

Pinchas Drash, Numbers 25:10-30:1

Nancy Sherman, July 19, 2025

This is both an uplifting and very troubling parsha. I'll begin with trouble, not making good trouble.

I moved from the newspaper to the bible to sadly find zealotry and vigilantism in both. The news we know. Pinchas may be less familiar. Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, takes up G-d's unleashed wrath against an Israelite man, one Zimri who was "whoring" flagrantly with a Midianite woman, who even is distinguished in having a name, "Cozbi" (not of the family Bill Cosby but daughter of a tribal chieftain of the house of Midian). There was intermingling, potential miscegenation, you might say, potential intermarriage. This threatened the purity of the Israeli line. G-d does not act, but Pinchas does, quelling G-d's own rage by stirring his own and acting on it. With spear in his hand, he follows both of the parties into the bedroom chamber and stabs them in cold blood (the woman "through the belly") "so that I [G-d] does not wipe out the Israelite people in my passion (this a few lines above in the preceding text at 25.6)." G-d is thrilled, for his own hand is stayed, and with his deputy, self-appointed righteous zealot, the deed is done with a cautionary lesson for all.

An act of righteous indignation, done out of religious zealotry and tribalism, gets rewarded and encouraged by G-d. His divine hands aren't dirty. Someone else's are. And G-d didn't even have to set his hench man up to do the deed: He showed up unsolicited, offended by the blasphemy of a tribe member having sexual relations with a non-Israelite apparently, without even hiding the fraternization.

Think of the Loving v. Virginia 1967 court case with Virginia charging the interracial couple violating the commonwealth's anti-miscegenation laws. It went to the Supreme Court who argued in favor of the Lovings.

There is a history of unbridled wrath in the ancient world. Homer's Iliad is the single most told tale of the wrath of a fighter, Achilles, denied his honor (*time*,) in this case a war bride, by his Greek commander Agamemnon, and Achilles taking his battle gear and sitting out the war because of the honor offense.

And too, think of Ajax, the bulwark of the Greeks in their fight against Troy, who is not given what he earned, the prize of Achilles shield for his incomparable role in vanquishing the Trojans, (he's passed over for Odysseus). Ajax commits suicide on stage at the tip of his spear for the honor offense (as told in Sophocles' *Ajax*).

Seneca, a Roman court minister, tutor, and speechwriter for Nero, and notably, a Stoic, rails against the toxic disease of anger in his treatise, *On Anger*. Here's a glimpse of his teaching. All anger, he says, is useless. It's a despicable plague. It runs riot. It knows no limits. It undoes the chances for equanimity of both the angry person and its target. He opens his essay *On Anger*, with a voyeuristic glimpse of the face of anger: "Eyes ablaze and glittering, a deep flush over all the face as blood boils up from the vitals, quivering lips, teeth pressed together, bristling hair standing on end... the hideous horrifying face of swollen self-degradation."¹ Only a literary essayist of the caliber of Seneca can pen such prose. As the tutor for young Nero and

¹ <https://ifl.web.baylor.edu/sites/g/files/ecbvkj771/files/2022-11/Anger.pdf>

later his speechwriter once he ascended the throne, he likely saw Nero exhibit that kind of rage a few too many times.

Now this is extreme. Aristotle, several centuries earlier (384-322), will say anger is useful and apt if it is aimed at the right persons, for the right reasons, at the right time, and in the right way. That is what it is to “hit the mean” with respect to anger. It doesn’t mean you have to extirpate it. Or even always moderate it and tamp it down. It just means you have to control your impulse and passion and react and act reasonably, even when motivated by a sense of rage for an unjust offense or defamation. Anger can be virtuous. But he never says zealotry is or religious zeal.

But that is what we find, perhaps 700 years earlier in the Bible. And it is a lesson that seems to be influential, far too influential, in various segments of the Jewish population in Israel as well as this country. I’d love to hear more about that in the comments.

What’s also troubling to me is the reward Pinchas receives for his unbridled religious righteous anger. And that is for being God’s henchman of anger, he is honored with a Brit shalom, a welcoming ceremony, a pact of fellowship.

The term caught my attention because just a few weeks earlier I was in an annual discussion group with some fellow philosophers, the “Babylonians” we call ourselves, because we were exiled from the Hartman Center in Jerusalem where we used to annually meet as philosophers reading Talmud paired with secular philosophical writings (We have a hunch we were “exiled” not out of enmity, but probably only because we cost the center money without bringing in substantive profit.). In the small group of exiles is Michael Walzer, a true

philosophical hero of mine. The conversation moved to Israel and the war, etc. And Michael, an ardent Zionist and Jewish political philosopher scholar, heading to Israel in the coming days, said he always viewed the founding of Israel as not a religious state, but a Brit Shalom—a welcoming fellowship, I suspect he meant—of refugees and Jews displaced from all over the world. The term jumped out at me in this parsha, with Walzer's remarks in mind now. How welcoming is Israel? What is the religious zealotry that undermines just war theory that Michael himself helped rewrite in his famous *Just and Unjust Wars* (1977). I'd love to hear more from this group about the legacy of "Brit Shalom" in the bible etc.

So unleashed and licensed rage is a thorn in my side as I read this parsha. It is all too easy to let anger take hold. We all need anger management. But the lesson here is that murderous rage is divinely sanctioned and helps remove the stain of god's hand from doing the deed and replacing it with ours.

There is a second theme I want to raise for discussion and this one more uplifting. The parsha is in part about land inheritance and family legacies. A census is taken not for conscription, but for land apportionment. In the midst of it, (27:1-4), the daughters of Zelophehad (a descendant of Joseph, I believe) go before Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the whole gathered assembly, and plead for their rights to inherit their father's land. He left no sons and only daughters. Don't we have a right to preserve our family inheritance and honor our legacy through an allocation of land?

It's a feminist act, a bold, public act of courage before their spiritual leader and with witnesses in the whole congregation, or people. Here God doesn't reward wrathful vengeance,

but justice: “If a man dies without leaving a son, you shall transfer his property to his daughter.” Imagine: property rights passed down to women!

What did I make of this? Well, my first thoughts went to Henry VIII and the six wives, some beheaded, like Anne Boleyn, because she could not produce a male heir to inherit the throne. History would only laugh, I guess, we could say, to learn what became of Elizabeth, the daughter of Henry and Anne Boleyn, as she put her mark on the Tudor throne, eventually angling out her cousin and Catholic, Mary Queen of Scotland (Henry did have a male heir from one of his wives, but Edward died young and reigned only for a very short time.).

I also thought about my mother. My father returned from war, WW II, where he was a medic. Having lost his own father at his own bar mitzvah age, what he wanted most to do was marry and raise a family. And that meant earning a living to support your wife and children. He turned down the GI bill to do just that. Once my brother and I were old enough, my mother wanted to work. She had worked most of her life before marrying, finished a few years at NYU before the Depression hit and she had to drop out and work in her father’s store. So she knew about being a working woman. But for her to work was somehow insulting to my father, or shaming. It might mean he couldn’t properly support his family. She didn’t want to work for the money, but for the independence and sense of worth. He forbade it. I remember the arguments. You can imagine that my own path was something of a reaction against this: I went to a women’s college, Bryn Mawr, where women could achieve what men had long achieved, or so that was the line we were given.

What happened to the lessons of the daughters of Zelophehad? Those who thump Bibles these days, and preach good values from them, be they Christian, Jewish, or whatever, and in politics, at least, are rewriting norms to keep out women from high ranking military posts, and promoting a philosophy of motherhood and more babies, don't know the lessons of the daughter: Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Tizrah. The morality police of a different religion, Iranian Shia, don't know the lessons either as they brutally punish and killed a young woman, Mahsa Amini for daring to show a wisp of front hair from the folds of her hijab.

So a few questions to get us thinking:

--What is the role for zealotry for the sake of religious purity and/or non-intermarriage?

--What is the enduring legacy of the daughters of Zelophehad?

--And perhaps, too, please help me understand all the shades of meaning of *brit shalom*.

ONE last confession. My husband, Marshall Presser, a data dude from the beginnings of computing, volunteered to show me what AI could do for this parsha. At that moment, I was surrounded by a half dozen or so texts I pulled out from my shelves. He knows I am worried about returning to the classroom in the fall and dealing with students and AI. So, let's ask ChatGPT (via 5 AI engines), he said, what they think about Pinchas. And within minutes, he produced the answers, sent me a Google doc, which I read through. They were not bad at all. Some were really quite good, esp. from *Perplexity*. So you are my guinea pigs. Embrace the future!!!