

# PHINEHAS, ELIJAH & CIRCUMCISION

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At the outset of a traditional circumcision ceremony it is customary for the *mohel* to recite the opening verses of the Torah portion of Pin<sup>h</sup>as:

*Phinehas, son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned away My wrath from the children of Israel, in that he was very zealous for My sake among them, so that I consumed not the children of Israel in My jealousy. Wherefore say: "Behold I give unto him My covenant of peace" (Num. 25:11-12).*

These verses constitute the final vindication of Phinehas who stepped into a major crisis within the Israelite camp to perform a decisive act of intense zealotry which, according to tradition, alienated him from many fellow Israelites.<sup>1</sup>

The details are contained at the end of the previous Torah portion, *Balak* (Num. 25:1-9), where we learn of the rampant immorality and idolatry that had taken root within the Israelite camp. The Midrash attributes it to the advice given by the heathen prophet Balaam: frustrated by his vain attempts to curse the Israelites, Balaam told the Moabite king who had hired him that the only way to overcome the Israelites was to estrange them from their God by luring them into immorality. Balak accordingly set up market stalls near the Israelite camp, with beautiful girls who enticed the men who came to buy their wares.<sup>2</sup>

The Torah relates that Zimri, prince of the tribe of Simeon, grabbed Cozbi,<sup>3</sup> a Midianite princess whom the Talmud identifies as Balak's own daughter, and openly had sexual intercourse with her. Moses was so outraged, by the act itself and by what he construed as his own failure of moral leadership, that he remained rooted to the spot, unable to take action. Phinehas promptly leaped forward, seized hold of a spear and drove it through the two libertines, thereby bringing the nation abruptly to its senses and *turning God's wrath away from Israel* (Num. 25:11).

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Among the tasks that the Midrash sets itself is filling gaps in the narrative left by the written text. Hence, it seeks to account for Moses' inability to act decisively at such a critical time, thus leaving it to someone without judicial authority to do so instead, bypassing the due process of law. The Midrash states that Zimri dragged Cozbi by the hair in front of Moses and the elders, and challenged Moses, saying, "Tell me, son of Amram, is this woman permitted to me or not?" When Moses replied, "She is forbidden", Zimri gave an insolent riposte: "You call yourself a faithful interpreter of God's law. How can she be forbidden to me when you yourself, Moses, married a Midianite. Furthermore, this one is the daughter of a king, whereas your wife, Zipporah, is the daughter of an idolatrous priest!" Moses broke down in tears, unable to answer the personal insult hurled at him or to recollect the punishment Zimri deserved for his outrageous behavior.<sup>4</sup> It was this embarrassing impasse which prompted Phinehas to leap into the breach and take the law into his own hands.

The Midrash adds two further insights: Firstly, the fact that *no man knows his* (Moses') *burial-place* (Deut.34:6) was a punishment for his indecision in taking action against Zimri;<sup>5</sup> secondly, that indecision was occasioned by the fact that Moses had forgotten an oral law he himself had communicated to Phinehas shortly after his return from Mount Sinai,<sup>6</sup> namely, *Ha-bo'el aramit kana'im poge'in bo*, "Whoever has relations with a heathen woman, zealots (who are sincerely outraged) may run them through."<sup>7</sup>

To return to our circumcision ceremony, why are only the opening words of *parashat Pinhas* recited by the *mohel*? This may, of course, be explained quite simply by the fact that during this ceremony we are bringing a child into the faith of Israel and giving him a Jewish identity. At that moment, we remind ourselves of the occasion in our early history when we were guilty of a flagrant act of apostasy and defection from the high moral standards that membership of Israel demands. The reference to Phinehas thus reinforces the implications of that membership, and it constitutes an implicit plea for the newborn initiate to live up to the exacting moral standards exhibited by Phinehas. In addition, the climactic two words uttered by God in appreciation of Phinehas's action, *I will give him et-beriti shalom* – *My covenant of peace*, also have a close link with circumcision. *Beriti*, "My covenant", is, of course, the term used for circumcision, and *shalom* connotes (among its many bibli-

cal nuances) the sense of family continuity. For example, Psalm 128, which speaks of the blessing of a wife and a large family, concludes with the words: *U-re'eh vanim le-vanekha shalom al Yisrael – When you look upon your children's children, you shall experience the peace[ful continuity] of Israel* (verse 6).<sup>8</sup> Thus, that final word (*shalom*) in our Phinehas episode also has a semantic association with the context of birth and circumcision.

There are some other dimensions, however, to this association of Phinehas with the circumcision ceremony. In midrashic tradition, the prophet Elijah was invested with the soul of Phinehas, both having shared the characteristics of zeal and the pursuit of peace. When Elijah says, "*I have been very zealous for the Lord God of Hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant*" (I Kgs. 19:10), this distinctly echoes the words used to describe Phinehas – *be-kan'o et-kinati – who was very zealous for My sake* (Num. 25:11).<sup>9</sup>

Now in view of the midrashic identification of Elijah with Phinehas, it is not surprising that a place should also be found for Elijah at the circumcision ceremony. Indeed, Elijah is called *malakh ha-berit*, "the angel of the covenant,"<sup>10</sup> and immediately after reciting the verses from *Pinhas*, the *mohel* designates a seat of honour as *Kisse shel Eliyyahu ha-navi*, "the Chair of Elijah," presupposing that he attends every circumcision and occupies his seat. Even today, many synagogues have an impressive, beautifully embroidered "Elijah's Seat" for use at circumcisions. However, the Midrash views Elijah's restless presence as a penalty inflicted on him for denouncing Israel when he said, *azvu veritekha*, "*they have forsaken Your covenant*" (I Kgs. 19:10, 14). Because of that blanket denunciation of God's people, Elijah is made to appear at every *berit milah*, every newly initiated covenant, and give humble testimony of the Jewish people's loyalty to their ancestral heritage.<sup>11</sup>

Scholars prefer to view Elijah in the context of a prevailing superstitious belief that the newborn infant was susceptible to an attack by demonic forces, and therefore needed a guardian angel to protect him. Elijah was the natural choice for this role, since he was the one who famously revived the child of the widow of Zarephath after he ceased breathing (I Kgs. 17:17-22).<sup>12</sup> In that case, however, Elijah's successor, Elisha, was no less qualified, having performed a similar feat of resuscitation (II Kgs. 4:32-35).

With this Phinehas-Elijah identification in mind, there could be another reason why the *Pinhas* verses are recited at a *berit milah*, one based on Maimonides' rationale for the law of circumcision: "As regards circumcision, I think that one of its objects is to limit sexual intercourse by weakening the organ of generation as far as possible, and thus causing man to be temperate . . . Circumcision simply counteracts excessive lust."<sup>13</sup> Maimonides' rationale would clearly explain Phinehas' association with the "covenant of Abraham." Phinehas stands out as the biblical figure who, more than Moses himself, sought to "counteract excessive lust" by wreaking vengeance on Zimri, the prince of Israel who publicly displayed and promoted that misguided passion.

There is another, rather ironic connection between Phinehas and circumcision. Phinehas slew Zimri, a member of the tribe of Simeon. Generations earlier, Simeon and his brother Levi had devised a stratagem to wreak vengeance on the Shechemites for seducing and appropriating their sister Dinah.<sup>14</sup> The ritual of circumcision was used – or abused – to achieve their purpose, since they insisted on the Shechemites undergoing *milah* before they concluded an alliance with them and became "one people." On the third day after their operation, when the men of Shechem were weak and unable to defend themselves, Simeon and Levi entered the city and slew every male there. Jacob refused to justify his sons' act of retribution, denounced it in the strongest terms<sup>15</sup> and cursed both of them on his deathbed.<sup>16</sup>

There is a supreme and bitter irony in the fact that Simeon, who took the moral high ground in defence of his sister's honor, would be the progenitor of Zimri, who leaped from that dizzy height into the moral abyss below; and that Levi, his fellow conspirator, would be the very one whose descendant, Phinehas, ended up punishing the tribe of Simeon for their failure to comply with the moral perfection that supposedly justified massacring the Shechemites.

All of this provides a further link between Phinehas and circumcision. Whereas Simeon and Levi abused the ritual in order to facilitate a violent act of retribution, Phinehas atoned for his ancestor's part in that unsavoury affair by demonstrating a moral zeal which, unlike that displayed by Levi, was pure, uncompromising and wholehearted. Under the watchful eye of Phinehas and Elijah at every circumcision, we commit ourselves to *beriti*

*shalom*, our continuity as a nation, secured by upholding the highest moral values.

#### NOTES

1. See Rashi on Numbers 25:11. According to the Talmud, Phinehas was also severely criticized for his action by the later Sages, despite the longstanding oral tradition that "whoever has sexual relations with a heathen woman is liable to peremptory execution by a zealot" (see TJ *Sanhedrin* 48b [9:7] and note 4, below). Why there was antipathy towards Phinehas on this score, given that he acted in conformity with an established principle, is explained by R. Baruch Ha-Levi Epstein (see *Torah Temimah* on Numbers 25:13, footnote 31) on the grounds that an act of peremptory execution by a zealot is only condoned in a situation where there is not even the shadow of a doubt that his action was motivated by zeal for God, devoid of any personal bias or consideration. Since Phinehas belonged to the family of Moses and Aaron, there was always a lingering suspicion that he might have been motivated by family honor and the need to demonstrate strong, uncompromising leadership in a situation where this was being gravely challenged.
2. Numbers Rabbah on the phrase, *Come now, let me counsel you* (Num. 24:14). See also Rashi *ad loc.* and TJ *Sanhedrin* 10:2.
3. TB *Sanhedrin* 82a.
4. Numbers Rabbah 20:25; TB *Sanhedrin* 82a.
5. Numbers Rabbah, *ad loc.*
6. See TJ *Sanhedrin* 10 (7), 48b.
7. Mishnah *Sanhedrin* 9:6.
8. In a lighthearted vein, one might explain the connection between "seeing children's children" and "experiencing peace" as follows: the multiple chores, responsibilities and anxieties occasioned by the raising of one's children, afford little opportunity to enjoy peace and tranquillity. In the case of one's grandchildren, however, once they start to become obstreperous and to disturb one's peace, one can simply hand them back to their parents!
9. See *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 47; *Targum Yonatan* on Ex. 6:18 and Num. 25:12.
10. Mal. 3:1. Although Malachi does not specify the identity of "the angel of the covenant" who will be sent as a harbinger of the Messianic era, midrashic tradition is in no doubt that the reference is to Elijah (see *Seder Eliyyahu Zuta*, ch. 8, end), an identification underscored by Malachi's specific reference to him later in the book (3:23). In the selection of biblical verses that precede the blessings at a circumcision, Elijah is addressed directly: "Elijah, *angel of the covenant*, behold: one most dear to you is before you."
11. See *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer*, ch. 29; *Zohar, Bereshit* 93a.
12. See *Encyclopaedia Judaica* 6:645.
13. Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed* (ed. M. Friedlander), part 3, p. 267ff.
14. See Genesis 34.
15. Gen. 34:30.
16. Gen. 49:5-7.