

## Preserving Zeal

Moshe Taragin

Pinchas is celebrated for his courageous intervention and is lavishly rewarded with priesthood. Indeed, special circumstances call for special measures and his intrusion into this debacle halts a raging plague which had already claimed 24,000 lives. Moreover, his actions terminate a public desecration or Chilul Hashem preventing the type of religious freefall which had subverted the march to Israel forty years earlier.

Yet, even Pinchas was almost reprimanded by the local courts in recognition of the danger of his extra-legal maneuver. The Talmud Yerushalmi asserts that procedures to excommunicate Pinchas had already commenced at which point G-d, by declaring rewards for Pinchas, validated this heroism. The very same Yerushalmi records that Pinchas' decision was discrepant with the conventional will of the Chachamim – a statement which creates further ambiguity about this decision. Even the celebrated zealot or kanai such as Pinchas is treated with ambivalence by Chazal-and for good reason!

Civilized society generally frowns upon vigilantism and zealotry. Snap justice carried out by lone individuals can plunge society into chaos and launch cycles of violence and revenge. Organized judiciary systems are established precisely to assure due process and to provide deliberate and accurate prosecution of crimes. Self-appointed vigilantes are discouraged not only because their interventions may be hasty and erroneous. Their self-initiated justice – even when accurate-imperils the entire system of law and order.

However, as dangerous as zealotry may be and as destructive as lone-wolf vigilantism is to social order, there is also a danger of social and religious apathy. A zealot cares and cares deeply about his values and their possible erosion. True, his passion overcomes his judgment and it provokes dangerous and socially corrosive behavior. However, it is myopic to criticize the unhealthy expressions of a zealot while ignoring the deep passion and profound conviction which underlie this behavior. As we discourage zealotry, do we also dismiss zeal? In condemning vigilantism are we scorning vigilance? In our justifiable recoil from unrestrained

“kana’ut” do we adopt a quieter and more listless approach of ideological indifference?

Not only does a Pinchas care deeply about his own values but he also views his life as interconnected with his community – which in this instance is spiraling. Others may have ignored these deplorable ‘sinners’ allowing them to wallow in their own appetites and meet their inevitable Divine fate. For Pinchas, this disaster is personal as this circus-like spectacle is desecrating the Divine presence and disfiguring their shared fabric of religious experience. When we oppose vigilantism and adopt a “live and let live” approach, are we, in reality, severing ourselves from the commonplace and secluding ourselves from the shared experience?

Someone who hurls a stone at a Shabbat violator has crossed terrible red lines and has also violated multiple halachot. This type of violence and similar hostile measures are intolerable and justifiably cause revulsion. However, in our haste to revile this behavior do we check our own “passion temperature”? Are we able to summon similar levels of passion and a similar sense of shared experience, while carefully modulating our responses and sentiments so that they aren’t violent or abusive? Do we stream our experience collectively so that we sense deep disappointment when some members of that collective betray our cherished values and compromise that shared experience?

It is a delicate but important question- precisely because zeal can easily morph into hostile zealotry coupled with strident judgementalism and cocky dismissiveness. Below are a few guidelines to help differentiate between healthy ‘internal zealousness’ and dangerous dismissiveness and negativity:

#### 1) Anger or Sadness

Angry people are often looking for easy targets to vent their anger and frustration and very few targets are as ‘easy’ as perceived religious waywards. If the driving emotions of our zealous thoughts are anger and antagonism, it is likely that our zealous passions are, in reality, masking ugly anger and smugness. Anger and self-righteousness can never be justified and they can never serve a holy purpose. By contrast, if the internal zealousness is rooted in sadness or in disappointment it is

more often a sincere manifestation of deep conviction and a sense of shared experience. Discerning between anger and sadness is an important barometer in life in many delicate moral situations.

## 2) Is the Zealot Himself a Hypocrite

There is an old expression: “scratch a Saint find a sinner” ! Though this is a generalization, it does reflect a tendency of some to cover their own religious blemishes by spewing religious venom at others – specifically for the faults which they secretly harbor. In fact, Chazal remark that many were mocking Pinchas by highlighting the idolatrous background of his maternal grandfather Yitro. As he emerged from this pagan world, he was hardly the person to critique those who were drawn to this mess. Zealous sentiments are noble when they don’t reflect an attempt to compensate for personal flaws but are sensed by a person who is immune to the failures he witnesses in others and which sadden him. Recognizing our own lack of immunity often cools otherwise zealous thoughts.

## 3) Overall Body of Work

We can often gauge the ‘validity’ of zealotry by studying the overall “body of work”. The Satmar sect of Chassidim are virulently opposed to the formation of the Jewish State based on the teachings of the original Satmar Rebbe in his sefer Va’yoel Moshe. It should be stressed that though opposed to the State of Israel, Satmar chassidim overwhelmingly reject the despicable actions of a small minority of renegade Satmars who actively align with our worst enemies. Their general opposition to the State of Israel may cause many supporters of Israel great resentment. Yet, anyone who has spent even a weekend in a NY area hospital can attest to the remarkable chesed extended by the Satmar chassidim to any needy Jew. Satmar is astoundingly devoted to ahavas yisrael, as evidence by their hospital activities. As part and parcel of that devotion they are passionately resolved against the State which they see as thwarting Jewish redemption. Though opposed to their position it should not be difficult to appreciate their caring.

Uncharacteristically, Pinchas is traced back two generations to his grandfather Aaron. Perhaps this frames his zealousness in a similar fashion. His grandfather set the tone for the Cohen profile - caring devoted public servants who

relentlessly pursued the common welfare and public harmony. This caring led one member of their family to a passionate response to a public and offensive display of sexual misconduct. This was an act of caring even though it skirted the classic judicial channels.

We are far removed from a world in which a Pinchas –type response would be imaginable. Furthermore, active zealousness in the age of religious and ideological differentiation would be harmful. However, we cannot mistake lack of response for lack of passion and lack of intervention for lack of conviction.