

# A Leader or a Zealot?

## Shabbat Pinhas

Our reading this week starts with God praising Pinhas for his dramatic action in killing Zimri and his mistress the Midianite princess Cozbi, as they defied Moses and the rest of the community. Normally the act of killing disbarred a priest from serving. But Pinhas was given special dispensation to serve within the Tabernacle because he acted out of anger at the insult to God and Moses. This over the objections of the tribal princes, says the Midrash, that he had acted independently, extra-judicially, without consulting Moses and should have been punished.

Why then was Pinhas, who took responsibility when others failed to act, not given a bigger role, like Joshua for example? Which model of leadership was preferable? Moses accepted advice from his father-in-law Jethro to appoint elders to help him govern. Despite receiving the law on Sinai, he consulted several times when he was not sure how to proceed.

Whereas Pinhas acted alone, without consultation. This is why his role was confined to the Priesthood which was limited to the Mishkan. The lesson we learn is that although on occasion there might be an exception as in Pinhas's case. But taking the law into one's own hands is not the quality one needs for leadership. Men like Pinhas need to be controlled and confined.

When Joshua, on the other hand, thought that he needed to take extra-judicial action when Eldad and Medad challenged Moses's authority, he consulted Moses first and Moses restrained him. Joshua also dared to stand up against the majority opinion of the spies. So, when Moses needed to appoint a successor (Bamidbar 27) he was looking for someone who could "go in and out before the people." That was the political role. Being able to interact. Not being a loner. But he also needed that humility, the ability to ask, to consult.

The Torah is telling us that sometimes, extreme action may be necessary. Even if as a rule we must go through the judicial system. Imagine meeting Hitler in private before the Second World War and you had a chance to assassinate him. Or perhaps a terrorist in action. Should you have killed him? You bet you should have. You shouldn't wait for a judge to sign off on it. But the leader of a nation needs to be cautious and thoughtful, not impetuous. Zealotry has no role in leadership.

Shabbat Shalom

Rabbi Jeremy