A Broken Hallelujah
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Temple Sholom – Vancouver BC
July 3, 2021

This past week I watched a NY Times documentary on the January 6 insurrection at the US Capitol. Narrated by a man with a distinct Irish brogue, which I think was a conscious choice to give his words an air of both authority and remove from the crass nature of what we saw and heard. The 45-minute film was a reconstruction of the events of the day pieced together form what must have been hundreds of video clips taken from participants in the riot.

I was horrified of course, but also fascinated trying to understand what would lead some people, a great number of people to believe so fervently in their cause that they would storm the capitol of the very nation they proclaimed to love so deeply.

The word that came to mind was zealotry, *n. fanatical and uncompromising pursuit of religious, political, or other ideals; fanaticism.*

The story of Pinchas, for whom this week's parasha bears his name is the biblical figure that both champions zealotry and warns us of its inherent dangers.

It important to note that Pinchas' zealous act, where he kills a Jewish man and Midianite woman for cohabitating actually takes place at the very end of last year's parasha.

That in itself is unusual for torah, not just the act, which can perhaps best be described as an honour killing with all of the horror and revulsion that entails; but what is unusual is that last week's parasha Balak ends with this incident. Its little more than a paragraph why not begin this week's reading, which bears his name there? Why separate the two by an entire week?

Last week his fundamentalist ideas that he is right and that he is judge, jury, and executioner, leads him to kill two human beings as he does not approve of what they are doing and, he believes that he is acting as G-d would want him to act. In other words, he is like so many in the world today who would tell you that they and they alone know what G-d wants and, if you don't agree with them, you are not worthy of life.

Words I heard echoing through the halls and on the steps of the US Capitol in the documentary time and time again.

Quoting from our parasha:
"Pinchas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the Israelites by manifesting such zeal [be-qan'o 'et qin'ati] among them on my behalf that in my jealousy [qin'ati] I did not consume the Israelites."

Lest we have any doubts about Pinchas' zeal [qin'a], these divine words affirm that he acted on behalf of God's jealousy [qin'a]. As we know from the Decalogue, the Israelites are forbidden to worship any other god, for "I the LORD your God am a jealous God ['El qan'a]" (Exodus 20:5, Deuteronomy 5:9; cf. 4:29, 6:15; 32:16, 19 and 21). Religious zealotry [qin'a] channels the passion of God's possessive and exclusive relationship with Israel.

But is zealotry and jealousy – characteristics of God that we are encouraged to emulate?

They are not; and how do we know this? Because after this zealous act last week there is a pause, a new parasha is introduced, one that bears Pinchas' own name so that we cannot dissociate the lesson that it will impart from him, his character and earlier action.

In the second verse of Parashat Pinchas, quoted earlier, there are three repetitions of the Hebrew root "kuf-nun-aleph," which can mean "jealousy," "rage" or "passion."

בְּקַנְאוֹ אֶת־קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכָם וְלֹא־כִלִּיתִי אֶת־בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאָתִי

Among the many attributes of God that our tradition encourages us to emulate, jealousy, passion and rage are not included." In Deuteronomy and in Talmud Sotah, as well as elsewhere, we are instructed to walk in God's ways. We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit the sick and bury the dead. Elsewhere we are exhorted to emulate God's attributes of compassion. But nowhere are we encouraged to behave like the "vengeful, self-declared 'impassioned' God," we frequently encounter in the Torah.

Passion, we are told in The Song of Songs, is a flame of God. Passion lights up the senses, clears the nerve endings, and clarifies and refines perceptions. It spurs us to action. But it is can also be a dangerous intoxicant. Like fire it can warm you but if you get too close to it you will be burned.

Passion, zealotry creates xenophobia of heart or mind, which can overwhelm ethics. Without something to bind and contain it, passion can become chaotic and destructive.

And thus the verse continues with the corrective to Pinchas' passionate and deadly outburst.

[God says] "I hereby grant him [Pinchas], my covenant of peace [briti shalom]. It shall be for him and for his descendants after him a covenant of perpetual priesthood [brit kehunat 'olam], because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement [va-yekhapper] for the Israelites (Numbers 25:11-13).

A brit shalom might not be a reward at all; rather it might be a *hotem*, a seal, designed as a prophylactic to contain the flame of God so that it can be channeled into the world as a force for good.

This is an idea taught by Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin (20 November 1816 in Mir, Russia – 10 August 1893 in Warsaw, Poland), also known as Reb Hirsch Leib Berlin, and commonly known

by the acronym Netziv, was an Orthodox rabbi, dean of the Volozhin Yeshiva and author of several works of rabbinic literature in Lithuania.

In his commentary on the text Netziv sees the brit shalom as a corrective measure to zealotry. He notes that "the nature of [Pinchas's] act, killing with his own hand, tends to leave a harsh feeling in the heart. He who acted for the sake of heaven, was [therefore] granted a blessing to remain gentle and peaceful." Here, Netziv points out the need of an antidote for zealotry. The zealot should scrupulously develop a counter-trait of shalom.

Jewish tradition has little tolerance for zealotry, and it would be dangerously wrong to read the story of Pinchas as an endorsement of such behaviour; just as it would be dangerously wrong to view those who stormed the US capitol as defenders of democracy. One does not defend democracy by subverting democracy. Similarly, Judaism has never taught that there is only one way to act, believe or behave.

The Brit Shalom that Pinchas is given in our parasha is not complete, it is still information. God has set the limit but pinchas like all of us must live within those limits, he has the power and the free will to allow passion and zealotry to take over; its only through emulating the good ways of God that he can fulfill this covenant.

And we know this because incredibly the text itself draws us a picture. According to tradition, the Masoretes (the scribes, responsible for adding vocalization, musical notation and other filigrees to the Torah scroll), mark the Hebrew word shalom—peace, wholeness, well-being—with a severed letter (vav katiyah).

The broken vav is a symbol a reminder to Pinchas and those who might follow in his zealous ways. Whatever peace they have created by their zealous act(s) is a fractured peace not a heavenly peace. It's the peace that comes with silencing dissent not learning to live with difference and it will be short lived. It's not to be rewarded but rather avoided;

Remember that story of Pinchas is not in the book that bears his name. The book that is his namesake contains the Brit Shalom, the Covenant of Peace that God places on Pinchas not as a reward for his action but as a blessing that will constrain further similar action.

In fact, a reading of the Book of Joshua reveals that Pinchas himself changes his ways. Years after his zealous act, Pinchas brokers a truce between Israel and the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh (Joshua 22). Some commentaries suggest that only after Pinchas' intercession, which avoids a split within the Jewish People, is he completely embraced as a leader (Tosafot, Zevachim 101b, s.v. "hahu").

The pathway to redemption is not the way of Pinchas in last week's parasha, but rather the first steps toward redemption begin with the self-limiting Brit Shalom in this week's parasha and are fully realized with the Pinchas we meet in the Book of Joshua.

The severed line that bisects the Vav is challenge to every human being that seeks peace among others, we have to bridge the divide, we are called to make the letter and the word and its intention of shalom of peace the very definition of the word itself which is wholeness.

In the words of Leonard Cohen, “a broken hallelujah.”