

Extremism in Judaism

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This week's Torah portion is called *Pinchas*, which is a man's name. Interestingly, the story of Pinchas is told at the end of last week's Torah portion, with only a brief recap at the beginning of this week's reading.

Pinchas, Moses's great-nephew, observes an Israelite man consorting with a Midianite woman. This illicit liaison has apparently elicited a plague from God. Imbued with zeal to end the plague, and to wipe out evil in Israel, Pinchas enters the tent where the liaison is taking place. He thrusts his spear through both the Israelite man and the Midianite woman, killing both. We would recoil from Pinchas's murderous response, even if we agreed that the sexual union were sinful. We can think of a myriad of solutions to the problem, short of murder.

Pinchas, though, is honored in our tradition. Zealotry in pursuit of God's wishes would seem to be permitted, even encouraged. We are reminded of the words of American politics leader, Barry Goldwater, who famously declared: "Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice."

That speech didn't turn out well for Goldwater in the 1964 presidential election. Sadly, though, extremism is very much in vogue today. We see it in American politics, where party primaries have become happy hunting ground for those who disdain moderation and compromise. We have seen it, much to our sadness and even horror, in recent weeks in Israel.

Israelis had a very good reason to be angry, even before the barrage of rockets from Gaza escalated in the last few days. Last week, the bodies of three Israeli teenagers were discovered after a weeks-long manhunt that followed their kidnapping. The brutal murder of Naftali Frenkel, Gilad Shaer, and Eyal Yifrah, has saddened the Jewish people and our friends, needlessly reminding us of the cruelty of Israel's terrorist enemies. Hamas, the terrorist organization that controls the Gaza strip, continues to lob rockets into southern Israel, indiscriminately targeting innocent men, women, and children, not military targets, to the point that Israel has had to respond with what now amounts to a full-scale war. The Israeli government has named Hamas suspects in the kidnapping and murder. Nevertheless, the supposedly moderate Palestinian Authority, which controls the West Bank, has made a coalition and treaty with Hamas – which is, I repeat, a terrorist organization, nothing less.

We can understand Israelis' taking to the streets, demanding that the government respond harshly. We may or may not think such a reaction to be wise or helpful, but we can understand it. If military action ensues, we hope it will be guided by the conscience and prayer expressed by the late great Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir, who said: "We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. We cannot forgive them for forcing us to kill their children. We will only have peace when they love their children more than they hate us."

Last week, though, the Jewish world was shocked a second time. This time, we were dismayed not by the killing of more Jewish youngsters, but of an Arab one. This Arab teen wasn't murdered in a necessary or understandable military response such as the ones to which Golda Meir referred. Instead, the victim was Mohammed Abu Khieder, a 16 year old with no connection to Hamas or to the murdered Israeli teens. Israeli officials have arrested six Jewish extremists for his abduction and particularly horrifying murder. Apparently, he was burned alive.

Now, Israel and the Jewish people are forced to struggle with murderous extremism in our own midst. Like Pinchas before them, these extremist Jewish murderers doubtless imagined themselves to be pursuing God's will. Perhaps they saw themselves as biblical blood avengers. But they were wrong. Torah does license the near relatives of a murder victim to kill the murderer, a law we would not want to see in force today. Even if it were, though, these Jewish killers would not be authorized to kill Mohammed Abu Khieder, who had nothing to do with the Jewish teens' murder. Moreover, these extremists aren't relatives of the deceased Israelis. By contrast, Rachel Frenkel, mother of the murdered Naftali, has cried out for peace and has received a condolence call from Arabs.

In short, these Jewish terrorists are no different from Hamas itself.

Judaism has struggled with extremism before.

In the First Century, when the Romans laid siege to the Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews were divided. Some, who may be termed more zealous, thought they should fight to the death. Others, led by Rabbi Yohanan ben Zakkai, planned a stealthy escape. Yohanan lay down in a coffin, and had several of his students carry him outside the city as pallbearers. Instead of going to the cemetery, as soon as they were out of the Romans' sight, Yohanan jumped out of the coffin and escaped with his students. Eventually, Yohanan negotiated with the Emperor's representative, to be allowed to establish a rabbinical academy at the town of

Yavneh. The Temple was destroyed. The zealots were defeated, and most of them were killed; but Judaism survived because of the scholars who escaped the battle.

Much has been made of the zealots who died at Masada. They committed suicide rather than becoming slaves to the Romans. But how can we be certain they did the right thing? Today, rather than simply honoring the suicides, scholars and historians debate the questions: Would survivors of Masada not have been able to give rise to future generations of our Jewish people? What, really, did they accomplish by their deaths?

65 years after the fall of the Jerusalem Temple, Rabbi Akiva and his colleagues supported the zealous rebellion led by the warrior Bar-Kochba. But Bar-Kochba and his legions were slaughtered by the thousands. From that moment, in the year 135, some 1800 years passed before Rabbis again sanctioned any large-scale armed uprising. Even the successful guerilla warfare of the Maccabees is ignored when Hanukkah is described in the Talmud, written in the centuries following the Bar-Kochba rebellion.

David Ben-Gurion was nobody's pacifist. He led Israel's Defense Forces before there was a Jewish State. And yet, he opposed zealotry. Ben-Gurion vigorously debated his younger contemporary and fellow Zionist warrior, Menachem Begin, who headed an organization called the Irgun. Both Ben-Gurion and Begin fought the British, who controlled Palestine when the Zionists were trying to bring Jews into the land to escape the Holocaust, or as refugees after the War had ended. Only the Irgun, though, went to the extreme of bombing the King David Hotel, where the British had military headquarters. Ben-Gurion fought that kind of zealotry so strongly that he famously ordered the newborn Israeli Defense Forces to attack the *Altalena*, a ship bringing weapons to Begin and his forces.

Murderous zealotry by extremist Jews has been a menace to Israel more recently, too. On February 25, 1994, an American-born physician, by the name of Baruch Goldstein, murdered scores of Muslims at prayer in a mosque in Hebron. His grave is revered as a shrine even today by some in the Occupied West Bank. When Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin, of blessed memory, had negotiated the Oslo Peace Accords, some ultra-Orthodox Rabbis branded him a *rodef*. *Rodef* is the Hebrew term for a person who is pursuing an innocent victim, seeking to murder. These so-called Rabbis believed that Rabin's proposals would lead to the deaths of Jews. Calling him a *rodef*, they incited Yigal Amir, who murdered the Prime Minister in cold blood on November 4, 1995.

A knife may be utilized to create a meal to feed a family. It may also be a murder weapon. Fire can forge products that fuel economies and feed families. It can also destroy a home or a city. Zealotry, too, can be a force for good or it can be most destructive.

Zeal imbued Civil Rights crusaders, who were willing to go to jail, rather than see injustice continue.

Zeal of another kind inspired our people to hold fast to Torah, even at the price of persecution, and in some places in some times, at the cost of their lives.

Last week in Israel, though, zeal led six extremists to murder an Arab boy who just happened to be there, in Jerusalem. Perhaps the murder will terrorize Palestinians in Israel, thus achieving the assassins' goal. Murder, though, is murder, a violation of God's highest law. Israelis who demand a harsh response to Hamas should continue their advocacy appropriately, joining the rest of the world in condemning this cowardly act of murder and in mourning the death of an innocent youngster, as many of them have. Then may their zeal, like that of David Ben-Gurion and Martin Luther King, be pleasing in the sight of God.

Amen.