

What does God want from us when common decency is violated; when sacred space is trashed?

It's perhaps an overly spiritual sounding question, but I felt provoked to ask it by this week's parashah, Pinchas. Last week's parashah, Balak, ended on a cliff hanger. To borrow the paraphrase of the narrative from my colleague, Rabbi Eli Herb in Salem:

"At the end of [Parashat Balak}, the Israelite men are seduced by Moabite women who invite them to the orgiastic sacrificial feasting for their god. The men partake of the feast and bow down to that god, Baal-peor.

Israel's God, in great fury, sends a plague upon the people of Israel, seeking to wipe them out.

In the midst of this trauma, while the Israelites are weeping in grief and terror at the Tent of Meeting, one of the Israelites, Zimri, brings one of the Moabite women, Cozbi, and engages in intercourse in the sight of Moses and of the whole Israelite community at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting."

In response, Pinchas, the priest, grandson of Aaron, Moses's brother, takes a spear and spears both of them through the belly. According to the second to last line of the Torah portion, "Then the plague against the Israelites was checked."

Parashat Pinchas, this week's parashah, is so named because it opens with God telling Moshe that it was Pinchas's action that turned back the plague. God further grants Pinchas, "Brit Shalom," a covenant of peace, or wholeness for all time.

Okay, by now you're probably feeling some mix of disgust and horror, probably at God or at Pinchas in this story.

So, first, I want to try sharing a little radical empathy with Pinchas. I know, it's gross to spear people in the belly, and we tend to get uncomfortable when God condones that behavior. But as I was rereading the context of Pinchas's action, it hit me for the first time the fullness of the rage he must have been feeling. For Zimri and Cozbi were not just having sex in public. They were, in the most public way possible, trashing the sacred; which is to say, they were expressing utter disdain for the community's sense of decency, deliberately and publicly, when the community was anxious and in mourning. Their behavior was genuinely despicable.

To put it in contemporary parlance, they were *trolls*. I realized that their behavior was, for a contemporary example, like that truly hellish category of internet troll known as RIP trolls. For those of you who have not heard of it, it's people who post sarcastic comments and jokes on the social media pages of grieving parents whose children have died from tragic diseases or accidents. This is an unfortunately well-documented phenomenon over the past ten years or so, enough that academics have begun to study it: people who for various reasons delight in anonymously sending offensive and shocking messages to those who are grieving – in other words, who trash the sacred. As Alice Marwick, a researcher at Fordham University on this phenomenon, wrote: "Trolls are really violating every taboo we have around the way that we think of our loved ones when we pass; the taboos around speaking ill of the dead."

I don't know about you, but I personally have a visceral rage reaction when I read about this behavior.

I think trashing the sacred happens in times of social upheaval. RIPtrolls are a function of increasing widespread internet use, and the fact that internet technology progresses more quickly than human morality can keep up. In the past few years, we have seen norms of decency crumble in all sorts of arenas, and I reckon that I am not the only one who feels rage as I witness this. Since we live in a time when trashing the sacred is increasingly commonplace, I think it's useful to discuss this in the context of Pinchas, who was also living at a time of rapid social upheaval – as indeed the quick Exodus from Egypt and sudden revelation at Sinai must have caused.

Because Pinchas, in response to witnessing people trash a sacred taboo, carries out what for most of us would only be a vengeance fantasy. And what is Hashem's response?

Well, two things: first of all, the "Brit Shalom/covenant of Peace." This is not a simple reward. It is also a corrective to the man whose zeal for the holy leads him to violence. As Rabbi Shai Held writes, reflecting numerous earlier commentaries: "The blessing Pinchas receives is the one he most needs: A zealot needs help in discovering calm. . . So God grants Pinchas, "the most zealous man in all of Israel," a blessing of peace in the hope that he can attain some internal balance."

And then, later in the Parasha, Moshe asks God to appoint his successor. According to the Hasidic master, Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk, that request occurs in this parashah because “until Pinchas’s moment of zealotry, Moses had always assumed that [Pinchas] would be his successor. . . [Once he saw the violence in Pinchas’s zeal for the sacred] Moses thought, ‘A zealot cannot be a leader of Israel.’ That was the motivation for finding an alternative in this parashah.

So what does God want, when decency is violated? This parashah gives us at least the beginning of an answer. In a time when trashing the sacred is increasingly commonplace, it would do us all well to be in touch with our inner Pinchas, the part of us that wells up in violent rage at each violation. There is an appropriate place for feeling that rage, as my grandmother of blessed memory, a psychoanalyst, used to say, “there’s a difference between feelings and behavior.” Be in touch with Pinchas, and like Hashem did for the Israelite people, do not let him lead.

Instead, let’s give ourselves a brit shalom – blessings of peace and equanimity, and compassion to let the rage wash through and out of us, until we are able to discern how and when to act in wisdom and peace.