

## Pinchas

Kol Masorti, 2019

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This week a new leader is chosen. Sound familiar? In chapter 27 of today's sedrah, God reveals who that new leader is to be. But at the start of the sedrah, it might look as if Phinehas is odds-on favourite to be that leader. Last week we read how amidst the idolatry of Baal-Peor, an Israelite Zimri-ben-Salu took a Midianite woman Cozbi-bat-Zur and paraded her in front of the entrance of the Tent of Meeting as the people were mourning Aaron. Phinehas, who as Aaron's grandson was one of the mourners, was so outraged that he chased Zimri and Cozbi to the 'Kubah', the chamber of the tent of meeting, and impaled them both with his spear.

And today in 25:12 God tells Moses that he is so proud of his great nephew that God is giving him his Covenant of Peace – Brit Shalom - and a covenant of everlasting priesthood - Brit Kahunat Olam. Would Moses have wanted his relative Phinehas to be his successor?

Phinehas may have been too young and impetuous to be considered for Moses' successor, but his later exploits are more creditable. He successfully leads an Israelite army against the Midianites to avenge the incident with Baal Peor, killing all the Midianite men, but sparing the women and boys; was Phinehas starting to feel remorse for his earlier zealotry?

Later, when the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh settle in Transjordan, they establish an altar which the other tribes mistake for a separatist move to set up a new religious centre. Phinehas is sent to investigate. He negotiates and accepts their sincere motives, and the threat of civil war and secession is averted.

In the Mishnah, Hillel says: Be of the disciples of Aaron; a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, one who loves all people created by God and draws them close to Torah". So is Phinehas inheriting the mantle of the peace lover from his grandfather straight after his death? What did the Covenant of Peace mean? One explanation is that God gave Phinehas the covenant of peace *because* he was so troubled by the spontaneous, youthfully impetuous way he had killed Zimri and Cozbi. The Neziv, Rabbi Naphtali Zvi Yehudah Berlin said that this deed would leave in Phinehas' heart such intense emotional unrest afterward, that the divine blessing was designed to cope with the situation and promised peace and tranquillity of the soul. Is this a lesson that youthful indiscretions should be disregarded in the search for a new leader?

When Moses asks God to appoint a successor but humbly doesn't suggest Phinehas, or one of his own sons, Midrash Rabbah suggests that maybe having seen that God had just re-confirmed the hereditary principle in the case of Zelophehad, Moses thought that God would let one of his sons succeed him. But no – God appoints Joshua. The Midrash quotes Proverbs 27:18 – 'He who looks after the fig tree shall eat the fruit thereof'. Joshua looked after Moses, was the attendant of the Mishkan where Moses ministered, and so was appointed the successor.

But we are left wondering what Israel's fate would have been if Phinehas had been chosen.