine sticking a pin in and out of a piece of cloth. You can see most of the pin, but there a small break in what you can see.) Some have suggested that the broken "Vav" symbolizes the spear that entered and exited the bodies of Zimri and Kozbi.

Sometimes you have to break the Peace in order to make the Peace. ("Praise the Lord, and pass the ammunition!")

There is a special chair set up at every Bris. According to Tradition, Elijah the Prophet comes to every Bris. He comes to testify that the Nation of Israel continues to adhere to the Bris -- the special Covenant of Peace between G-d and Israel.

The Talmud tells us that Elijah the Prophet never died. He lives on, coming to every Bris, and will some day announce to the world that the Messianic era is about to begin. Elijah will announce the permanent fulfillment of the Covenant of Peace.

There is an opinion in the Talmud that Elijah the Prophet, the Messenger of the Covenant, is none other than the man with the spear, Pinchas, son of Elazar the son of Aaron the Priest.

IMMORALITY OR IMMORTALITY?

A Bris is a strange event. Here you have a beautiful, perfect little newborn baby. His own mother gives up son, her own flesh-and-blood, to some rabbi, who proceeds to remove some of the baby's flesh and blood.

The anatomical location of the Bris is not a coincidence. G-d has placed us in the world to live a life of morality. The act of human reproduction can be an act of holiness, when G-d joins the mother and father as partners in Creation. The same physical act, when unrestrained, can be an immoral act that G-d abhors. The message of the Bris is that our every action must be done in a G-dly fashion.

Pinchas/Elijah killed two people. His act of war was an act of Peace.

King Balak gave up his daughter to play the harlot. She ended up on the end of a spear. Her act of reproduction was an act of destruction. A mother "gives up" her son to be cut. This "act of destruction" is an act of holiness.

Pinchas/Elijah is sitting there at the Bris. He is there to remind us that not every so-called act of "love" is an act of peace. Not every drop of spilled blood is an act of war. He is there to remind us that sometimes, doing the right thing is going to hurt a little. Sometimes, like Abraham and Pinchas, we have to ignore the influences of society and risk being unpopular.

A baby cries. A small cut. It will heal. Small pain=big gain.

Have a great Shabbos.

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