

## **DARSHANUT**

*Darshanut, derived from the Hebrew root darash [explicate, expound], presents the expository, homiletic interpretation of the Bible. Its origins are as old as the most ancient aggadic and midrashic teachings and as new as the sermon or D'var Torah delivered on the most recent Shabbat. The intent is a challenge to relate the Bible to the problems, issues and goals of daily living.*

*We encourage our readers to contribute to Darshanut. The submission should be based on the Bible, no more than 750 words in length, and as relevant and current as you would like to make it. For more information on submissions, see the inside back cover.*

## **PHINEHAS AND MICAH**

**SUSAN WEINGARTEN**

Much has been written about the weekly readings from the *Torah* and the haftarah. Less has been written on the dialogue between them which results from their juxtaposition. But if we listen carefully we can hear this dialogue and the message it teaches us. The last chapter of Balak begins: *And Israel abode in Shittim and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab* (Num. 25:1). God then sends a plague on the people, and Moses tells the judges to put the offenders to death. Meanwhile, one of the children of Israel comes and flaunts his Midianite woman in full view of all the people and before the very Tabernacle itself.

*And when Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose up from the midst of the congregation, and took a spear in his hand. And he went after the man of Israel into the chamber, and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly. So the plague was stayed from the children of Israel. And those that died from the plague were twenty and four thousand (25:7-8).*

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At first this seems horrific, the message of violent religious zealotry heard in the Torah portion. And Phinehas is approved of – God tells us Phinehas has '*turned My wrath away from the children of Israel*' (25:10).

Similarly, in the haftorah from Micah 5:6-6:8, Israel, the *remnant of Jacob*, is described as being like a marauding lion:

*And the remnant of Jacob shall be among the nations, in the midst of many peoples, As a lion among the beasts of the forest, As a young lion among the flocks of sheep, Who if he go through, treadeth down and teareth into pieces, And there is none to deliver*  
(Mic. 5:7)

But then the picture in the haftorah changes. Instead of the people taking the law into its own hands, even in self-defense, it is God Himself who now deals with idolatry: *And I will cut off thy graven images and thy pillars from the midst of thee: And thou shalt no more worship the work of thy hands* (5:12). And the prophet goes even further than this: it is God, not a human being, who now takes on Himself the function of punishing the idol-worshippers among the nations: *And I will execute vengeance in anger and fury upon the nations because they hearkened not* (5:14).

But the rabbis who chose this haftorah to be read after the story of Phinehas and his violent redressing of the wrongs of Israel in the wilderness do not stop here. They choose to end the haftorah with a message to us all not to take Phinehas and his action too literally: *And what doth the Lord require of thee: Only to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God* (6:8).

The Jewish people must "do justly." (The Hebrew *צדק* [asot *mishpat*] is perhaps better translated "do justice.") The individual must not take the law into his own hands; punishment is to be meted out only after due process of law. Justice alone is not enough. People must relate to each other as they pray God will relate to us, with *חסד* [*hesed*]. That word, translated here as "mercy" is an untranslatable Hebrew concept which includes love, mercy, grace, pity, kindness. And finally, we must "walk humbly with God"; we must walk in His ways, but not have the presumption to think we have an exclusive right to interpreting what He wants. The violent act of Phinehas was right in its own time and place. We of later times must beware of

presuming to repeat it and should rather take the words of the prophet as our guide to everyday life.