

I am glad to be here with all of you, just over 6 weeks post-partum. Even though it's a little wrenching to have to be away from my baby in the evening, it is also a welcome break. I recognize that I am in a uniquely privileged position. The women before me in my family had to struggle more to make a place outside the home for their talents. And especially today, too many women are constrained by their economic circumstances and find themselves forced to work, unable to spend as much time as they'd like with their children. It is very challenging to find the happy medium between those two extremes, and I am humbled when I consider how much economic and cultural privilege I have to be able to be here like this.

When I considered the timing and content of this week's Parashah, Pinchas, I was also struck by the intergenerational challenge of finding a happy medium between extremes that we see hinted at here.

The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, the beginning of our three weeks of mourning was yesterday, and it always falls either the week right before or right after Shabbat Pinchas.

According to Masechet Taanit: **"On the seventeenth of Tammuz the tablets were broken** by Moses when he saw that the Jews had made the golden calf.

As a reminder: Ex 32:1-4 "(1) When the people saw that Moses was so long in coming down from the mountain, the people gathered against Aaron and said to him, "Come, make us a god who shall go before us, for that fellow Moses—the man who brought us from the land of Egypt—we do not know what has happened to him." (2) Aaron said to them, "[You men,] take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." (3) And all the people took off the gold rings that were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. (4) This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf.

Notice that Aaron, Moshe's brother, the one who becomes High Priest, is the one to make the Golden Calf. He does not resist the people's demands.

Commentators struggle to justify Aaron's behavior, but without going too deep into those conversations, I want to point out an early teaching about Aaron from the Mishnah: Pirkei Avot 1:12: Hillel used to say: be of the disciples of **Aaron**, loving **peace** and pursuing peace, loving mankind and drawing them close to the Torah.

Hillel says that Aaron was essentially a peacemaker. He wasn't a prophet, speaking harsh truth to power, he was a mediator, smoothing the conversation between truth and power. That's why he spoke for Moshe in front of Pharaoh, that is perhaps why he was chosen for the priesthood.

Perhaps Aharon gets off easy because he acted, though catastrophically, out of a posture that is generally a laudable trait in the world: mediation, smoothing out tense moments, offering a way forward. Aharon could be perhaps analogized to writers and pundits who seek to find the virtues of "both sides" in an argument ; generally, that is a valuable thing to do, except – and only except – when there is some kind of abnormal toxicity in the discourse. And the making of the Golden Calf was just such an instance.

What does this have to do with Pinchas?

In last week's parashah, we see what Aharon's grandson, Pinchas, does. The people have, as a whole begun to worship idols at the organized instigation of the Midianite women, and a plague breaks out. Numbers 25:

6) 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 Pinchas, 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. (9) Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand.

The parashah ended there. This week's parasha begins:

Hashem spoke to Moses, saying, (11) “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. (12) Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My *brit Shalom* = covenant of peace. (13) It shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.”

To be clear, no commentator thinks that what Pinchas did was okay. In fact, the general response of the commentators is that if it weren't for the evidence of God's response – the plague stopping and God's announcement of the covenant of peace – Pinchas would have been obviously guilty of murder.

How do we understand Pinchas's zealotry and rage? I found this commentary by Or HaChaim revealing: “Why did the Torah have to give us Pinchas' full genealogy here? . . . it is likely that G'd wanted to heal the residual bad feeling that might have existed against Aaron who at the time when he made the golden calf had inadvertently become the cause of many Israelites dying prematurely (compare Exodus 32,35 "G'd smote the people who had made the calf **which Aaron** had constructed). Now a grandson of Aaron had come and saved many more Israelites' lives than Aaron had ever even indirectly caused to be lost. . .”

Imagine Pinchas, grandson of Aharon, knowing his peace-loving grandfather's failure in the greatest sin the people have ever committed. And now he sees a similar situation: the boundaries disintegrating, people engaging in ecstatic orgies: even in front of the temple meeting. He is emphatically not going to make the same mistake as his grandfather. He goes to the other extreme.

Dr. Erin Lieb Smokler points out that there is another ancestor in the story, one whose legacy affects both Aharon and Pinchas: Levi, one of the 12 sons of Jacob, who with his brother Shimon massacres all the male inhabitants of the city of Shechem after its prince rapes their sister Dina, back in Genesis. This vengeance is so shockingly violent that their father Jacob curses their fierce anger on his deathbed.

Aharon himself, in his pursuit of peace, might have been reacting against the legacy of violence of his ancestor Levi. The pendulum swings too far, and Aharon's conflict aversion causes great harm.

Pinchas, too aware of how much harm his grandfather's conflict aversion caused, swings the pendulum back to zealous violence in pursuit of justice.

And, in this case, it works. Sometimes the discourse is not normal, sometimes certain ideas need to be firmly, even violently repudiated. But we shouldn't mistake this for the normal framework of how a society must function. As Rabbi Claudia Marbach writes:

God decrees that Pinchas has done God's work and saved Bnei Yisrael, in this case only. But how can we move on from this act of violence in the name of God? Instead of violence, God offers the legacy of Pinchas' grandfather Aharon, the man known to all as the אוהב שלום ורודף שלום — the lover of peace and the pursuer of peace. God gives Pinchas a brit shalom. A brit — a covenant or a reminder, like the rainbow after the Flood. This will not, must not, happen again. Be on guard. From now on be a man of peace. If you are going to be a rodef, be a rodef of peace, not violence..."

From over zealotry to conflict aversion and back; from "both sides-ism" to the vilification of those who think differently — back and forth the pendulum swings. We reject the harms of those who came before us, but in our haste not to make the same mistakes they made, we can cause different harm.

And yet, there is an aspiration that we might someday find balance. Just as I hope for the aspirational ideal that everyone might be able to find the privileged balance between work and family that I have found, my hope for us all is that we can find the place between conflict aversion and reactionary impulses, where we can hold firm moral convictions without resorting to violence. As Dr. Smokler, again, writes "The possibility of a "brit shalom" means that, even after generations of woundedness, healing might yet come."