

Punches

AUGUST 1981

One of the big problems that we all face today is the question of tolerance and approval. In our day and age we have seen a great deal of eroding of standards. People are now willing to say <sup>that</sup> if something allows you to feel good then do it. Feeling good about something seems to be the only criteria to determine whether or not a person should do something. Also, a person's personal freedom to do what he or she likes is brought into direct conflict with what society or other individuals demand or expect. How do we deal with other people who have values different than our own? How should we react toward them? We obviously cannot approve of everything. There is no way that Judaism can countenance immorality; violence, incest, homosexuality, etc., but what should be our stance for others who do have different values than our own? Obviously, we cannot assume a standard that a person can do anything he likes if he does not hurt anybody else as a guide because almost anything that person does will affect me. Because of drinking people have more accidents and my insurance rates go up. Because people take drugs the incidence of crime rises dramatically and I may be mugged in order to satisfy the drug user's habit. Divorces and broken homes make for more welfare payments and my taxes rise.

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The events of the past week have reminded me of a story. It happened once that a Frenchman, an Englishman and an Israeli were captured by cannibals. They were about to be put in the pot. The leader came and said, "It is our custom that we have everyone before we put him in the pot one last wish". He asked the Englishman what he wanted and the Englishman said he wanted some plum pudding. He asked the Frenchman what he wanted and he said that he wanted some wine. He asked the Israeli what he wanted and he said that he wanted to be kicked in the rear. The chief said, "Are you sure that is what you want?" and the Israeli said, "Yes", so the king kicked him in the rear. After he did so, the Israel pulled out an Uzi automatic machine gun from where it was hidden under his shirt and quickly dispatched the cannibals. The Englishman and Frenchman looked at the Israeli and said, "If you had that Uzi all along why did you request to be kicked in the rear first?" The Israeli replied, "Because I didn't want to be labeled an aggressor". Everyone knows that the P.L.O. was out to destroy Israel and to kill or expel every Jew from its territory. The world likes to fool itself and for oil it will do anything. The story is told of a man who swallowed a dollar bill. He was rushed to the hospital. The next day I called to ask how he was and the nurse said, "No change". In Europe today there has been no change. People who return even from England speak about all the anti-Semitism they have found there. We are the only ones who want to stick up for ourselves, and when we do the world is not happy. In this week's Torah portion we have something very unusual. We have a sentence which ends right in the middle. It does not finish and it even ends a paragraph. It says "and it was after the plague". The Jewish people were ready to enter the land of Israel but before they entered the land of Israel they were beset by a trap set by Midian. The Midianites did not engage them in battle. Instead they sent their daughters to seduce the Jewish people into participating in some lewd, sensual, sexual, pagan rites. Because of this action over 20,000 Jews died in a plague. We do not learn all the details of the plague. It just says "and it was after the plague".and G-d commanded Moses to lift up the head of all the Congregation of Israel in preparation for their entering of the land of Israel. Many Jews when they are faced with the perils of the world adopt the wrong course of action.

The world is a dangerous place. What should the Jewish people do vis a vis the world? Some nations attack the Jewish people. Others try to seduce them. Some leaders would try to claim let's not enter the world. Let's stay in the desert. Others would respond let's give up, let's assimilate. A third course of action would be to participate in the world but to lift up your head. There are many Jews today who want to give up. They want to change their names and their noses and be like everybody else. There are others who do not want to assimilate but they want to maintain a very low profile. They do not want to make waves. They want to demonstrate how similar they are to everybody else while maintaining a tenuous link to their tradition. Others, especially among the Chassidic groups, want to withdraw completely from the world. After the Holocaust, it was after the plague, they really do not want to have anything to do with the world. This is a paradox in a way because the Chassids in Eastern Europe were among the most acculturated to native village culture, but they say the world only brings plagues to us. We want to be completely apart. This is not the Torah's way. In this week's Torah portion we learn we are still supposed to participate in the world. We are not supposed to withdraw. We are to enter the world with our heads high. Moshe was commanded the world is dangerous, the world is perilous, but you still must enter the world but remember enter it lifting up your heads.

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Rabbi Joseph Radinsky

In the Torah portion, Pinchas, we have the problem of the zealot. The problem of the zealot is an especially difficult problem. In Judaism nobody is allowed to take the law into their own hands. Even though Zimry was performing a lewd, licentious act of worship to the idle poor, Pinchas had no legal right to kill him. If Zimry had turned around and killed Pinchas for attacking him Zimry would be blameless. It is a difficult problem, zealotry, because we need passion in religion. Without passion we cannot have commitment and especially if you are a minority you need passion and commitment just to maintain yourself. It is so much easier just to melt into the majority. We all know the harm that zealots can do. We all know the divisiveness they can cause, the self-righteousness they are plagued with, and their holier-than-thou attitude. But on the other hand, without a certain amount of passion religion becomes boring and irrelevant. Most people when you talk to them about services or religion, the first word that comes to their mind is boring. It is boring. In fact, I remember a Rabbi who was once talking to his Congregation and said, "You know what the problem with many American Jews is? They are ignorant and apathetic, but I do not care and I do not know". Perhaps because of this apathy we have a reaction of zealotry sometimes. It is not right for Jewish groups not to want to talk with each other, etc. Right after we learn about the incident of Pinchas we learn how G-d had to give him His blessing of peace because what happens many times is that the zealot enjoys doing violence. He gloats on it. He is happy he has killed innocent people along with the guilty. Pinchas had to be saved from this type of arrogant view. Because he was a zealot, though, he was not given the leadership of the Jewish people. Right after this incident we learn how G-d commands Moshe to harass the Midionites. The word Midion can also mean those who start quarrels. Moshe was commanded to stop all this senseless division and quarrels and nitpicking with people, always finding fault with each other and saying, "I saw him drinking a coke in McDonalds", etc. Right after this it says "and it was after the plague". This is one of the few sentences in the Torah which ends in the middle. The musical note signifies the middle not the end. The plague of zealotry, of senseless quarreling, is unfortunately ongoing. In Judaism we say what a person does in private is his own business. No zealot should interfere. It is only

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things that happen in public that we should be concerned about. Passion has its limits. We can see the evils of zealotry in the PLO. They gloat over their killing of women and children. They are so sure of their cause that they will not even change their Palestinian covenant which calls for the elimination of Israel and the expulsion of all Jews who were not there before 1917. That way can only lead to death. Perhaps now a new Palestinian organization will arise and be willing to compromise and to live and let live. That's what we Jews want. We want their blessing, not their extermination. Unfortunately, many in the world today are trying to save the PLO. This will only delay true peace. This type of zealotry leads only to more and more destruction. Let a new Palestinian organization arise. This reminds me of a story about an orchestra that was playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony outside. They took an intermission. The wind came up and started to blow their music away. They started to tie down the music except for the basses who went for a drink. The conductor was dismayed to find it was the end of the ninth, the scores were tied, and the basses were loaded. It is now the end of the ninth for the PLO. Let them strike out. Peace cannot be made with zealots. Pinchas could not get the leadership. Let us hope and pray that peace will come soon to the Middle East.

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In the Torah portion Pinchas we learn about zealotry. The rabbis are not very happy with Pinchas. Zealotry can lead to all sorts of evils. Today, too, we witness a revival of zealotry and extremism. The Jewish tradition for the last 2000 years has been a non-violent one. We have been made fun of and scorned and derided because we really did not believe too much in fighting back. We were scattered throughout the world in small groups, and to fight back would almost always be suicide, because once you provoke someone by fighting back they, many times, rise to the challenge and want to wipe you out. However, besides that, in the Jewish tradition there is an abhorrence with taking life and shedding blood. We Jews have been criticized during the Holocaust for going to our deaths like sheep. This really is not fair since not only did we not have a State or an army or a way of organizing ourselves, but, what's more, nobody, we included, really believed Hitler would do what he said he would do: wipe us out. After all, the Germans had the highest culture. Just 20 years before in the First World War they had treated us with such dignity and respect. They treated us so much better than the Poles and Russians. Many Jews looked forward to the Germans coming into Poland. They could not believe that these refined people could be capable of mass murder. Perhaps if someone would have killed Hitler in the 1930's things would have been different. Perhaps in that instance zealotry would have been called for. However, today is not the 1930's. Today we have a State with an army and there is no excuse at all for any type of taking the law into our own hands. The rabbis were aghast about how Pinchas would take the law into his own hands right in front of Moshe. How could he, whose mother was also a daughter of Jethro, have done what he did? G-d had intervened personally to save Pinchas by giving him His covenant of peace. Otherwise he would have been tried and convicted as a murderer. Why do zealots act the way they do? In the bulletin, I discussed that they do it out of fear. They also feel that more is better, that if a little security is good, total security is better. It reminds me of a friend of mine who was a little bit puny, but he thought if he broke a matchstick one day, two matchsticks the next day, three matchsticks the next day, etc. that he would be able to break a telephone pole at the end of the month. This, of course,

is ridiculous. More is not always better. Every cook knows this. If a recipe calls for one cup of something and you add two or three cups, you will ruin the recipe. Every chemist knows this, too. If you add too much of a chemical you can cause an explosion. A person for whom the doctor prescribes one pill every four hours and who takes two pills every four hours is not going to get well sooner. He is just going to damage his health. Fanaticism is a terrible plague which can completely destroy society. More is not always better. That's why it says in the story of Pinchas, "and it was after the plague." This sentence is an incomplete sentence, and many rabbis explain this means, "and it was after the plague of zealotry." More is not always better. It is sometimes much worse. I am reminded of the story of a lettuce who was very small and wanted to be bigger so he went to a geneticist so he could make him a bigger, better lettuce. The geneticist said he would help him by splicing some genes. He did but, unfortunately, the lettuce turned into a radish. This just goes to prove that sometimes it does not pay to get a head.

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Pinchas was rewarded for his act of zealotry by being given the high priesthood. However, the rabbis say that unless G-d would have intervened, Pinchas would have been tried as a criminal. We also learn in this Torah portion a census of the Jewish people because the Jewish people were afflicted by a plague after many of them had involved themselves with the world of Baal PaOr, with licentious idolatrous sexual rites. After we learn about the census we learn about how the land was to be divided. Then we learn that the Tribe of Levi was not to be given a portion in Israel. It says, "For they were not numbered among the Children of Israel because there was no inheritance given them among the Children of Israel." Why should this be mentioned here? Why should we mention that Levi was not to be given an inheritance among the Children of Israel? This is a fact which had been mentioned earlier. Why should we mention it right here, especially in the Torah portion which has to do with zealotry?

Pinchas, of course, was from the Tribe of Levi. We know, too, that in Jewish tradition there were two tribes which were known as zealots. These two tribes were Shimon and Levi. In fact, Jacob on his deathbed, in effect, cursed these two tribes by saying that they would not be given a portion among Israel but that they would be scattered among the other tribes. What's more, he said he did not want his name associated with them, because it was these two tribes who had perpetrated the foul deed of destroying a whole city in Israel. They had done this after their sister, Dena, had been raped by the son of the head of this city, the city of Schem, a city which still gives the Jewish people a lot of trouble and throughout Jewish history has given the Jewish people a lot

of trouble. Jacob did not like what they had done. They had taken revenge against a city and, through an ingenious plot, had wiped out the city. Jacob did not like this act of zealotry, and, therefore, he said that these two tribes should be scattered throughout all Israel, that he did not want them to be concentrated because he was afraid of what their zealotry not to the gentiles but to the Jews, themselves. It is interesting to note that Levi turned his curse into a blessing. It was true that he became scattered among Israel, but he became the leaders and the teachers of Israel. Just as today you have rabbis scattered throughout all the cities of Israel, so they became the rabbis of their day being scattered throughout Israel, teaching the people, exhorting them to try to get them to live according to higher standards. Shimon, on the other hand, let his curse remain a curse. He did not turn it into a blessing. He had some cities in the south of Israel which later were just incorporated into the Tribe of Judah. Why, though, should we mention Levi here, that he was not given a portion among the tribes of Israel?

It seems to me that what we have enunciated here in this Torah portion is a lesson of why zealotry should never be used or should be used very, very sparingly. The reason for it is that zealots can swing both ways. A zealot feels that because he is right, therefore he is justified in doing what he is doing, that he can cut through all the redtape and beauracracy and can take direct action with consulting anyone, without going through any of the normal safeguards of civilization because he is right. Sometimes, it is a true, a zealot is right, but many times a zealot is wrong. Not every time we think we are right are we really right. That is illustrated here in this Torah portion, because the

