

## The Religious Extremism of Pinchas and 9-11

Summer is the season of vacation and fun. But even as we devote ourselves to the sun and clear skies, we shield our eyes from the darkest chapters in history. Unfortunately, summer is also the season of Tisha B'Av and September 11. The darkest day in Jewish history and the darkest day in recent world history remind us of the destructive potential of bigotry. The death of Osama Bin Laden has not put an end to religious extremism.

In the view of many, religious differences are the source of the most dangerous violence. However, the critical divides in the world are not between religions. The most pernicious divisions lie between fundamentalist extremists and moderate pluralists. Indeed, the worst hatred is often within the same religion, between its extremists and its moderates. Modern moderate pluralists of all religions celebrate difference and teach mutual respect for people of other religions, as well as within their own. Fundamentalists teach hatred for all who do not accept their narrow definitions of truth. Extremists allow no compromise and consider tolerance a weakness. They cannot solve problems or create any basis for peace, because they believe that they and only they are right.

This week's Torah portion Pinchas provides us with a lesson about the danger of fundamentalism. This year, the Torah reading is joined to a Haftarah about Elijah. Both Pinchas and Elijah were considered zealots in their day, but the rabbis who placed these two portions together seem to be making a subtle comment about the dangers of such zealotry. Pinchas seems to be rewarded for his zeal, but Elijah's prophetic career comes to an end because of it.

To oppose the people's idolatry, Pinchas slays Zimri and Cozbi at the end of last week's portion. The portion this week begins when God gives Pinchas a covenant of peace, *brit shalom*, but the rabbis suggest that the peace of Pinchas is broken, or incomplete. They suggest that he must be given a covenant of peace in order to learn peace. The rabbis oppose such extremism as that of Pinchas, and reinforce their opposition with the story of Elijah.

Elijah flees for his life up onto Mt. Horeb. He accuses the Israelites of abandoning the covenant, and asks God to take vengeance on them. God responds to Elijah in a still, small voice, *kol d'mama dakah*. God dismisses Elijah because a zealot cannot be God's spokesman.

The Jewish tradition is teaching that loyalty to God or one's ideals can be a wonderful thing, but it is not the only thing that is important. One must recognise the humanity of others and treat their ideas with respect. Fundamentalists may believe in the ideas they hold, but their beliefs can quickly become entangled with a yearning for the power to realise those ideas. Ends justify means, and power becomes more important than the ideas themselves. Power thrives on single truth models of the world. When people are sure that they are right, it is natural for them to want the power to enforce their ideas.

But the world is more subtle than any one model of truth. There are many perspectives on truth, and many paths to follow in order to obtain truth. Our tradition has a story that two of our great rabbinic teachers, Hillel and Shammai, argued for three years about the law. The

Voice of God then calls out saying, “Both these and these are the words of the living God.” -- Both are true.

How is this possible? Open-minded people recognise the power of mutual respect even for opposing views. It is not an absolutist power. Rather it is the power of relationship. It is the knowledge that what different people with different ideas accomplish together is far more valuable than what any single idea can accomplish no matter how many people support it. Diversity and pluralism are life-enhancing. Fanaticism destroys creativity and endangers life.

Fundamentalists have a false understanding of what is right and good. They have one consuming idea and that is not enough. If this understanding is applied to current experience, it means that people of different religious traditions and different political persuasions, who understand the importance of respect for difference and know how to work with people who are different from themselves have far more in common with each other and can accomplish much more together.

This coming September 11<sup>th</sup> will mark the tenth anniversary of the extremist attacks by Osama Bin Laden. Moderates of all faiths, Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and others, are planning together to make September 11<sup>th</sup> a day of interfaith reconciliation by holding interfaith services and sponsoring interfaith programmes in local communities all over the world. This new Holy Day is meant to counteract the shameful acts which desecrated religion ten years ago.

May God grant us the courage to oppose religious extremism, regardless of source, regardless of victim. May God bestow upon us the wisdom to respect and encourage diversity of belief. May God give us the love to link arms in partnership with those around us in building a world of peace. *Oseh Shalom Bimromav, Hu Ya-aseh Shalom Aleyniu, V'al Kol Yisrael, V'al Kol B'nai Adam, V'Imru Amen.* As You make peace in the heavens above, O God, may You help us make peace among all Israel, and among all humankind.

And to this – by our deeds - as well as in words, let us all say “Amen.”

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