"*Pinchas*: precursor of Jewish zealotry"

by Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M Cohen

The sidrah Pinchas is generally read on the Shabbat following the Fast of the 17th Tammuz, commemorating the breaching of the outer walls of Jerusalem by the Romans in 69 CE in the run-up to the destruction of the Temple. The coincidental link between the two is represented by the uncompromising zealotry of Pinchas and that of the Zealots of Judea who rashly forced a show-down with the mighty Roman army by burning all the stores of grain within the city.

Before we deal with the topic of the propriety of Pinchas's zealotry – which is related in our sidrah – and that of the extreme nationalists of the 1st century, the sources of which are not so familiar, we need to sketch in some of the historical details of the latter.

The beginning of the zealot movement may be traced to the factionalism that characterised Jewish religious, social, and political life in Judea in the century leading up to the Roman conquest and the destruction of the Temple (70 CE). Josephus refers to a tripartite division into sects, namely, those of Pharisees, Sadducees, and Essenes,[1] but that is a generalisation that omits the reality of the countless smaller factions, and the bitter rivalries that characterised their respective relationships and which created a powder keg within the city of Jerusalem.

One of these was the fearful Zealot faction that first sprung up within the Pharisaic community to express its hostility to Herod, the Roman Jewish client king (72- 4 BCE), and to carry out its objective of effecting an armed uprising to rid Judea of the hated invaders. Within the ranks of the latter were also those named *sicarii* ('daggermen') who deftly assassinated not only members of the Roman administration of the city but also fellow Jews

whom they believed were collaborating with the Romans. They were so called because of the small dagger (*sica*) they secreted beneath their robe, with which to inflict their retribution. A measure of their violent temperament may be gauged by the fact that, according to Josephus, in retaliation for the inhabitants of Ein Gedi's suspected collaboration with the occupiers, the sicarii put 700 of its inhabitants to the sword.[2]

Such zealot groups took their inspiration for armed insurrection from the apocalyptic belief of the Essenes of Qumran that there was to be an impending violent clash between The Sons of Light and The Sons of Darkness, as expounded in their military manual, discovered by Eleazar Sukenik in 1955 in a cave at Qumran in 1955, among the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Romans were, naturally, identified with the Sons of darkness; and hence the Zealots' theological justification for their uprising in a war whose victory they believed would usher in the longed-for Messianic era.

The Zealots and Sicarii made some startling initial gains, by creating a riot in Caesarea in 66 CE., ostensibly in retaliation for the Roman administration's disdain for Judea's Jewish inhabitants and for its encouragement of the hated elite and wealthy Greek communities' objective, which was to wipe out the Jewish influence in Judea and replace it with Hellenism.

The Zealot massacre of the city established its reputation in the eyes of the Romans as a serious and feared force that had to be neutralised. A series of other lightening blows were inflicted, however, wherein the Zealots succeeded in overrunning several Roman garrisons. Inevitably, as the spirit of nationalism spread, many Judeans pinned their hopes on their freedom fighters, though, given that there was a sizeable Jewish population spread over the Eastern Roman empire – over 8 million according to some historians – it is more than likely that majority of Jews took a realistic approach and realised that they were no match for the

Romans once they had boosted their military presence and brought in their heavy military equipment.

As the tide of the rebellion turned in favour of the Romans, with staggering numbers of Jewish casualties, Judean public opinion – which was at its strongest among the Jews of Sepphoris – became more pacifistic, a philosophy preached and promoted by the great disciple of Hillel, R. Yochanan ben Zakkai. As the well-known Talmudic account relates, he had himself carried out of Jerusalem in a coffin, to avoid Zealot detection, and brought to the headquarters of the Roman General, Vespasian. Having prophesied to him that he would imminently be declared emperor by the Senate, and would put down the Jewish rebellion, R. Yochanan elicited a concession from him that the city of Yavneh would be spared the destruction so that he might rebuild Jewish life there and establish it as a centre of learning. After the Jewish defeat, the Sanhedrin accordingly moved there from Jerusalem, and Yavneh became the catalyst for the rapid development of Talmudic scholarship.

It is tempting to view one of Hillel's most famous pacifistic statements as an anti-Zealot polemic and a prophesy of the doom that zealotry brings on all who embrace it:

> *Moreover, he saw a skull floating on the face of the water. He said to it: because you drowned others, they drowned you. And in the end, they that drowned you will be drowned (Avot 2:6).*

In the following century, the Jews attempted another insurrection against Rome under Shimon Bar Kochba, which also ended in failure and the tragic loss of life. Rabbi Akivah gave his enthusiastic support to the uprising, even hailing Bar Kochba as the long-awaited Messiah. He did not win the support of his colleagues, however, and the Talmud quotes the warning of one of his closest colleagues: 'Thorns will grow out of your cheeks and the son of David will still not have arrived' (Yer. *Ta'anit* 4:5).

The book of Proverbs (3:17) hails the promotion of peace and pleasant living as the primary objective of Torah – *d'racheha darchei no'am v'chol n'tivoteha shalom;* and the sages went so far as to include *shalom* as one of the divine names (See Tal. *Shabb.*10b).

It is from that fundamental theological perspective that we may appreciate why the sages were perplexed and troubled by the reward of 'an eternal priesthood' that was bestowed on Pinchas, given the gravity of Zimri and Kozbi's public act of moral depravity and the fact that Pinchas was not instructed by God to act on His behalf. Moses was the leader and the supreme judge. It was his duty and prerogative to deal with them or to call upon God to do so. Indeed, Pinchas's act followed on immediately after God had instructed Moses to execute all who had behaved similarly with the daughters of Moab in the idolatrous and immoral Ba'al Pe'or worship. Significantly, God told Moses that in doing so, he would 'turn away the Lord's wrath from Israel' (25:4) which was on a par with Pinchas's act of 'displaying zeal on My behalf among them' (v. 11).

Furthermore, Moses – on the advice of Yitro – had established a sophisticated judicial structure which, at that moment, Pinchas totally by-passed to take the law into his own hands. Pinchas's peremptory act was thus not only uncalled for, but also one that undermined the authority of Moses' leadership. It is conceivable, therefore, that Moses' plea to God to appoint a new leader – which followed on immediately after God's award to Pinchas[3] – may have been motivated by his belief that God had lost confidence in him and was about to appoint Pinchas as his successor.

Attitudes toward Pinchas down the ages were ambivalent however, with writers such as the author of Psalm 106 and I Maccabees (2:24-28) praising his heroism. Josephus also does so, though he studiously avoids making any reference to his zealotry, notwithstanding that the Torah uses that term (*k-n-a*) four times in the

course of two verses (vv. 11, 13). The reason for his omission of that term is clearly that, as a pro-Roman turn-coat Jewish historian, he was implacably opposed to the Judean zealots who sparked the insurrection against the Romans.

But so were a large number of the Talmudic sages, especially of the Hillelite school. And, in enunciating their criticism of Pinchas – the trailblazer of Jewish zealotry – their primary objective was to aim a broadside at the zealots of their own day. To have aired their opposition openly would been dangerous; so, instead, they substituted the persona of Pinchas as the symbol of the zealotry they so abhorred. (That those sages utilised a biblical episode to send a subliminal message to their communities should not surprise us. After all, that approach – called eisegesis, namely, interpreting a text in a way that serves a particular bias or agenda – has been the stock-in-trade of every preacher from time immemorial.)

The sages' dilemma, however, was how to wriggle out of the fact that God had condoned Pinchas's act. They did so by asserting that 'Pinchas's colleagues sought to excommunicate him for what he'd done, but at that moment the heavenly Spirit descended on him, saying, *"And there shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of priesthood for all time"'* (25:13).[4] This didn't resolve the problem, however, as it provided no rationale for God having discounted the problems we have referred to. It nevertheless had the benefit of demonstrating that the sages' antipathy toward the zealotry of their day had a biblical precedence in the situation of Pinchas, and that the critical attitude of his colleagues represented the halachic norm in the absence of any divine intervention to the contrary.

Some sages attempted to rationalise God's approbation of Pinchas's act was to employ the principle of *halachah v'ein mor'in kein* – that there are certain laws which, though justifiable in principle, were merely theoretical 'and never intended to be enacted in practice.'[5] And the law of *boe'el aramit* – which condones a citizen's assassination of those committing a public act of moral outrage[6] – was one which those sages included in that category. Given the existential threat to the nation posed by the degenerate and seductive Moabite Kemosh worship and Baal Pe'or rituals, God's rewarding of Pinchas was presumably intended as a timely message of gratitude for his having pricked the conscience of the nation, restored it to the straight path, and ensured that God 'did not consume the Children of Israel in [His] vengeance' (Nu. 25:11).

Shabbat shalom

Rabbi Jeffrey

Back nos. of 'Torah thoughts' are available on
www.rabbijeffrey.co.uk > Torah thoughts

---

1. See Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, Book. 4, pp.131-155
2. See Josephus, *Wars of the Jews* (ed. W. Whiston), Bk 4, chap. 7, par.2.
3. Nu. 27:15-ff.
4. Jer. Tal., *San*. 9:7.
5. See Tal. *Betz.* 28b; *Shabb*.12b; *Men*. 37b, *et al*.
6. See Mish. *San*. 9:7; Tal. *San*.81b.