

Parshat Pinhas

Who is a Zealot?

11 'Pinhas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aharon the priest, has averted My wrath from the children of Israel, in that he was zealous for My sake among them, so that I did not consume the children of Israel in My zeal. **12** Wherefore say: Behold, I give unto him My covenant of peace... because he was zealous for his God, and made atonement for the children of Israel.'

Pinhas is given historic recognition and enormous credit for his actions – "Bekano et Kinati" – for zealously expressing God's zeal, Pincha's zeal reflecting God's. He is awarded a special covenant of peace "For that he was zealous for his God and atoned thereby for the entire Bnei Yisrael." The focus here is unquestionably Pinhas' and God's zealous feelings and acts. But what is "zeal?" What does it entail?

In today's popular mindset, Zealots do not generate positive responses. Religious zeal is dangerous. We might add that one's taking the law into one's hands and committing murder in the name of God is particularly displeasing to the modern ear. When we celebrate Pinhas for his heroic act of Zealotry, what exactly are we saying?

Is this line of action recommended? If so, then should we all become zealots? How so? What are we to do?

If God's approval of Pinhas does NOT represent a normative call to action for us, then on what basis is this act good for Pinhas but not for ourselves? Is it just that Pinhas acted in a unique historic situation that cannot be replicated?

THE WORD KIN'AH

What is Kin'ah? How exactly do we translate that word in Hebrew? Maybe "zealotry" is not the appropriate explanation of the word?

a. Kin'ah – Jealousy

Our first look at this word gives us the classic emotion of jealousy, envy, the desire to have that which another person has. An example of this may be found in the story of Rachel and Leah, when Leah has children, but Rachel is unable to bear children. There, we read "And Rachel envied her sister." The verb used is KN"A.

But clearly, this is a negative trait, not one that we particularly desire to cultivate. In the book of Kohelet (4,4) we read: "I have noted that all labor and skillful enterprise comes from men's envy

of each other – this too is futile..." Maybe envy fuels the free-market but it isn't the epitome of a religious value system!

b. Kin'ah - Zeal

A second interpretation of Kin'ah is Zeal, a passionate emotion of rage, outrage. Rashi on our parsha (25:12) comments:

"As he zealously acted for My zeal: He took My revenge, he was filled with the anger, the fury that I sought to put into action. Every language of "Kin'ah" indicates a feeling of anger prompting the to enactment of vengeance."

So zeal is anger, fury, and vengeance.

Maybe in this context, we understand God's title as "the Zealous God" in the Ten Commandments:

"You shall have no other God's before Me For I, the Lord your God, am a zealous God (el KANA), visiting the sins of the parents upon children upon the third and fourth generations of those who reject me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep my commandments."

So here, God's zeal is reflected in his impassioned punishment of not only the sinner, but also his progeny.

A DIFFERENT CONTEXT - SOTA

But I think that we might be able to place the notion of Kin'ah in a new context that might slightly adjust this approach, or maybe reframe it. Let us turn to the parsha of Sota (Bamidbar 5) which talks about a husband who "the spirit if Kin'ah passes over him and he suspects (KN"A) his wife." If this happens then the suspicious husband has recourse to a hearing at the Beit Hamikdash where the wife drinks the "accursed water" which will detect her unfaithful relationship if it indeed happened.

Now how does the notion of Kin'ah fit in here? It isn't jealousy! After all the husband who walks in on his wife having an affair is not jealous of her! Nor is he envious of the man who is with his wife! No, that isn't an accurate description of his emotion at all. It would be something more like, shock, feelings of betrayal, outrage. Now how about our second definition: anger, vengeance? Well the anger does fit in, but not the vengeance! After all, here he suspects his wife of an affair; he takes her to the Temple! – the zealous husband doesn't take matters into his own hands!

In general, a glance at the Concordance indicates that not every emotion of Kin'ah is associated with an act of Vengeance. So, what is happening here? Where is Kin'ah taking us?

Let us take the Parsha of Sota as our starting point. From Sota, one can say that Kin'ah is the feeling of outrage at the notion that one's

spouse is illicitly involved with another person. On that basis, Kin'ah is a state of impassioned emotion, the temperament that enlivens a person engaged in a relationship of exclusivity.

ADULTERY AND IDOLATRY – THE EXCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIP

In the opening verses of Parshat Pinchas, the Ibn Ezra points out that God's designation as "El Kana – the Zealous God - is used particularly in reference to the sin of idolatry. Now, idolatry is to monotheistic religion what adultery is to marriage. In both cases we are dealing with an exclusive commitment that demands total dedication. God is an El Kana in His intolerance and disgust felt towards Avoda Zara. This is because Avoda Zara is the antithesis of Monotheism, the ultimate betrayal of a relationship with God. It is betrayal of a relationship. The violating party is undermining – no! totally destroying – the partnership of trust, love and exclusive commitment between God and man. And when the God-Israel relationship is violated by Israel's worship of another deity, it arouses the deepest emotions of outrage, violation and disgust. This is the selfsame intense emotion of outrage at the sheer brazenness, the wanton breach of commitment of the Sota, the breaking of vows and promises; all of this rises to the surface at the moment in which the sacred covenant is betrayed

That is the "spirit of Kin'ah" that the betrayed husband feels. It is the same Zeal that God feels, betrayed by idolatry. The "Kin'ah" felt by Pinchas as he took hold of the spear to impale Zimri and Kosbi.

PINCHAS

In the case of Pinchas, the entire Israelite camp was enthralled in an orgy of idolatry and sex with the Midianite and Moabite people (see Ch.25 vs 1-15. Interestingly, the sins here reflect both aspects of our example here: the sexual area, and the realm of commitment to God.) This dangerous mix of sins threatens to undermine the entire mission that the nation has waited for 40 years. Here they stand at the border of the promised Land and yet again, the nation lose sight of their objective, they become distracted by the immediate, the temporal pleasures of the now, rather than the eternal promise of the future. Pinchas watches as the lofty vision dissipates before his very eyes. If the idolatry and immorality spreads, what will happen to the future of the nation. The leadership, the elders are paralysed; people cry but do not act (25:5-6.)

It is Pinchas who understands the impact, the significance of this violation of the covenant. He knows that this behaviour can sabotage the entire mission. He is impassioned, feeling the full impact of the breakdown of the God-Israel covenant, fearful for the enormous implications of the craze gripping the people in the camp. His is an act of violence, but his motivations are above and beyond anger and aggression. His act – an act of violence – is not motivated by vengeance, but rather a desperate act of ideals as he sought to put a stop to the madness, to restore proportion, to bring the nation to their senses, to wake people up to the covenantal significance of the acts that were transpiring around them.

That is Kin'ah; the heightened awareness, the indignation, the sensitivity and passionate resolve to make a difference.

THE POSITIVE SIDE OF KINAH : LOVE

But there is a positive corollary to this negative Kin'ah.

"I am very zealous for Jerusalem and Zion ... thus said the Lord, I graciously return to Jerusalem." (Zecharia 1:14-16)

If we go back to the model of a human relationship, a marriage, we might suggest that it is precisely the passion of marriage – the feeling of love and commitment - that finds its expression in outrage if the marriage is betrayed, It isn't two emotions. It is two sides of the same coin. The self-same intensity with which the marriage is valued and energised is the intensity of shock expressed if the marriage is tragically betrayed. They are directly proportional because they are one and the same. Love, the positive force of marriage, becomes transformed into the sense of outrage at its breakdown.

And now, back to God. In the Ten Commandments, God is called a Zealous God. But to my mind his zealous-ness is reflected not simply by the fact that he punishes:

"visiting the sins of the parents upon children upon the third and fourth generations of those who reject me."

He is also zealous to reward:

"... Extending kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep my commandments."

What I mean is that God's zealotry is the sense that the violator should be hunted down, but also that "those who love me" should be warmly embraced well into the future. There is anger, but there is also love. The phrase El Kana might just refer to both sides of the equation; positive AND negative.

Zeal has its foundations in a passionate state of love.

If God's zeal is activated upon the breakdown of the covenant, surely the same covenantal passion is to be mustered in the positive sense in reinstating and rebuilding, the God-Israel relationship. Kin'ah , zeal, is simply the glue of the relationship, invoked when it is violated, and inspired when the covenant is built.

This is why Zecharia uses the language of Kin'ah when God returns to Jerusalem. God's enthusiasm in building the covenantal city is simply the inverse at his outrage at its sins that lead to its destruction.

May we merit the passion of God's love, and not the opposite!