

Speaking of Text

A WEEKLY EXPLORATION OF THE JEWISH BOOKSHELF



Finding Our Place in a Universalistic Age

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Elijah Benamozegh, *Israel and Humanity* (1863), translated by Maxwell Luria (Paulist Press, 1995)

Israel and Humanity is the *magnum opus* of Italian rabbi and polymath Elijah Benamozegh. Born in the cosmopolitan city of Livorno in Italy in the early nineteenth century (only one year before JTS's founder Rabbi Sabato Morais was born in the same city), Rabbi Benamozegh was a distinguished community leader, printer, kabbalist, and public intellectual both in Jewish and non-Jewish circles. In his erudite but extremely approachable and poetic treatise, *Israel and Humanity*, Benamozegh presents a bold and refreshing view of Judaism vis-a-vis other religions (with special emphasis on Christianity). Instead of falling into apologetics and triumphalism, Benamozegh is willing to delve deep and shine a light on the strengths and beauty of other religions, while extolling Judaism's gifts.

Basing himself on kabbalistic and midrashic sources, he posits the existence of a primal universal religion which he calls "Hebraism." Given that all world religions stem from this common proto-religion, there can be a fruitful dialogue between the faiths enabled by their shared parentage. The mission of Judaism is to be the preeminent guardian of this shared background; through its particularism, it is tasked with reminding the world of the universal and primordial truths that we all share. Benamozegh follows this exercise in the fields of theology, religious anthropology, and jurisprudence, articulating—for the first time—a revolutionary inclusive rereading of the Noahide covenant that expands to embrace the sincere practitioners of other world faiths.

Benamozegh's book is not a critical or historical account of the development of religions, but rather a bold religious humanistic re-mapping of the relationship between Judaism and other faiths, between Jews and Gentiles. By mining deep into the Jewish sources, he emerges with a theory that eschews both the triumphalist vision of the fundamentalist and the relativistic skepticism of the Modern age. It is a refreshing forgotten classic for anyone interested in interfaith dialogue or those of us who wonder about the specific worth and mission of Judaism in an increasingly universalistic worldview.

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Pinehas 5778

פינחס תשע"ח



Charismatic Saint or Reckless Vigilante? Pinehas and the Covenant of Peace

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Along with Simeon and Levi, who raged against Shekhem and his people in response to defilement of their sister Dina's dignity, the figure of Pinehas has become synonymous with decisive and unforgiving zealotry. In the face of growing sexual promiscuity within the Israelite desert camp, and against the backdrop of a crippled and confused leadership headed by Moses, Pinehas took action:

When Pinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, saw this, he left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite into the chamber and stabbed both of them, the Israelite and the woman, through the belly. Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. (Num. 25:7-8)

Pinehas's zealotry is not a tale of the past only. As the prospects of peace between the State of Israel and the Palestinians grow more distant, the figure of Pinehas becomes increasingly central to the internal political debate in Israel. For many, Pinehas ought to serve as a role model. For others, his actions ought to alarm us all in considering how faith and power result all too often in violence. The Torah, in this case, lends support for the former group. Simeon and Levi's zealotry was condemned by their father Jacob on his deathbed:

Simeon and Levi are a pair; their weapons are tools of lawlessness. Let not my person be included in their council, let not my being be counted in their assembly. For when angry they slay men, and when pleased they maim oxen. Cursed be their anger so fierce, and their wrath so relentless. I will divide them in Jacob, scatter them in Israel. (Gen. 49:5-7)

In the case of Pinehas, however, the Torah seems far more favorable. Here are the unequivocal praise and blessings meted to Pinehas by the Torah in the affair's aftermath:

“Pinehas, son of Eleazar son of Aaron the priest, has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me, so that I did not wipe out the Israelite people in My passion. . . . It shall be for him and his descendants after him a pact of priesthood for all time, because he took impassioned action for his God, thus making expiation for the Israelites.” (Num. 25:11,13)

Quoting these verses, some argue that Pinehas with his zealotry and complete intolerance ought to be the model for contemporary Jews in relation to the Arab enemy. Others, however, point to the dangers of vigilante actions. For example, critics of the settler right's anti-Palestinian militias maintain that Pinehas-like actions result in weakening the very forces they wish represent or replace, i.e., the Israeli military and law enforcement system. For them, Pinehas's action might have been justified, yet his breaking of the “chain of command” was regrettable. They quote the Palestinian Talmud in saying that “Pinehas [acted] against the will of the Sages” (Sanhedrin 9:11), whereas the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 81b) states that even though sexual contact with gentile women results in the danger of being struck by zealots, if someone comes to ask for a halakhic adjudication they should not be instructed to perform such zealotry by the Rabbis.

More humanist voices within religion, on the other hand, find even this latter notion highly troubling. Does Pinehas's action only pose a chain-of-command or rule-of-law problem? Does the Torah really ignore the deeply problematic moral nature of Pinehas's deed? For them, the truth of the Torah's message lies in verse 12 of our parashah, omitted from the earlier citation. This verse reads:

“Say, therefore, ‘I grant him My covenant of peace’” (Num. 25:12)

What exactly is this “covenant of peace” granted by God to Pinehas? For some commentators such as Isaac Abarbanel, a peace covenant is a sign of assurance for Pinehas himself. If the relatives of Pinehas's victim would come to seek revenge and wish to carry out blood vengeance, God will

protect Pinehas, who ultimately fulfilled God's will. Such a commentary, underpinning the great danger to which Pinehas was exposed after his deed, clearly attests to the extremity of Pinehas's act. Yet, at the same time, this commentary reinforces that this deed was favorable in the eyes of God.

Other commentators take a wholly different approach, from which their criticism of Pinehas's zealotry emerges. Most notable in this context are the words of the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816–1893) in his commentary *Ha'amek Davar* (on Num. 25:12):

As a reward for alleviating the wrath and anger of the Holy One, Blessed be He, [God] blessed him [Pinehas] with the attribute of peace, so that he would not be strict and intemperate. For the nature of the deed that Pinehas committed—to kill a soul by his own hand—would leave intense emotion in the heart afterwards. But because the deed was for the sake of heaven, came the blessing, that gentleness and the attribute of peace will always be with [Pinehas].

Pinehas might have acted for the sake of heaven, says the Netziv, but his deed is one that corrupts a person from within. God's bestowal of a peace covenant on Pinehas can thus be understood not as a simple blessing or mark of divine protection. Rather, we ought to see this (following the reading of the late Prof. Nechama Leibowitz) as a preventive act, in which God ensures that Pinehas will no longer continue to act murderously. Now, the zealot will become a man of peace.

In the desert, in the wilderness, many wild things happen. Upon entering the Land, however, leadership must cease to be driven by charisma and personal audacity alone. In a sovereign land, leaders must obey the law, and must uphold order. That is the covenant of peace given by God to Pinehas, and that is the covenant we pray will permeate the conduct of our leaders today as well.

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