

Pinḥas 5767

Shabbat Shalom.

When I lived in New York, many of my friends utilized the services of a *mohel*, a ritual circumciser, who did their sons' *britot milah* or, as more commonly known, brisses. While he seemed fairly proficient at the procedure, for some reason he always needed to cut the tension with a pun or a bad joke. When it came time to discuss his fee, he would say, "I don't charge a fee, I only take tips." Even during the bris itself he would crack some jokes.

I never found humor around the *brit milah* to be appropriate. I understand that this is an important mitzvah, one that demands a degree of seriousness. I usually ask a *mohel* with whom I work to avoid what I would call "*bris humor*". *Milah*, circumcision, is the profound signifier of a male's Jewish identity, of commitment to God, Torah, and the Jewish people. It is a deeply spiritual act.

At a traditional *brit milah*, the *mohel* begins, after everybody has greeted the baby with the words *Barukh haba*, blessed is the one who has entered," and then says words from this week's Torah reading. The words are from the opening of Parashat Pinḥas:

"The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. Say, therefore, 'I grant him My pact of friendship, my *brit* of peace.'"

Why do we recite these three verses at a *brit milah*, at a circumcision, as we enter a Jewish boy into a covenant between God and the Jewish people?

The reason is that the rabbis associated Pinḥas, the protagonist in this morning's *parashah* with *Eliyahu hanavi*, Elijah the Prophet. It states in the Talmud (Bava Metzia, 114b), that there is an opinion that Elijah and Pinḥas are one and the same, that they are actually the same person. Now while this is highly suspect to say the least, we can understand this insight as telling us that Elijah, who lived a few hundred years after Pinḥas, is following in his footsteps. In 1 Kings 19 Elijah states twice that he is zealous for God because the Israelites have broken their *brit*, their covenant with God. The rabbis have God reply to Elijah, "By your life, Jews will perform circumcision from now on and you will see it with your own eyes."

Our rabbis further instituted the ritual of placing the infant on the *kissei Eliyahu*, the chair or throne of Elijah, who, as the *malakh habrit*, the messenger of the covenant, symbolically attends every circumcision. Thus we call upon Elijah and Pinḥas during this moment of stress.

As the grateful father of two sons – and one daughter – I have watched my sons undergo the *brit milah*. I know personally how difficult and stressful this mitzvah can be for parents. It is counterintuitive; it is difficult and challenging on numerous levels. But it is a concrete sign of the covenant, a link that goes back 4000 years, one of our most powerful rituals. As a parent in that moment, I needed someone to help me and comfort me, and there is no more powerful force than Elijah himself -- Elijah, whom we call upon every Saturday night at the end of Shabbat. We sing to him and he somehow visits us as we end the Shabbat to strengthen us, to gird us as we enter the workweek, leaving behind our oasis of Shabbat. Elijah stands with us at many liminal moments as we move from the security of one state of being to another.

Similarly, we call upon Elijah at the *seder*, a time, especially in the Middle Ages that was often associated with attacks on Jews, that was literally dangerous, to reassure, to strengthen and to give us courage. Elijah is present at every *brit milah* as he was there for me at my sons' *britot milah*.

There are two different *haftarot* associated with this morning's *parashah*. The one that we did not read because of today's date on the Hebrew calendar is the one the rabbis chose for this Torah portion. It includes both the above-mentioned verses about Elijah's zealotry for God, and the following description of Elijah's spiritual encounter with God:

"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 murmuring sound. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his mantle about his face and went out and stood in the entrance of the cave."

Elijah is not only a passionate leader of the Jewish people, but he is one who experiences God on the most intimate level.

Now associating Elijah with Pinḥas can be a little bit problematic. Pinḥas is also zealous for God, and, at the end of last week's Torah reading, when many of the Israelites were committing acts of sexual immorality with Moabite women, it is Pinḥas who rises up and stops the immoral behavior with an act of murder. It is a dramatic moment, one that the tradition viewed on some level as positive because he stopped this terrible behavior and tried to get the people to turn away from idolatry and immorality.

But the tradition struggles mightily with Pinḥas. How can this act of both punishment and/or murder be acceptable?

Our Etz Hayim Hummash offers many different explanations in answer to this question. First of all, the letter *yud* in Pinḥas' name in the Torah scroll is written smaller than the other letters. "When we commit violence, even if justifiable, the *yud* in us (standing for the name of God and for Y'hudi, Jew)" is diminished. In addition, in the following verse where Pinḥas is given God's covenant of peace, the *vav* in the word *shalom* is written with a break in its stem. This is interpreted homiletically to suggest that the sort of peace one achieves by destroying one's opponent is inevitably flawed.

Pinḥas is given a covenant of peace even though his actions are problematic. Some say that the covenant of peace was in essence to control his violent, overly zealous behavior and to moderate it – to channel his religious passion into constructive and healthy action.

Several commentators understand God's granting the priesthood, the *k'hunah* to Pinḥas and his descendants, not as a reward for his violent behavior but as an antidote for it, a means to control and sublimate it appropriately. As the *K'tav Sofer* writes, "He will have to cure himself of his violent temper if he is to function as a Kohain." The *Ha'amek Davar* suggests, "The priesthood will protect Pinḥas from the destructive impulse within him."

Pinḥas and Elijah are both passionate religious leaders, whose passion sometimes gets out of hand. Like us, our rabbis were uncomfortable with the absence of strong limitations, boundaries for their actions, so they constructed a proper framework for them. I do not wish to judge Pinḥas. There are moments where one must take action, sometimes even violent action, and perhaps in that moment he was justified. Given ancient understandings of morality, perhaps that was the case. Morality, of course, shifts and has changed over the course of thousands of years. Nonetheless, it is clear that his type of behavior should be avoided at all costs, and the rabbis wished to teach us that.

The real key to understanding Pinḥas is in how the rabbis shaped and refocused him. Perhaps the strongest indication of this is that this week's portion begins, not with Pinḥas' act, which was left as the end of last week's portion, but with his *brit shalom*, his covenant of peace.

I think the rabbis deliberately broke up the reading so that last week included Pinḥas's act of violence, but this week it seems that Pinḥas has undergone some kind of process. As readers of Torah, we too, like Pinḥas, have had some time to think things through. There was some kind of transformation; maybe even some *teshuvah*, repentance, for what he had done. He was trying to move beyond his act. By dividing the story in two and naming this week's *parashah* where he really takes almost no action for Pinḥas, the rabbis left us with a negative end to last week and a positive beginning to this.

Pinhas and Elijah are reminders that we need people who are passionate about God, Torah, and Israel. We need to have people who are able to inspire their peers and their families to new heights of religious observance take up the reins of leadership. We are also reminded to connect with those around us, to strive for balance, to direct our religious passion appropriately. The tradition is all about that golden mean. Elijah and Pinhas, who appear together at the *brit milah*, were both people who struggled with finding that balance, as many of us do. But ultimately we must take their model, appreciate their passion, and utilize it to inspire and protect us while we find the appropriate means to convey their message.

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