Parasha Pinchas

וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: פִּינְחָס בֶּן-אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן-אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הֵשִׁיב אֶת-חֲמָתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל...

Shabbat Shalom! Today, we delve into a pivotal portion of Torah Parasha Pinchas. This passage is a rich tapestry of divine zeal, covenant faithfulness, and the sanctity of vows and offerings, woven together in the narrative of Pinchas, the census of a new generation, and the legislation of offerings and vows. Our journey will blend traditional Jewish insights with Messianic interpretations, honoring our roots while reflecting on our faith in Messiah. As the parasha opens we immediately begin reading about covenant faithfulness. What an undulating path Israel seems to travel: the high highs, followed by the low lows; mountain tops to valleys and back again. From holy obedience to casual irreverence, from proper worship of the Almighty to great and high-handed sins against Him. No sooner have we finished the episode of Balaam pronouncing glorious and victorious prophetic blessings over an Israel that bears no guilt in God's eyes, and an affirmation of their unique and separate identity with the Lord from among all the nations, than we find the Hebrews cavorting with the enemy, reveling with their gods, and partying with their women. We might ask ourselves at this point, "don't they ever learn?" How many deaths at God's own hand must they suffer before they fully submit to His Lordship? Well on the one hand we see the infamous description of the Hebrews as being a "stiff-necked" people being developed. But on the other we see that it's less a matter of short memories and more a matter of a different group of people having to learn the same lessons that had previously been taught to their elders. By now God's curse upon Israel that none of the people who came up out of Egypt (who had attained an age of 20 by the time they left) were still alive save for Joshua and Caleb. So, while the first Exodus generation had suffered much as a result of their rebellions, this new generation was either not yet born or had failed to absorb the lessons meted out upon their elders.

This may also answer the often-asked question: why does Numbers, and later Deuteronomy, tend to repeat so much of what had already been given to Israel (and us) from the book of Exodus? The reason is really no different to how it has always been with mankind: we never seem to learn from history. It is said that a wise man learns from his mistakes, but a wiser man learns from the mistakes of others. The new generation of Israelites didn't take Adonai seriously and so were about to pay a terrible price. Verse 1 tells us that Israel was probably still at the same encampment they were when Balaam and Balak stood on 3 different hilltops, gazing at this vast horde of Hebrews, with King Balak trying to convince the gentile sorcerer Balaam to curse Israel for him. This was at a place called Shittim, which literally means Acacia tree.

Let's begin by understanding that it is highly unlikely that at the moment it was occurring Israel had no idea of the shenanigans that had occurred with Balaam and Balak. That is to say that the folks of Israel had no idea at the time it was happening that King Balak was working furiously to have Israel spiritually cursed. In fact, it is tradition that Balaam suggested as he was leaving to go back to Mesopotamia that as an alternative means of defeating Israel that King Balak infiltrate Israel with his people and befriend them in an attempt to slowly turn Israel away from Adonai. The immediate goal would be to get Israel to worship the gods of Moab, because this was a culturally typical sign of alliance and respect. Sure enough, we're told that the Hebrews (the men) started messing around with the Moabite women; almost for sure these were the younger and eligible men but might have also included a few of the middle aged who felt free to cavort with women other than their wives. Further it is said at the beginning of verse 2 that the setting for this "whoring" was a sacrifice to the gods of Moab. What is happening here is a festival to Ba'al; or as he was officially called during this era in the Trans-Jordan region, Chemosh. And this whoring also likely revolved around the pagan practice of religious prostitution that was common among most of the Mystery Religions of this time. Chemosh who is here called Ba'al -Peor (or better "the Ba'al of Peor") was one of several gods involved with fertility so sacred sex was at the core of every celebration in honor of any fertility god or goddess. Therefore, we have two major violations of God's commandments at play: Israel was coveting other gods than Adonai, and they were committing fornication (and in some cases adultery) and this with foreign women. This could all be lumped into the category of idolatry.

At first the actions of the people of Israel interacting with the Moabites would have seemed welcome and natural. It would have seemed peaceful, respectful, and neighborly on both sides. Moab was not the home of savages who sought to do terrible things to all who came near to them; they were just pretty much regular folks. For the young men of Israel to spy some pretty girls from another and different (probably appealing) culture was something to be humanly expected. Moab worshipped various gods including Ba'al as the chief god. It was not Israel's calling to convert foreigners as they journeyed towards the Promised Land, and they certainly felt no obligation to attempt it. So, people being people, Israel showed some respect for the Moabites' beliefs even if they didn't agree with them; how else would they be able to get along in a civil manner? Yet never in the Holy Scriptures are God's followers ever taught to show respect to false gods of other cultures, not even as a means to peaceful co-existence. And the reason why is demonstrated right here in the first 2 verses of Numbers 25. Invariably the respect and tolerance of pagan ways and their gods turns to the adopting of some of those ways and the watering down or perversion of the ways of God Almighty. God calls this whoring because for Him idolatry practiced by His set-apart people is unfaithfulness.

Whoring doesn't necessarily mean that the Israelite men were going after Moabite prostitutes (though some did), rather it means that by having closer and closer relationships with a foreign people whose culture was all about honoring other gods the men of Israel were automatically being unfaithful to Adonai. Let's fast forward to the 21st century. No group of people as a whole more than Christians and Jews are seeking to find a way to forge a relationship with an enormous group of people who openly worship a false god. Over and over Christian and Jewish leaders, and political leaders who claim Christian beliefs, say that we must show respect for Islam. And the thing is, that respect begins with showing respect for the god of Islam because that is what Muslims demand. We have had multiple world leaders tell the whole world that Allah is the same as the Christian god, and that Christianity and Islam must show respect for each other's beliefs as the obvious route to peace and co-existence. We must compromise and make allowances for one another. The applause was thunderous and the world acclaimed him for it, as did the bulk of Christianity and Judaism. After all, didn't Yeshua preach peace at any price? There in Moab the deadly spiral of apostasy and idolatry began subtly and unnoticed with Hebrew men merely forming acquaintanceships with Moabite women. Pretty soon, as says verse 2, the Moabite women did what was natural: they invited their new Hebrew friends to join them at some of their national festive occasions (an honest and sincere attempt to be social). And of course, just as it was for Israel, all of Moab's festive occasions revolved around one of their gods or another. Many within Israel had no qualms with this, and in attending some of Moab's religious celebrations saw no conflict with that versus their worship of Adonai. For them they were "only" forging a peaceful relationship with the Moabites. We are attempting the same exact thing today, for the same reasons. Judaism invokes humanitarianism and Christians invoke the love and peace commanded by Yeshua as our platform for reaching out a hand of tolerance to Islam. 2 Corinthians 11:4 tells us, ***For if someone comes and proclaims another Yeshua whom we did not proclaim, or if you receive a different spirit that you did not receive, or a different "good news" that you did not accept, you put up with that well enough!*** God's reaction to these kinds of human efforts and misuse of His commandments is well stated in Numbers 25:3: *"...the anger of Adonai blazed up against Israel".*

Let's continue with Pinchas, whose zealous act of stopping a plague among the Israelites reveals much about divine justice and covenant integrity. The Hebrew word "kinah" speaks of a fervent, protective jealousy similar to God's own nature. This is not mere aggression but a deep commitment to safeguarding the holiness of God's people. Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, known as Rashi, comments that Pinchas's zeal was a reflection of God's own passionate love for His people — a reminder that our zeal should be rooted in love and not in anger or vengeance. As followers of Yeshua, we see echoes of this zeal in his righteous indignation at the temple, demanding purity in worship.

Parasha Pinchas is one of the most profound portions in the Torah because it addresses four major themes: Holy zeal and covenant faithfulness, the everlasting priesthood, the transfer of leadership from Moshe to Joshua and Inheritance and covenant order. Almost immediately, the portion begins after one of the darkest moments in Israel's wilderness journey. Twenty-four thousand Israelites have died because of the sin at Baal Peor. Then a single man, Pinchas, acts decisively. The Lord responds with extraordinary words: *"Pinchas son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest has turned My wrath away from the children of Israel..." (Numbers 25:11)* From a Messianic perspective, this portion points both backward to the priesthood of Aaron and forward to the greater priesthood of Messiah Yeshua. Numbers 25:10 tells us, *"VaYedaber Adonai el Moshe lemor", "And Adonai spoke to Moshe, saying"* Like most parasha the portion begins with direct divine speech. The sages often note that whenever Torah introduces a new divine declaration after a judgment, it signals that mercy is about to emerge from judgment. The plague has stopped. Justice has been satisfied. Now covenant restoration begins. Rashi comments that God publicly praises Pinchas because many Israelites were questioning his actions and lineage. Adonai therefore vindicates him and a principle emerges: God often defends those who defend His covenant. *"Pinchas... has turned away My wrath." (Numbers 25:11)* The Hebrew verb is: *heshiv et chamati, "turned back My fury."* Pinchas becomes a human instrument of covenant restoration. In regard to Jewish understanding, the sages are careful. Pinchas is not praised merely for violence. He is praised because his action arose from covenant faithfulness rather than personal anger. The Talmud teaches: *"He acted for the sake of Heaven." (Sanhedrin 82a)* The issue was not merely immorality. It was covenant betrayal. Israel was joining itself to idolatry.

Many Christians and Jews misunderstand zeal. Biblical zeal is not fanaticism. Biblical zeal is love for God's holiness. Yeshua Himself displayed zeal. David prophesied: *"Zeal for Your house has consumed me." (Psalm 69:9)* This verse is applied directly to Yeshua in the Gospel accounts. They came to Jerusalem and entered the east side of the city through the Sheep Gate. It seemed that Yeshua knew exactly where He was going. As He went, His hand touched sheep that were penned along the walkway. Bleating. Cattle sounds. Bird calls. The group of thirteen entered the portico. "Exchange your coins here for a sacrifice!" was what they all heard. "This is my least favorite part of the temple," Thomas said to Andrew. "It always makes me feel cheated. You know those money changers are cheating travelers." "Exchange your foreign coin for local coin... fair rates!" Andrew nodded, "It happens to everyone. All the time." The sights and sounds where Men had booths set up along the walls of the portico and were selling pigeons, doves, sparrows, and small sheep. There were other men, as Thomas had rightly seen, who were moneychangers who took the foreign currency of travelers and gave them local coinage. "Buy two doves and get a pigeon free!" Peter and James were looking at a few of the sheep along one wall when a commotion drew their attention.

It was Yeshua. He had just flipped over one of the tables of the money-changers. Coins of all types spilled out onto the floor and then men were on their hands and knees trying to collect them. They yelled angrily at the Rabbi. The mood of the portico was shifting from casual excitement to upset and chaotic. Yeshua flipped another table further down the wall. Wow... seems that Pinchas and Yeshua both demonstrate zeal. However, Messiah's greatest act of zeal was not taking life but giving His own life later. Pinchas stopped a plague. Yeshua bore the plague of sin.

We read in Numbers 25:12, *"Therefore say, Behold I give him My covenant of peace."* In the Hebrew that is "Briti Shalom" - "My Covenant of Peace". This is astonishing... Pinchas has just acted violently. Yet God rewards him with peace. Why? Because true peace is not the absence of conflict. True peace is the restoration of divine order. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch wrote: *"Peace is not the elimination of differences but the harmonious fulfillment of God's purpose."* Jewish scribes have long noted that the word shalom in this verse contains a broken letter vav in Torah scrolls. Ancient commentators discussed this anomaly extensively. Several lessons emerge: Peace in a fallen world is incomplete, Zeal and peace must remain balanced and Human righteousness is never perfect. Some rabbis viewed the broken vav as teaching that peace comes through sacrifice. As Messianics we naturally see a shadow of Messiah; The Prince of Peace was Himself broken so covenant peace could be established. But that led me to another thought about the priesthood mentioned in Numbers 25:13, *"It shall be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of everlasting priesthood."* Of course, the Hebrew is "Brit Kehunat Olam" - "An everlasting covenant of priesthood"; the priesthood is connected directly to covenant faithfulness. Notice, Pinchas receives both peace and priesthood. The priest's role is not merely ritual; the priest stands between God and people. Adonai went on to declare that as a reward for his decisive action, Pinchas would be the clan of Levites that would be the priests. This didn't really change anything; it just clarified something. Pinchas was Eleazar's son, and Eleazar was Aaron's son. Aaron was dead, and Eleazar was now the High Priest. So, one of Eleazar's sons would, naturally, become the next High Priest. The Lord just decided which son that would be: Pinchas. The Sifrei teaches: *"Measure for measure, because he restored peace between Israel and their Father in Heaven, he was given a covenant of peace."* This reflects a major Torah principle: God rewards according to covenant faithfulness. Yet there is also a Messianic connection. The Aaronic priesthood points beyond itself. Psalm 110 introduces another priesthood. "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek." The Brit Chadasha applies this to Yeshua. Yeshua does not abolish priesthood; He fulfills its ultimate purpose. You see, Pinchas temporarily stood between judgment and Israel, but Messiah eternally stands between judgment and humanity.

As we come to the end of the double portion we read that "Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes." *(Numbers 30:1)* The Torah now transitions to vows. Why end here? Because covenant life requires covenant integrity. Words matter. Promises matter. Commitments matter. The rabbis repeatedly emphasize: God created through speech. Humans bear His image. Therefore, speech possesses spiritual significance. The Talmud teaches: *"A persons yes should be yes, and his no should be no."* Words create obligations. Covenant people must be trustworthy. Yeshua taught similarly. Integrity of speech reflects integrity of heart. A disciple's words should carry weight. Has anyone ever stood you up? They promised to meet you, but they never came? A friend tells you they will come over to play with you, so you look forward to Friday after school? But they never come. Family say they are coming to visit on Sunday, so you even prepare some extra food? But they never show up. I believe we all have had this experience and been bothered by it. And the next time the person arranges something with us, we even have some doubt whether we can rely on them. The Shaliachim James tells us in James 5:12, *"...let your "yes" be "yes," and your "no," be "no"—so that you may not fall under judgment."* What James is talking about is that we are to keep our word. That when we say we will do something or meet someone; we actually do what we said. James is summarizing something that he had heard Yeshua teach in *Matthew 5:33-37 "Again, you have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'Do not break your oath, but keep the oaths you have made to the Lord.' But I tell you, Do not swear at all: either by heaven, for it is God's throne; or by the earth, for it is his footstool; or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the Great King. And do not swear by your head, for you cannot make even one hair white or black. Simply let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one.* Both Yeshua and James are talking about taking oaths, about swearing an oath. God, Yeshua and Rav Sha'ul all made oaths. We are called to make oaths before the Lord at times. Promising to fulfil our vows, the Ruach being our helper. But what the people in James' day were doing were making oaths on a daily basis. And there was a problem with this. First, it meant that they were not taking their oaths very seriously. An oath is a serious matter. In Deuteronomy 6:13 we read *"Fear the Lord your God, serve Him only and take oaths in His name."* Taking an oath is a serious matter. What Yeshua says is that when we swear by heaven or earth, we include God in our oath since these both belong to God. An oath is raising the stakes of our promise. It is saying that we promise and include something precious in that promise to show we are sincere. People say - "on my life, on my mother's grave, or in the name of God." When we start making oaths for everything we say, we are taking something reserved for special occasions and making it the norm. It's like having a Pesach dinner every day. Then when Pesach comes the meal is not very special. In fact, we might rather have a hamburger for a change. We trivialize that which is important. We desecrate that which is Holy. When we invoke God's name or other things He has given us, we are making God out to be unimportant. And not only that but we make God a party to our promise.

We involve Him in what we promise to do. And when we do that on a regular basis, sooner or later we will break our oath and God becomes part of a broken promise. Parasha Pinchas teaches that covenant faithfulness requires courage. Not anger. Not fanaticism. But unwavering loyalty to God and true covenant peace comes from alignment with God's will... and the covenant of peace follows covenant obedience. I believe Pinchas foreshadows the ultimate mediatorial work of Messiah. Which in turn leads us to a covenant relationship with the King of kings and that covenant requires faithfulness to include honoring commitments and guarding words.

What is happening in parasha is the use of utilitarianism not as the basis of the moral life in general, but as a way of deciding how best to act in a situation in which there are no clean choices. Whichever way you act, you will be breaking a rule that in ordinary circumstances you should abide by. You should not stand idly by and do nothing when you could save lives. But you should not cause someone to die by throwing him off a bridge to save them from an oncoming train because you hear it coming. You face, in the literal sense, a *dilemma*, that is, a choice between two courses of action, both of which are undesirable or, ordinarily, just plain wrong. *That is what was happening in the case of Pinchas*. He had a simple choice: either do nothing and let more people die, or act extrajudicially and kill the two key culprits, Zimri and Cozbi. Pinchas' act cannot be made the basis of a law, because of the unique circumstances in which he did what he did. He did not act on the basis of rule utilitarianism, because he was faced with two rules which clashed: (1) do not stand idly by while innocent people die, and (2) do not put an offender to death without a properly constituted trial. His behavior was a classic instance of act utilitarianism, *and the essence of act utilitarianism is that it is about specific situations, not general rules*. That is what the sages meant when they called it a case of *halacha ve'ein morin ken*, "It is a law that is not taught". The truth is that an act like that of Pinchas can only be justified in retrospect, when it actually does produce the consequences it was intended to achieve. In praising Pinchas for his courage and zeal, God ensured that he would never act that way again, by making with him "My covenant of peace." Rare are the circumstances in which Pinchas-like zealotry is justified, and if anyone asks whether he may do so, the answer should always be, "No."

Parasha Pinchas begins with judgment and ends with covenant order and oaths. Then moves: From plague to peace, from zeal to priesthood, from wilderness to inheritance, from Moshe to Joshua, from sacrifice to sacred time, from covenant promises to covenant responsibility. The Jewish sages saw Pinchas as a defender of the covenant. Messianic believers see in this parasha both the faithfulness of Pinchas and the greater fulfillment in Messiah Yeshua. Pinchas turned away wrath for a moment. Messiah provides eternal atonement. Pinchas received a covenant of peace. Messiah is the Prince of Peace. Pinchas received an everlasting priesthood. Messiah fulfills the ultimate priestly ministry before the Father.

Therefore, the enduring message of this parasha is this, God seeks a people who are zealous for holiness, faithful to covenant, committed to inheritance, devoted to sacred time, and anchored in the peace that comes through Messiah.

In reflecting on this portion, we see God's heart for justice, zeal, and integrity. The covenant with Pinchas, the census of the new generation, and the legislation of vows all point to a deeper relationship with God grounded in His faithful promises and our responsive obedience. How will you align your zeal, your integrity, and your pursuit of justice with God's covenantal love this week? I pray it be according to God's word...

b'Shem Yeshua, haMelech v'haMashiach Shelanu! Amein.
("in the name of Yeshua, our King and the Messiah! Amein.")