

Haftarot Unrolled: Pinchas

Outrage

The story of Pinchas is actually told at the end of the previous Parsha. In the very first encounter the Jewish People have with a civilized nation after 40 years in the desert, the men are seduced by Midianite women. One in particular, the head of the Tribe of Shimon, takes a Midianite princess, parading her in front of Moshe and the elders, directly into his tent. G-d tells them to get rid of these people, but everybody, Moshe included, is paralyzed with shock. Pinchas grabs a spear, barges into the tent, and skewers the man and the woman together, in flagrante delicto.

Was this act of vigilante aggression, murder? Should Pinchas have been tried and executed?

Our Parsha begins with G-d making a special announcement pardoning Pinchas:

פִּינָחָס בֶּן אֱלֶעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הִלְהִין הַשֵּׁיב אֶת חֲמָתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת קִנְאַתִּי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא כָלִיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאַתִּי:

Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon the Cohen, turned My anger away from the People of Israel, as he was outraged on My behalf and I did not decimate the People of Israel due to My outrage. (Bamidbar 25:11)

G-d gives his stamp of approval for Pinchas' violent zeal on His behalf. Is the message of the Torah that outrage on behalf of G-d is legitimate?

The Haftarah tells us another story of outrage, but with a very different reaction from G-d. Eliyahu tries to quit his job as a prophet (and quit his life while he's at it), and tells G-d the following:

קִנְאָה קִנְאַתִּי לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת כִּי עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת-מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ הָרְסוּ וְאֶת-נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרְגוּ בְּחָרֹב וְאֶתְּרָאֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ אֶת-נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ
"I am outraged on behalf of Hashem, the G-d of Tzva'ot. For the People of Israel abandoned Your covenant; Your altars, they destroyed; Your prophets, they put to the sword. I was left all alone - and they tried to take my life." (Melachim I 19:10)

Like Pinchas, Eliyahu expresses his outrage on behalf of G-d. Unlike Pinchas, G-d does not offer Eliyahu a big pat on the back. Instead, He tells him to go train a replacement. This is how the Midrash describes G-d's reaction to Eliyahu's declaration of outrage:

ויאמר קנא קנאתי לה' א - להי ישראל כי עזבו בריתך בני ישראל, אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא בריתי שמא בריתך, ואת מזבחותיך הרסו, אמר לו מזבחותי שמא מזבחותיך, ואת נביאיך הרגו בחרב, אמר לו נביאי ואת מה איכפת לך... ובאותה שעה שאמר אליהו על ישראל לשון הרע אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אליהו עד שאתה מקטר את אלו בא וקטר את אלו הה"ד (מלכים א יט) לך שוב לדרכך מדברה דמשק

Eliyahu said, "I am outraged on behalf of Hashem that the People of Israel abandoned your covenant!"

G-d said, "It is My covenant, unless it is your covenant?"

"They destroyed your altars!"

He said, "They are My altars, unless they are your altars?"

"Your prophets, they put to the sword!"

He said, "They are My prophets. What business is it of yours?"

[...]

That time that Eliyahu was saying negative things about the Jewish People, G-d said to him,

"Eliyahu, before you start condemning the Jewish People, go condemn the idol worshippers in Damascus." (Midrash Shir HaShirim Rabba 1)

G-d essentially tells Eliyahu to mind his own business, and save his outrage and condemnation for Israel's enemies.

So what does the Torah actually mean? Is this outrage good or bad?

A different Midrash, based on the tradition that identifies Pinchas with Eliyahu¹, has G-d relating to both events:

ויאמר קנא קנאתי אמר לו לעולם אתה מקנא קנאת בשטים על גלוי עריות וקנאת כאן

Eliyahu said: "I am outraged!"

He said, "You are always outraged. You were outraged in Shittim about the debauchery, you're outraged now. " (Midrash Yalkut Shimoni Balak 661)

Shittim was the location of Pinchas' story. What the Midrash is saying here is that once was enough. At that one unique place and time, in those precise circumstances, it was just exactly the right reaction, and G-d issued Pinchas a pardon. But there will not be any other situation like that, ever.

According to the Haftarah, G-d neither needs nor wants anyone's outrage against the Jewish People. Not even when the entire Jewish People worships the pagan god Ba'al. Certainly not for anything less.

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In memory of my father, Peter Rozenberg, z"l
לעילוי נשמת אבי מורי פנחס בן נתן נטע ז"ל

¹ This does not need to be taken literally.