

Torah Portion

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Words and Listening, Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 25:10-30:1)

by Rabbi Lisa Edwards

It's not unusual for people to respond with anger and a desire to stop the words or actions of those who seem to undermine what they hold dear. UC Irvine's Muslim Student Union received a one-year suspension for what the university deemed was a planned disruption of a speech on campus by Michael Oren, Israel's ambassador to the United States. And during an L.A. Jewish community rally for Israel on June 6, demonstrators booed a speech by Americans for Peace Now's West Coast Regional Director David Pine.

But I know I'm not the only Jew in Los Angeles still troubled by the angry responses to these speakers.

These events are on my mind as we open our Torah scrolls once again to Parashat Pinchas, which begins with God seeming to reward Pinchas, who, at the end of last week's Parashat Balak, took the law into his own hands by running a spear through the Israelite Zimri and his Midianite paramour, Cozbi, for their public display of affection (Numbers 25:5-15).

Again, I'm not the only Jew disturbed by the actions of Pinchas or by God's response: "I give him My covenant of peace [brit shalom]."

Rabbis of the Talmud discuss at length God's apparent appreciation of Pinchas (Sanhedrin 82a). The contemporary Torah commentary Etz Hayim summarizes Sanhedrin: "Had Pinchas asked the rabbinical court if it was permitted to kill Zimri and Cozbi, citing halachah to justify his request, the court would have told him: 'The law may permit it, but we do not follow the law!'"

Numerous commentaries also ameliorate the reward of priesthood that God bestows on Pinchas and his descendants, suggesting that perhaps God does so in hopes that demands of priesthood will make Pinchas less violent and/or allow him to atone for the lives he took.

My favorite bristling at the violence of the story comes in the form of visual midrash in the Torah scroll itself. Torah scribes scrupulously follow thousands of rules when writing a Torah scroll, among them that no letter may be broken ... with one exception — the letter vav in the word shalom in this verse: "I give him My brit shalom."

Why is this vav alone written with a break in it? It's uncertain, but many align with the suggestion that the letter vav, a straight vertical line with a slight curve at the top, resembles a spear, perhaps the spear of Pinchas. The broken spear-shaped vav here in the word shalom invites us to see the imperfection/corruption of peace when brought by the sword.

Add to that another nearby visual midrash: In verse 11, the yud in Pinchas' name is written smaller than the other letters. "When we commit violence, even if justifiable, the yud in us (standing for the name of God and for y'hudi, 'Jew') is diminished thereby" (Etz Hayim).

Lest we think God and the Israelites, here at the end of their 40 years in the wilderness, are tumbling irreversibly toward violence as a way to cope, along comes the first appearance of the daughters of Zelophehad — Mahlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah — who boldly step up before Moses and everyone at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting asking for an inheritance, since their father died without sons. Moses brings their claim before God, who decides, "The daughters of Zelophehad speak properly. You should give them an inheritance." Some of this decision is modified later (Parashat Masei), again not with violence, but through reasoned argument, careful listening and balanced judgment.

Still more happens in our parashah that leads the Israelites toward words and listening, and away from the reactionary behavior of Pinchas. At God's instruction, Moses, in the sight of the whole community, transfers some of his hod (authority/majesty) to Joshua, his successor. God also makes clear, however, that unlike Moses, who speaks with God directly, Joshua will seek out Eleazar, the priest who will consult the Urim (the mysterious biblical advice-giver — part Ouija board, part GPS), and "by such instruction they shall go out and by such instruction they shall come in, he and all the Israelites, the whole community" (Numbers 27:18-21).

It seems likely that fear of attack and subversion among his people motivated Pinchas. Not unlike many who seek to shout down speakers in a public forum, an angry response is understandable.

But perhaps we can learn from the growth and progress of God and the weary Israelite wanderers.

"Invest Joshua with some of your authority/charisma," God says to Moses, readying everyone for the change in leadership and scenery as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, "l'ma'an yishm'u kol adat b'nei Yisrael — in order that the whole Israelite community might [come to] listen."

Lisa Edwards is rabbi of Beth Chayim Chadashim (bcc-la.org), a Reform synagogue in West Los Angeles.