

Parashah One Hundred and Eighteen  
Numbers 25:10–26:51; Malachi 2:1–9; John 3:31–36

---

notes by Tim Hegg

*My Covenant of Peace*

Is it ever right to take matters into one's own hands? It seems very strange to us to read that God approved of the actions of Phinehas! He delivered the death penalty without due process. What right does an individual have to punish an evil doer until the sentence has been properly delivered by the judges?

The Sages struggled with the same question. The Midrash (Mid. Rab. *Num* 20.25) settles the issue by interpreting the phrase “he rose up from the midst of the congregation” to mean “he rose up from among the congregation of the judges.” In other words, Phinehas simply carried out the decree of the judges—due process had been served! Of course, the Biblical text gives no such indications.

Still other of the commentators divide between acts of murder carried out by premeditation, and those which are the result of a sudden zealousness for the Torah. Since Phinehas did not act out of premeditation but rather out of a sudden urge to uphold the Torah, his actions are permitted. It is on this basis that the Sages explain Moses' lack of action (even though he was fully aware of what had taken place, for the text says “in the sight of Moses and all the congregation”). He had considered the situation previously, and as the leader of the people, had contemplated what ought to be done about it. In this contemplation he removed himself from acting as a zealot and could not, therefore, take the life of Zimri, the fornicator.

What might the text itself say about this issue? First, it should be noted that a prominent woman from Midian was brought to the Tent of meeting in order to engage in a fertility act as a form of pagan worship. The text clearly implies that they were engaging in sexual activity within the sanctum of the Tabernacle, for they did so in the sight of Moses and all Israel, who were “weeping at the doorway of the Tent of meeting.” Secondly, the text states that Phinehas “went into the tent” when he struck them through. Thus, they were engaging in this fertility ritual within the Holy place. The sin of Baal Peor had entered into the very Sanctuary of HaShem.

The Torah had made it clear that only priests were to enter the Holy place or even come near to it (Num 1:51; 3:10, 38, 40). One might rightly ask, then, how the judges could have made a judgement in this affair without incurring guilt themselves by approaching the Tent of meeting, themselves not priests. On the other hand, in arriving at this interpretation, the Sages may have considered that the judges were themselves priests.

This idea is highlighted by the fact that Phinehas is immediately given an eternal covenant of the priesthood, and that he is repeatedly referred to as “Phinehas the priest.” What I am suggesting is this: in all of the Land, the judges were to be consulted before a person's life could be taken, but in the confines of the Tabernacle (and later the Temple), the place where the Glory resided, judgment was in the hands of the priests, for it was the realm in which they alone were allowed to exist. In a very real way, then, the priests functioned as the direct emissaries of God to carry out swift judgment in the sacred space of the Tabernacle. In the domain of His dwelling, He and His chosen priests constitute the only necessary *Beit Din*. Thus, the death of Zimri and Cozbi is not unlike the death of Nadav and Avihu, who likewise were put to death, albeit by the direct hand of God.

Why is the death penalty so swiftly and finally enacted in this case? It was, ultimately, to teach the Israelites (and us) God's own perspective on the matter. God simply will not tolerate the mixing of paganism within the *sanctum* of worship and service He has prescribed for His chosen ones.

What is more, it is clear that paganism, at its heart, wishes to assert ultimate control over the universe and life itself. Fertility cults had taken the supreme example of Divine intervention, i.e.,

the conception and subsequent birth of a child, and claimed it for gods of their own making. What is more, the fertility act put man in charge of this sacred begetting, expunging God entirely from any connection to it. But God is the source of life—indeed, His name embodies this concept, as the “God who is and always will be”—the unchanging source of all life (cf. Rom 11:36).

Isn't it interesting that in all paganism there is a mixing of fornication with the duties of serving the gods. Why? Why do immorality and idolatry seem always to go together? The answer lies in the message God intends for us to receive through the picture of marriage. The union of husband and wife is the only physical picture God has granted to mankind to demonstrate His own love and passion for His people. The fidelity, loyalty, and trust that stands at the heart of a true marriage is essential for the physical union within marriage to be what God intends. As such, the close intimacy of husband and wife remains a vivid illustration of the faithfulness of God to His people, and His longing for them to respond to Him in faithfulness. For this reason, the enemy hates marriage. He hates the companionship and happiness that comes from a man and woman who, first committed to God, live out a life of fidelity to each other. The enemy of our souls also despises the joy that comes from the children that the marriage union produces. And he will do all in his power to destroy marriages and families, and turn the beauty of the marriage relationship into cheap, selfishness driven by lust. Part of the blindness applied to the unbeliever by the enemy (cf. 2Cor 4:4) is a blindness to the sacred aspects of marriage. Those who are born from above, however, come to realize that in an ultimate sense, marriage is given as a revelation of the union between Messiah and His bride, the *kehilah* (congregation) of believers (Eph 5:25ff). And realizing this, they strive to find in their own marriage relationship the mystery of God's infinite and unchanging faithfulness as a husband to His treasured people.

Thus, the marriage union, rightly understood, expresses in unexplainable terms the deep, longing our own Creator has for those He has chosen, and the life He intends to produce by filling their lives with His. It is no wonder then, that Satan and his cohorts would do all in their power to turn this most wonderful symbol into something that produces only heartache and broken lives. It should not be lost on us that Satan intends to turn what is sacred into that which is profane.

Notice as well the language describing the eternal covenant of the priesthood promised to Phinehas (25:12): “Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give him My covenant of peace . . .’” Why is it described as a covenant of peace (הַגְּנִי נִתַּן לוֹ אֶת-בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם)? Note first the emphatic language: “Behold, I am giving to him My covenant of peace.” The participle is employed in order to allow the emphatic pronoun to take first position in the clause, stressing that this is God's decision, and He is directly bequeathing His own covenant of peace to Phinehas. But why is the high priesthood described as a “covenant of peace?” We should most likely understand the phrase to mean “a covenant which brings peace.” The work of the *cohen gadol* was particularly germane to Yom Kippur, the one day in the cycle of *mo'edim* when the method of atonement for the sins of the people is acted out in detail. There, in the Yom Kippur ceremony, the revelation of the Coming One is revealed. Through His sacrifice, He would effect eternal peace between God and His people because He would always live to make intercession for them (Heb 7:25). Thus, the covenant of the priesthood given to Phinehas was a covenant that described (through the actions of the *cohen gadol*) how peace could be achieved between God, Who is infinitely holy, and His people.

That the covenant of peace would maintain the life of Israel may be hinted at in the narrative structure by the close proximity of the census taking story. Immediately following the devastating plague that took the lives of 24,000, the numbering of the people signals a continuation of the life of Israel. The nation would not be destroyed by God's wrath but would continue to live before Him. The obedience of Phinehas, acting out the part of the priest, had caused the plague to cease, and life to be restored.

The census totals given at the end of this *parashah* are remarkably close to the totals numbered

shortly after the Exodus (Num 1:46). There the total was 603,550, just 1820 more than the total in our section (601,730). Given the fact that the people had undergone a severe plague (loss of 24,000), and that the trek across the desert was difficult, the fact that the numbers had only decreased by 1820 shows the merciful hand of God in sustaining Israel as He had promised. Interestingly, the one tribe that diminished the most was Simeon (59,300 to 22,200) and some of the Sages reason from this that Simeon was directly involved in the idolatry of Baal Peor, and that therefore that tribe suffered the most casualties of the plague. Conversely, the unusual growth of Manasseh, as well as of Benjamin, Asher, and Isaachar is considered proof that they stood apart from the sins of the rest. In the end, however, the census taken at this point in Israel's history emphasizes God's faithfulness in maintaining the nation. Even though she had not been entirely faithful to God and the covenant, she nonetheless remained a strong and viable nation, preserved in order to enter and possess the Land which God had sworn to give to her.