

# THE JEWISH JOURNAL

July 8, 2009

## Acknowledging the Pinchas Within

*Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25: 10-30: 1)*

By [Rabbi Laura Geller](#)

[http://www.jewishjournal.com/torah\\_portion/article/acknowledging\\_the\\_pinchas\\_within\\_20090708/](http://www.jewishjournal.com/torah_portion/article/acknowledging_the_pinchas_within_20090708/)

Last week we began the story of Pinchas, grandson of Aaron and great-nephew of Moses. Pinchas saw Zimri, a Jewish leader, and Cozbi, a Midianite princess, engage in a public display of immorality connected to the idol worship of the Midianites. Frustrated by Moses' hesitation in responding to what Pinchas believed would destroy the Israelite people, he took matters into his own hands, grabbed a spear ... and impaled the two of them through their genitals.

This week's Torah portion begins with his reward for this act of zealotry: God gives him a covenant of peace and a covenant of everlasting priesthood.

This is a dangerous story. It's dangerous because it seems to imply that when we see someone committing what we think of as an offense against God, we can take matters into our own hands. This is what Yigal Amir, the assassin of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, apparently thought. And this is how the words of the Sephardic Chief Rabbi Eliyahu Bakshi-Doron might have been understood when, in 1996, he compared the Reform movement to Zimri and added that in times of plague it was sometimes necessary to take extreme action. He said that just as Zimri had tried to bring non-Jews into the Jewish people, so the Reform movement encouraged assimilation by bringing in non-Jews with "fictitious conversions."

How should we respond to the story of Pinchas? We need to begin by admitting that our tradition, like other religious traditions we criticize, contains stories that, when read literally, could incite violence. Only then can we call on the religious leaders in other traditions to expose the violent teachings in their sacred texts. We must also publicly denounce anyone who acts out this violence or who uses rhetoric to incite and inflame. And we need to support those members of other communities who are willing to denounce the violence and the acts of terror that their co-religionists sometimes do in God's name.

We're not the only generation to be uncomfortable with the story of Pinchas. The rabbis of the Talmud make clear that his act should not be used as a model for anyone else. They explain that Pinchas ignored the appropriate legal process delineated in the Talmud: He did not warn the couple that this act could merit death, and even more problematic, he was the witness, judge and executioner. If Zimri had managed to kill Pinchas first, the Talmud says, Zimri would have been exonerated because it would have been self-defense. And if Pinchas had killed the couple at any moment but the actual moment of intercourse, then Pinchas would have been guilty of murder. In other words, don't try this at home. In fact, don't ever try this.

And yet God rewards Pinchas with the covenant of peace and his descendants with the covenant of eternal priesthood. How can we understand this reward?

Zealotry exists in our tradition, and it needs to be controlled. By making Pinchas a priest, responsible for the precise details of maintaining the sanctuary, Pinchas' instinct to zealotry could be controlled and managed. Law is an antidote to violence. One can challenge the law, but that challenge must be done within the law.

Zealotry not only exists within our tradition, but it also exists within each of us. We need to confront our own "Pinchas" as well, the part of ourselves that is convinced we know what is "right" and is outraged when others cannot see what we know to be true. We need to acknowledge that "Pinchas" in us and be careful about what we say, including in conversations within our community on those issues about which we care most deeply, especially what is best for Israel and what is best for the United States. Perhaps this is what the Israeli poet Yehuda Amichai suggests in his poem, "The Place Where We Are Right":

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

But doubts and loves

Dig up the world

Like a mole, a plow.

And a whisper will be heard in the place

Where the ruined

House once stood.

Yes, Pinchas is given a covenant of peace. But in the giving is a warning. The words "my covenant of peace" are written in the Torah in a peculiar way. The vav in shalom is broken. Perhaps it is Torah's way of emphasizing that Pinchas' way is broken. Violence and zealotry can never lead to peace or redemption.

*Laura Geller is senior rabbi of Temple Emanuel of Beverly Hills, a Reform congregation.*

© Copyright 2009 The Jewish Journal and JewishJournal.com  
All rights reserved. JewishJournal.com is hosted by [Nexcess.net](http://Nexcess.net)