

## In the Face of Violence, a Covenant of Peace

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Karen Armstrong, the scholar of religion and popular author of such works as *The History of God*, relates that wherever she travels, she is often confronted by someone—a taxi driver, an Oxford academic, an American psychiatrist—who confidently expresses the view that “religion has caused more violence and wars than anything else.” This is quite a remarkable statement given that in the last century alone, tens of millions of people have been killed in two world wars, the communist purges in the Soviet Union and its satellites, and the Cambodian killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, none of which were caused by religious motivations.

This is not to say, of course, that religion has failed to play a significant role throughout history in the instigation of wars or the perpetration of individual acts of violence. History is replete with such examples from the Crusades, to the massacre at Hebron by Baruch Goldstein, to the killing and maiming of abortion providers by fundamentalist Christians, to acts of terror committed in the name of Islam. Those of us who take religious life seriously and who see its fundamental values expressed in concepts of love, justice, and human dignity cannot help but feel both disgusted and defensive about this history of wars and violent acts undertaken in the name of religious conviction even if our secular friends and neighbors tend to impose disproportionate blame on religion for the world’s woes.

This week’s Torah portion, Pinehas, frames like no other parashah the problem of biblical religion’s relationship to violence, particularly zealotry and vigilantism. Last week we read the story of Pinehas, the grandson of Aaron, who saw an Israelite man and a Midianite woman publicly having sex in an alcove (*kubah*) near or in the Tabernacle. Without warning or any judicial proceedings, Pinehas grabbed a spear and thrust it through them both in a violent parody of the sexual

act itself (the spear ended in the woman’s *kubah*, which may refer either to her belly or her sexual part). That parashah ended with a plague being lifted, but no definitive word about how God or Moses viewed this act of vigilantism ([Num. 25:6–9](#)).

That judgment is rendered at the beginning of this week’s parashah and to our modern sensibilities as well as our fundamental understanding of religious values, it is a stunner:

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: “Pinehas, son of Elazar 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. Say, therefore, ‘I grant My pact of friendship (*beriti shalom*). 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.’”

This is not merely divine applause; it is a godly standing ovation. God credits Pinehas’s extrajudicial killing with saving the Israelite people from extermination by plague and bestows upon him and his posterity the religious leadership of the people through the office of the High Priest, an honor in parallel to God’s promise to David on the political side. All of this is wrapped within a pact of friendship between God and Pinehas.

How are we to understand this apparent divine approval of an act of extreme violence and religious zealotry? Perhaps the answer lies with the nature of the sin perpetrated in the alcove.

The modern biblical scholar Richard Elliot Friedman asserts that the essence of the crime was not immoral sexual relations but rather a violation of the sanctity of the Tabernacle (*Commentary on the Torah*, 514 [on [Num. 25:8](#)]). As non-Levites, the perpetrators were not even allowed to enter that sacred space, much less have intimate relations there. Since the commission of the ritual crime is clear and there can be no defense, Pinehas as a priest was justified in entering the Tabernacle and inflicting the prescribed punishment. While to our modern eyes the result may still seem shocking, this interpretation has the benefit of precluding the Pinehas story from being used as a justification for violent acts of contemporary religious zealotry. Since the unique holiness of the Tabernacle no longer exists, so too is extinguished any justification for future religious killings based on the rationale that motivated Pinehas.

Other biblical commentators reject the view that the crime at issue was a ritual crime and argue instead that it was really a political transgression (See Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses*, 819–20, and n. 8, 14–15; Rabbi Sholom Riskin, *Torah Lights: A Biblical Commentary*, 207–211). This position is supported by the identification of the perpetrators, who are revealed in our parashah to be Zimri, son of Salu, a chieftain of the tribe of Simeon, and Cozbi daughter of Zur, a Midianite princess ([Num. 25:14–15](#)). The tribe of Simeon was second in terms of seniority behind the tribe of Reuben and ahead of the tribe of Levi, from whom Moses descended. The Midianites were worshippers of Baal Peor, a particularly noxious religious cult in the eyes of God.

Thus the public cohabitation between a Simeonite chieftain and a Midianite princess could be viewed as an existential challenge to the established (and God-ordained) religious and political order of the Israelite nation. Pinehas's decisive act was intended to preserve that order. As JTS professor Alan Mittleman writes in his insightful analysis of violence in the Jewish tradition, "Zimri puts the authority of Moses and ultimately the authority of God in jeopardy. Thus, Pinehas might be taken to have acted outside the normative constraints of the system of Mosaic law in order to save the system" (*Does Judaism Condone Violence?* 167).

The political, rather than cultic, interpretation of Pinehas's act, even if limited to an existential threat to the polity itself, creates the danger that the Pinehas episode will be misused as a precedent and even a justification for violent political action. One only has to reflect on the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by Yigal Amir, which mixed political and religious motivations, to see the potency of this danger. Undoubtedly, this is why the Rabbis of the Talmud placed so many limitations on the precedential value of this biblical episode as to render it a virtual nullity for purposes of modeling religious behavior ([BT Sanhedrin 82a](#)).

Nevertheless, the question remains: why the divine blessing of a *berit shalom* for Pinehas? Here I choose to rely not on modern biblical scholarship but rather on homiletics. The Netziv (Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin) offers this explanation for the *berit shalom*: "In reward for turning away the wrath of the Holy Blessed One, God blessed him [Pinehas] with the attribute of peace, that he should not be quick-tempered or angry." Just as God was turned back from the way of violence and death when God terminated the plague, God bestows upon Pinehas and all of us the *berit shalom* so that we too will be turned away from the path of anger and violence and returned to the path of peace. Like Pinehas's grandfather, Aaron, we should become once again lovers of shalom and pursuers of shalom.

*This commentary was published originally in 2019.*