



Covenant & Conversation

Jonathan Sacks
THE RABBI SACKS LEGACY

PINCHAS • פִּנְחָס

FROM THE TEACHINGS AND WRITINGS OF **RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS** ז"צ

With thanks to the Schimmel Family for their generous sponsorship of Covenant & Conversation, dedicated in loving memory of Harry (Chaim) Schimmel.

"I have loved the Torah of R' Chaim Schimmel ever since I first encountered it. It strives to be not just about truth on the surface but also its connection to a deeper truth beneath. Together with Anna, his remarkable wife of 60 years, they built a life dedicated to love of family, community, and Torah.

An extraordinary couple who have moved me beyond measure by the example of their lives." — Rabbi Sacks

This year's series of essays were originally written and recorded by Rabbi Sacks ז"ל in 5772 (2011–2012).

These timeless messages are accompanied by a new [Family Edition](#) created to inspire intergenerational learning on the Parsha and Haftara.

The Zealot

With Pinchas a new type enters the world of Israel: the zealot.

"Pinchas son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the Priest, has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous with My zeal in their midst, so that I did not put an end to them in My zeal."

Num. 25:11

He was followed, many centuries later, by the one other figure in Tanach described as a zealot, the prophet Elijah, who tells God on Mount Horeb, "I have been very zealous for the Lord, God Almighty" (1 Kings 19:14).

In fact, tradition identified and linked the two men even more closely: "Pinchas is Elijah" (Yalkut Shimoni, Torah, 771). Pinchas, says Targum Yonatan (to Num. 25:12), "became an angel who lives forever and will be the harbinger of redemption at the End of Days."

What is truly fascinating is how Judaism – both biblical and post-biblical – dealt with the idea of the zealot. First, let us recall the two contexts.

First is that of Pinchas. Having failed to curse the Israelites, Bilaam eventually devised a strategy that

succeeded. He persuaded the Moabite women to seduce Israelite men and then lure them into idolatry. This evoked intense Divine anger, and a plague broke out among the Israelites. To make matters worse, Zimri, a leader of the tribe of Shimon, brought a Midianite woman into the camp where they flagrantly engaged in intimacy. Perhaps sensing that Moses felt powerless – he had himself married a Midianite woman – Pinchas seized the initiative and stabbed and killed them both, ending the misbehaviour and the plague by which 24,000 Israelites had already died. That is the story of Pinchas.

Elijah's story begins with the accession of Ahab to the throne of the northern kingdom, Israel. The king had married Jezebel, daughter of the king of Sidon, and under her influence introduced Baal worship into the kingdom, building a pagan temple and erecting a pole in Samaria honouring the Ugaritic mother goddess Asherah. Jezebel, meanwhile, was organising a programme of killing the "prophets of the Lord." The Bible (1 King 16) says of Ahab that "he did more evil in the eyes of the Lord than any of those before him."

Elijah announced that there would be a drought to punish the king and the Baal-worshipping nation. Confronted by Ahab, Elijah challenged him to

gather the 450 prophets of Baal to a test at Mount Carmel. When all assembled present, Elijah issued the challenge. The prophets would each prepare sacrifices and call on God, and so would Elijah. The one who summoned fire from heaven would confirm the true God. The Baal prophets agreed, made their preparations, and then called on their god, but nothing happened. In a rare show of scornful humour, Elijah told them to cry louder. Perhaps, he said, Baal is busy or travelling, or having a sleep. The false prophets worked themselves into a frenzy, gashing themselves until their blood flowed, but still nothing happened. Elijah then prepared his sacrifice and had the people douse it three times with water to make it even harder to ignite. He then called on God. Fire descended from heaven, consuming the sacrifice. The people, awestruck, cried out, "The Lord – He is God! The Lord – He is God!" words we say nowadays at the climax of Neilah at the end of Yom Kippur. The people then executed the false prophets of Baal. God had been vindicated.

There can be no doubt that Pinchas and Elijah were religious heroes. They stepped into the breach at a time when the nation was facing religious and moral crisis and palpable Divine anger. They acted while everyone else, at best, watched. They risked their lives by so doing. There can be little doubt that the mob might have turned against them and attacked them. Indeed after the trial at Mount Carmel, Jezebel lets it be known that she intends to have Elijah killed. Both men acted for the sake of God and the religious welfare of the nation. And God Himself is called "zealous" many times in the Torah.

Yet their treatment in both the written and oral Torah is deeply ambivalent. God gives Pinchas "my covenant of peace," meaning that he will never again have to act the part of a zealot. Indeed, in Judaism, the shedding of human blood is incompatible with service at the Sanctuary (King David was forbidden to build the Temple for this reason: see I Chronicles 22:8, 28:3). As for Elijah, he was implicitly rebuked by God in one of the great scenes of the Bible. Standing at Horeb, God shows him a whirlwind, an earthquake and a fire, but God is not in any of these. Then He comes to Elijah in a "still, small voice" (1 Kings 19). He then asks Elijah, for the second time, "What are you doing here?" and Elijah replies in exactly the same words as he had used before: "I

have been very zealous for the Lord God Almighty." He has not understood that God has been trying to tell him that He is not to be found in violent confrontation, but in gentleness and the word softly spoken. God then tells him to appoint Elisha as his successor.

Pinchas and Elijah are, in other words, both gently rebuked by God.

Halachically, the precedent of Pinchas is severely limited. Although his act was lawful, the Sages none the less said that had Zimri turned around and killed Pinchas instead, he would be deemed innocent since he would have acted in self-defence. Had Pinchas killed Zimri even *one moment after* the act of immorality, he would have been guilty of murder. And had Pinchas asked a court of law whether he was permitted to do what he was about to do, the answer would have been no. This is a rare instance of the rule, *halachah ve-ein morin kein*, "It is a law that is not taught" (Sanhedrin 82a).

Why this moral ambivalence? The simplest answer is that the zealot is not acting within the normal parameters of the law. Zimri may have committed a sin that carried the death sentence, but Pinchas executed punishment without a trial. Elijah may have been acting under the imperative of removing idolatry from Israel, but he did an act – offering a sacrifice outside the Temple – normally forbidden in Jewish law. There are extenuating circumstances in Jewish law in which either the king or the court may execute non-judicial punishment to secure social order (see Maimonides, Hilchot Sanhedrin 24:4; Hilchot Melachim 3:10). But Pinchas was neither a king nor acting as a representative of the court. He was acting on his own initiative, taking the law into his own hands (*avid dina lenafshei*). There are instances where this is justified and where the consequences of inaction would be catastrophic. But in general, we are not empowered to do so, since the result would be lawlessness and violence on a grand scale.

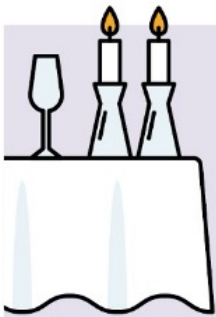
More profoundly, the zealot is in effect taking the place of God. As Rashi says, commenting on the phrase, "Pinchas ... has turned My anger away from the Israelites by being zealous with My zeal", Pinchas "executed My vengeance and showed the anger I should have shown" (Rashi to Num. 25:11).

In Judaism, we are commanded to “walk in God’s ways” and imitate His attributes. “Just as He is merciful and compassionate, so you be merciful and compassionate.” That is not, however, the case when it comes to executing punishment or vengeance. God who knows all may execute sentence without a trial, but we, being mere humans, may not. There are forms of justice that are God’s domain, not ours.

The zealot who takes the law into his own hands is embarking on a course of action fraught with moral danger. Only the most holy may do so, only once in a lifetime, and only in the direst circumstance when the nation is at risk, when there is nothing else to be done, and no one else to do it. Even then, were the zealot to ask permission from a court, he would be denied it.

Pinchas gave his name to the Parsha in which Moses asks God to appoint a successor. Rabbi Menahem Mendel, the Rebbe of Kotzk, asked why Pinchas, hero of the hour, was not appointed instead of Joshua. His answer was that a zealot cannot be a leader. That requires patience, forbearance, and respect for due process.

The zealots within besieged Jerusalem in the last days of the Second Temple played a significant part in the city’s destruction. They were more intent on fighting one another than the Romans outside the city walls. Nothing in the religious life is more risk-laden than zeal, and nothing more compelling than the truth God taught Elijah, that God is not to be found in the use of force but in the still, small voice that turns the sinner from sin. As for vengeance, that belongs to God alone.



Around the Shabbat Table

1. How can you tell the difference between acting out of anger and acting for justice?
2. Why might someone like Pinchas not be chosen to lead, even after displaying heroism?
3. What makes a good leader? Do the ideal qualities differ, in different contexts?

● These questions come from this week’s **Family Edition** to Rabbi Sacks’ Covenant & Conversation. For an interactive, multi-generational study, check out the full edition at <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation-family-edition/pinchas/the-zealot/>