

Pinchas: Numbers 25:10-30:1 - Read at the service of 7/29/13

I reviewed last year's commentary and had, as nearly always some new resources and some new thoughts. I read in *Sparks Beneath the Surface* (p.202) a teaching that Pinchas did "all this by himself without any consultation or self-reflection without preparation and without intention, only from some inner impulse" and so is an act which the commentator sees as one which justifies the reward given him.

This leads me to what seemingly uncontrolled acts in which there is no reflection and no conscious awareness of the consequences are nevertheless justified. The only ones I can think of are those one usually hears about through the media; these are acts involved in saving the lives of others in the course of disasters. In these accounts, we almost invariably hear from rescuers that they acted intuitively and don't consider themselves heroes; a response which is not challenged and often rewarded. But this is not zealotry; it is an intuitive reaction to the feeling that all lives are worth preserving.

So I reflect again on the definition of zealotry and its meaning in our time. Acts of zealotry, by definition, are acts that reflect a commitment to principles. Historically, some of those principles are often accepted and later rejected (white supremacy) or rejected and later accepted (women's right to vote). Zealotry in past centuries took the form of wars, strikes, political assassination, and protest marches, usually aimed at defeat of the opposition which then took the form of new legislation or changes in government.

Contemporary zealotry comes in a less visible organizational form than it has in the past. People support public officials whom they see as sharing their principles. They attend meetings, march in

demonstrations sign petitions, contribute money, and encourage their children to emulate them by the same forms of activism in which they participate. They might be described as zealots if they assume leadership roles and devote themselves full time to their causes. This pattern seems to apply equally whether their inclinations are considered liberal or conservative, secular or religious. None of this has the flavor, as in past centuries, of soap-box radicalism, defiance of convention, and rejection of parental authority. One can argue that these quiet forms of activism are in the long run probably more effective in achieving goals than the more violent forms of the past, at least one would hope so.

In the light of the media's current preoccupation, one has to take note of a relatively new form of zealotry, commonly known as whistle-blowing. Here individuals, who might be described as zealots but, in any case, are people with strong convictions who take it upon themselves to expose wrong doing by those carrying public responsibilities. They act usually with minimal support. Their actions by definition cannot be impulsive: they have to be based on considerable knowledge, their morality has to be defended and they have to be aware of the consequences of their actions. As in Gorenberg's commentary, quoted last year, God dealt with Pinchas' zealotry with a reward that prevented him from ever again undertaking an action which so zealously defended God. Today's zealot-cum-whistle blower will likely pay for his acts for the rest of his life until the world passes judgment on the value of his zealotry.