

This week's parashah, Pinchas, opens in a terribly difficult moment. For good reason, many of our b'nei mitzvah students and other speakers choose to focus on the story closer to the end of the parasha, the five daughters of Tzelophehad agitating for their right to inherit their family portion in the land of Israel in the absence of a male heir, so successfully that Hashem amends inheritance law on the spot.

But what to do with the beginning? Our parashah opens after a cliffhanger that Maya mentioned in her dvar last week: at the end of Parashat Balak, the Israelites committed intercourse and idolatry with Moabite women. Specifically, Chapter 25, verses 1-3 say that the Israelites engaged in prostitution with the Moabite women, "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 Hashem was incensed with Israel."

We have a problem already: there are three acts: the sex, the idolatry and whatever it means by expounding further, "Israelites attached itself to Ba'al-peor" - a foreign God. And so Hashem became angry. But was God angry at all of it? Or was it only the idolatry that sets God off? This matters, as you'll see.

Hashem responded by ordering Moshe to execute the ringleaders, and as soon as Moshe gives these instructions, as verses 6-8 said, "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."

All commentators take for granted that what the Israelite man and the Moabite women were doing was having sex in front of the tent of meeting – a shockingly disrespectful act, no matter who would have been committing it.

But they also struggle with Pinchas's act, noting that Pinchas departed from the assembly, meaning he departed from the deliberations about due process, taking matters into his own hands. And Masechet Sanhedrin page 82 says that had the Israelite man had killed Pinchas in self-defense, that too, would have been justifiable, as he hadn't been condemned to death.

In Torah study yesterday, Casey expressed confusion at the commentator's discomfort – hadn't Moshe just ordered the execution of the idolaters, and wasn't Pinchas carrying them out? Well - the Israelites had engaged in sex **and** idolatry. God apparently demanded punishment for the idolaters, not for sex - but once vigilante justice had been unleashed, it is hardly surprising that it would spill over into non-death penalty crimes. So Pinchas's act of murder, though predictable, cannot actually be justified.

Yet, Pinchas's act stopped a plague that killed 24000 people. On that disquieting note, last week's parashah finished.

This week's parashah opens with Hashem saying to Moshe, "Pinchas, 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. Say, therefore, 'I grant him My covenant of peace. . .'"

This is a really odd resolution. We do not know what a "covenant of peace" means. As Dena Weiss points out in her teaching in the parashah this week, "When behavior is uncontroversially good and irrefutably praiseworthy, no heavenly voice needs to come in and assert the appropriateness of a reward. Furthermore, when the reward is the absolute opposite of the behavior, it could also be seen as a slight chastisement. God's reward to Pinchas is not a sword or a medal of bravery, an appointment to be general of an army. Rather, it is a covenant of peace and, according to the *midrash*, a little homily on the value of peace."

I also note that the narrative repeatedly lists Pinchas's lineage as the grandson of Aaron, Moshe's brother – the same Aaron who was so anxious to appease that he built the golden calf for the people when they demanded that he make them a God. Many midrashim state that the reason Aaron wasn't punished for this was that he was acting out of a love of peace. I imagine the shame of that ancestral legacy perhaps drove Pinchas to greater zealotry. And so his reward, such as it was, is to be steered back towards peace.

Finally, I love Rabbi Arthur Waskow's reading on this passage. He writes:

"... try reading God's words this way:

"In a blind rage, consumed with jealousy/zealotry, I began killing My people with the plague. Then Pinchas imitated Me: in his own blind and jealous rage, he turned his hand to killing.

"His jealous/ zealous act opened my eyes, shocked me into shame at what I Myself was doing. I said to him, 'I will stop, and you must stop!' That is why I stopped the plague; that is why I made with Pinchas my covenant of shalom/ peace."

In this reading, God does a turn-around, a "tshuvah." God grows. The God Who begins by bringing a plague upon the people ends by making a covenant of peace. The God Who is horrified by Pinchas also sees in Pinchas' face one facet of God's Own Face."

But then he asks, for those who do not believe in an "old man in the sky" God, what does this mean?

"We mean that the deep processes of the universe. . . those processes themselves act in subterranean ways to bring on genocides and plagues, and also to call forth human intervention to prevent, to soften, and to heal them."

Last week's parashah ended with the end of a plague - A plague brought on by the meeting of peoples and mixing of their religions. Rabbi Waskow's theological reflections help me bring this parashah into the present moment, when we are all too aware that the more we move about and mix with others, the farther we go – the more that plagues can spread. Is it any wonder that our ancestors feared such mixing?

But this parashah also reminds me that Divine violence, or what we might call the randomness of the universe, is not something that we should seek to take into our hands. Pinchas did, and it torments centuries of commentators, and it apparently torments even the Divine, whose wrath is transformed by Pinchas and who then transforms Pinchas back, offering a covenant of peace. Later in this parashah, we will see a transformation again, when the daughter of Tzelophechad transform God's understanding of justice, and so God transforms the human definitions of justice. Whether you understand God as a separate entity who communicates from outside of us, or as a metaphor for our own strivings towards greater goodness and connection, this is the mysterious partnership at the core of the human condition. The source of plague and the source of peace are one, as infuriating, as paradoxical as it is. The source of injustice and the correction towards greater justice are one. And we, like Pinchas, fearful as we are, violent as we sometimes are, we are called to a covenant of peace with that mystery.