



The Conservative Kehila in Zichron Ya'acov

Parashat Pinchas: Shhh!! Can You Hear God's Heartbeat?

Dear Friends,

Parashat Pinchas opens in praise of religious zealotry, or so it seems. At the end of the previous parasha, Parashat Balak, Pinchas, the grandson of Aharon the Cohen, impales a Hebrew man and a Midianite woman who were having sexual relations publicly in front of Ohel Mo'ed, the sacred meeting place. This week's parasha opens with God granting Pinchas a covenant of peace and eternal priesthood. This appears to be a reward for Pinchas' religious zealotry.

But then there is the Haftorah, a chapter from the Prophets which our Sages attached to each parasha, based on a mutual theme. In this week's haftorah there is a description of a fascinating dialogue between God and Eliyahu (Elijah) the prophet on Har Chorev (which is usually another name for Mount Sinai). The Haftorah takes place after Eliyahu - in a fit of zealotry - slays 400 prophets of the Ba'al on the river banks of the Kishon, at the foot of the Carmel mountain.

According to our Sages, Eliyahu is a reincarnation of Pinchas. They are both religious zealots.

The decision to attach this Haftorah to our parasha hints that the Sages may have been uncomfortable with Pinchas' act, and they wished to explain the apparent reward for zealotry in a very different way.

Here is a brief description of the events: Eliyahu escapes from Jezebel, who wishes to avenge the 400 slain prophets. He arrives in the Negev and collapses! This is not caused by exhaustion. It appears to be more like a clinical depression that comes after the ecstatic manic episode on the Carmel. He arrives at Har Chorev on his last legs, as if returning to the source of life to recharge. There he enters a cave.

And then the dialog begins: **“Then the word of the LORD came to him. He said to him, ‘Why are you here, Elijah?’”** (Kings 1, 19:9-14)

In other words, “Eliyahu, what's happening?”

Eliyahu answers in a rush of emotion: **“He replied, ‘I am moved by zeal for the LORD, the God of Hosts, for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.’”**

Eliyahu’s description is not at all accurate! The situation was, indeed, difficult, but he was not the only surviving prophet, and he knows it. At least a hundred other prophets remained in hiding in various places around the Kingdom of Israel.

God answers in an unusual and wondrous way: **“‘Come out,’ He called, ‘and stand on the mountain before the LORD.’ And lo, the LORD passed by. There was a great and mighty wind, splitting mountains and shattering rocks by the power of the LORD; but the LORD was not in the wind. After the wind—an earthquake; but the LORD was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake—fire; but the LORD was not in the fire. And after the fire—a soft sound of silence.”**

I translate loosely again: “Eliyahu, that was quite a performance you put on on Mount Carmel! A real pyrotechnic ecstasy. But, dear one, I am not to be found in your dramatic shows! Your zealotry does not work! I am not in a storm, in an earthquake, or in fire. Eliyahu, if you want to truly find me, consider looking for me within the silence! Yes, I can be found in the expanse of stillness!”

And then something very odd occurs. It is as if God is telling him “okay, now let’s try again, from the beginning. Eliyahu, what’s happening?”

But Eliyahu doesn’t seem to hear. He doesn’t appear to have learned anything. He hurls the same words at God that he did previously: **‘I am moved by zeal for the LORD, the God of Hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken Your covenant, torn down Your altars, and have put Your prophets to the sword. I alone am left, and they are out to take my life.’**

At this point God understands that it is hopeless! Eliyahu is addicted to drama, to fire, and to ecstasy. There is no alternative: God fires Eliyahu! He asks him to complete a few last tasks, among them to find and prepare his heir, Elisha. Later in the story (and not in our parasha), Eliyahu will ascend heavenward in a dramatic storm, because this is the only kind he understands. Drama and storms, fire and ecstasy. How appropriate and how perfect!

Zealotry is based on a terrible mistake. The mistake is that we think God requires our zealotry, that he is waiting for us human beings to make order (preferably violently) in His world, that we take control or try and fix people through all kinds of “reparative therapies”.

The haftorah sends us a very bold message in biblical terms: God does not want us to do so. He is not to be found in the kind of zealotry that brings destruction. He is present in the very fragile silence before and after the storm; not in the storm itself.

Pinchas’ grandfather, Aharon, the first Cohen, was very familiar with this silence. After his two sons die during the inauguration of the Tabernacle in the wilderness, his response is

unusual. He does not cry hysterically; he does not do anything extreme; he does not place blame. His only response is silence: **“And Aharon was silent.”** (Vayikra 10:3)

Eliyahu and Pinchas both undergo a very significant transformation in our tradition. Eliyahu goes from being a prophet of fire and fury to a kind old man who joins us silently at the Seder table in order to tell us that salvation will come in good time; he whispers good tidings to us at the havdalah ceremony on Saturday nights, a moment before we return to the mundane; he blesses the 8-day-old baby boy, softly and silently, as he is being brought into the covenant of Avraham. According to the book of Malachi, Eliyahu is destined to bring peace between parents and children, between the generations: **“Lo, I will send the prophet Elijah to you ...He shall reconcile parents with children and children with their parents.”** (Malachi 3:23-24)

Pinchas undergoes his own metamorphosis at the beginning of our parasha: **“I grant him My pact of peace.”** (Bamidbar 25:12)

God wisely (If I may give God compliments) recruits the zeal and dedication of Pinchas and Eliyahu for the purpose of peace and wholeness. From zealots, they become agents of blessing, comfort, and peace.

This is not a shift from zealotry to lack of conviction, but from external religious adherence (through fire, destructive storms, and drama) to a deep, quiet, internal worship. Because it is in the quiet and stillness, not in the storm and the wind, that God’s heartbeat may be heard, that heartbeat which is the source of all Creation.

Try it at home, it works! Every time you feel overwhelmed and angry, remember Eliyahu and the haftorah of Pinchas: God is not to be found in a lost temper; that’s just your drama, your nerves, your hormones, or a meltdown in the heat of the summer. It will pass! And when it does, God’s silent presence will be clear to see.

Shabbat Shalom,

Elisha