

Drash for Parsha Pinchas

In this drash I will combine talks and my memories on Category Theory, the Reverend Daniel Berrigan, and the Mathematician Paul Erdos, as a way of explaining the continuing importance of the figure of Pinchas in each of our lives.

There are four troubling parts to the figure of Pinchas. The action which distinguishes Pinchas occurs before the Parsha, when Pinchas the zealot runs through the Jewish Prince and his midianite lover while they are copulating in the Holy of Holies, thus averting the plague. Pinchas is then blessed by G-d for this act, even though the Rabbis spend a lot of time later trying to put Pinchas' act into a "one time only" box so as not to associate normative Judaism with acts of violent zealotry. And later Pinchas leads the Jewish forces to avenge G-d over the Midianites, another troubling act which we try to "put into a one time box", while in his final appearance, in the Prophets, he is a man of peace sent to reconcile warring factions. And if Pinchas actions are to be so "contained" as one time acts, what can he mean for us today.

To start my thoughts about Pinchas let me take us back over 40 years to Ithaca NY, where I was a struggling graduate student in Mathematics at Cornell University. I had not been well prepared by my undergraduate days, and in reality was not suited to be a pure mathematician, but like so many other graduate students, I knew no other future and so plodded along in a field I was destined to fail to succeed. I was living in a group home with 12 students, among which were several Catholic students who knew and were influenced by the Reverend Daniel Berrigan, the Catholic Jesuit Chaplain who along with his brother Rev Phillip Berrigan and others, were active protesters against the military and the war in Vietnam .

Everyone at Cornell knew of Dan Berrigan and his actions in Catonsville Md, where he and eight others of the Catonsville Nine poured blood on draft files, an act for which they were arrested and convicted. Dan was awaiting sentencing while serving as one of the Catholic chaplains at Cornell. I knew of Dan since I was co-director there of the Cornell Draft Counseling group, sponsored by another Chaplain, the Reverend Jack Lewis. [While there Dan also sponsored the Student Homophile League, which later, after the Stonewall Riots, became the Gay Liberation Front. They sponsored an appearance by Frank Kameny, founder of the Mattachine Society, the first Gay Rights group; at the meeting I asked him whether there were any articles on Homosexuality and the Draft and he responded by telling me there would be after I wrote one. After that I collaborated with him and Arlo Tatum, Executive Director of the Central Committee of Conscientious Objectors and produced the first pamphlet on Homosexuality and the Draft, which was distributed around the country by Gay and Draft Counseling organizations.]

One day Dan appeared at our Group House and after meeting with the Catholic members of our house asked if he could move in with us until the FBI came to get him. While we were considering this, President Nixon ordered the bombing of Cambodia, Kent State happened, and Dan Berrigan called for everyone on campus to stop going to classes and occupy the campus to protest the war's escalation, and appeared at our house suggesting we go with him.

I chose instead to go to my class on Category theory. Let me explain category theory to you. Perhaps the best way to begin is to mention that its nickname among Mathematicians is "Abstract Nonsense". It is all about how to manipulate mathematical objects mathematically. While this makes no sense in most disciplines – imagine studying the medicine of medical terms and ideas, or the biology of biological categories like genomes and cell structures – it does make enough sense that some mathematicians spent their careers in it, and one of them was my teacher, one of the most boring teachers at Cornell. So with chanting going on outside our classroom, with the pull of my friends and my conscience arguing within me, I sat there copying notes about arrow categories tracing among each other, notes that I did not understand while I was taking them then or now.

And later that week, after some desultory debate inside our group house we turned Dan Berrigan down and he waited for arrest by himself, then chose to disappear, only to be arrested later as a fugitive. And a few weeks ago I again said no to an invitation to attend Dan's 90 birthday party, where Amy Goodman would speak and Pete Seeger would play.

But Dan Berrigan did not go away even though I turned away. Rather Dan lived and lives inside me, the sheer force of his convictions, his passionate pursuit of justice and his willingness to take on topics like Homosexual Rights in 1968 and the War in Vietnam in 1965 and the Torture in Guantanamo Bay in 2001-2012 lives inside me and anyone who knows him or knows of him. Like Pinchas, people like Dan Berrigan run us through our gut when we are busy doing other things, like pursuing our animal instincts. They remind us of what we do not want to face, our idolatrous worship of pleasure, routine, obligations, career, etc. And we must stop and try to put them into a box lest they divert us from what we intend to do, lest they bring down our institutions, plans, goals, and push us towards their jealous god.

One more story about another mathematician, Paul Erdos. Every Mathematician knows the stories about Paul Erdos, how he never married, or had a home, or owned anything. If you were in one of Paul Erdos's fields and he thought you were a good mathematician, he would simply show up at your home, and when you opened the door, he would walk in and announce, "My mind is open". When this happened, it was your lucky day, you simply took care of Erdos' needs and in return he and you would solve problems and publish papers that could make your reputation. Paul Erdos published more papers on more topics than any other mathematician in history.

Erdos had names for everything. Children were referred to as "[epsilons](#)" (because in mathematics, particularly calculus, an arbitrarily small positive quantity is commonly denoted by the Greek letter (ϵ)); Women were "bosses" and their husbands were "slaves"; People who stopped doing math had "died"; Music was "noise"; People who had married were "captured"; People who had divorced were "liberated"; and although an atheist he called G-d the Supreme Fascist and believed he had written a book in which all mathematical proofs were given. He believed in the book if not the author. To this day every mathematician has an Erdos number. Zero is reserved for Erdos; one for everyone who wrote a paper with Erdos; two if you wrote a paper with someone with an Erdos number of one; and so on. Mine and my brother in law have Erdos number 3, one of my proudest possessions. You write the number above your name in small letters and everyone in the Math world knows what it means.

Now I want to ask you what your Pinchas number is. Think about whether for someone in your life you were their Pinchas, someone who was influenced by some zealous act or word of yours. If so, give yourself a P(zero). Or maybe there was a Pinchas in your life who directly influenced you, who made you as uncomfortable and still sits like a burr in your saddle today as you struggle with their ideas of actions. If so give yourself a P(one). Or maybe there is someone who was so influenced by the writings or actions or words of another – a Martin Luther King or Gandhi or Berrigan or Kameny – that so changed them and then they changed you, so you are a P(2). Identify your number and tell us about what happened to you and your world at that time.