

## PARASHAT PINCHAS



### פינחס ואליהו Pinchas and Eliyahu

#### ■ The Rise and Fall of Pinchas

The Torah portion of Balak ends with one of the most painful episodes of Bnei Yisrael's wanderings in the desert. It was punctuated by an outburst of the entire nation, including even Moshe and Aharon, "*weeping at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting.*" (Bamidbar 25,6)

Some of the nation had begun sinning with the women of Moav, resulting in idol worship of Baal-Peor. Moshe ordered the idol-worshippers killed, while at the same time, the leader of the tribe of Shimon openly desecrated G-d's Name with a Midianite princess, Amid the resulting confusion, helplessness and sobbing, Pinchas ben Elazar jumped out of his anonymity and stabbed the two sinners to death:

פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הִכְהֵן הַשֵּׁיב אֶת חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל...  
*Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Priest turned back My  
anger from upon the Children of Israel...* (verse 11)

For this noble and courageous deed in sanctification of the Divine Name, G-d rewarded Pinchas by specially granting him His "covenant of peace," as He tells Moshe:

לְכֹן אֶמְרֵן הַנְּנִי נִתָּן לוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹמִים.  
*Therefore say: I will give him My covenant of peace.* (verse 12)

What is this “peace covenant”? At first glance, this appears to mean that Pinchas will not be punished for having killed someone without a trial and without a court; he will be at “peace.” His reward will also include the Priesthood: “*for him and his descendants after him, an eternal covenant of priesthood.*” (verse 13)

However, we see in the words of the Prophet Malachi that the phrase “Covenant of Peace” actually includes much more:

... לְהִיּוֹת בְּרִיתִי אֶת לְוִי אָמַר ה' צַב־אוֹת.  
בְּרִיתִי הִיְתָה אִתּוֹ הַחַיִּים וְהַשְּׁלוֹם ...

*... that My covenant be with Levi, says the Lord of Hosts.*

*My covenant was with him, the life and the peace...* (Malachi 2,4-5)

This verse indicates that Pinchas, a Levite, merited eternal life. His act of zealousness put a stop to the plague that had been raging in the camp. In return for saving thousands of Jewish lives, and for sanctifying G-d's Name before Israel, he received everlasting life.

We find a hint of his eternal life at the end of the Book of Joshua. Pinchas played a major role in the leadership of Israel; not only did he serve as High Priest alongside Joshua, he was the man who was sent on the critical mission of ensuring that the Tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe remained unified with the rest of Israel. Yet when the deaths of the leaders of Israel are listed, we find that Joshua and Elazar are mentioned – but not Pinchas:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַיָּמָת יְהוֹשֻׁעַ בֶּן נֹון עֶבֶד ה'...  
וַאֲלֻעֶזֶר בֶּן אֶהֱרֹן מֵת וַיִּקְבְּרוּ אֹתוֹ בְּגִבְעַת פִּינְחָס בְּנוֹ...

*After these events, Yehoshua bin Nun, the servant of G-d, died...  
and Elazar son of Aharon died,*

*and they buried him in the hill of his son Pinchas.* (Yehoshua 24,29-33)

Did Pinchas himself not die?

Before answering that, let us again consider the phrase “Covenant of Peace,” and specifically its reference to peace. We again turn to the end of the Book of Joshua, where we find an account of the events after the Israelite conquest of the Land and the division into tribal inheritances.

Joshua sends the vanguard troops of the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe back to their homes on the eastern banks of the Jordan River. They had earlier asked Moshe Rabbeinu for special permission to settle

there, but soon after they arrived, they shocked their brethren by building a large altar. This act threatened to cause a civil war between the Israelites on both sides of the Jordan, as it indicated that the two and a half tribes no longer considered themselves part of the same Jewish nation as those on the other side.

A commission of tribal princes headed by Pinchas was sent to the eastern side of the Jordan to clarify the matter. The eastern tribes explained to the delegation that their new altar was not planned to be used for sacrificial offerings, and was certainly not meant to replace the true altar in the Land of Israel. In fact, they said, its purpose was the opposite: to serve as a testimony and symbol of their continued unbreakable bonds with the majority of the nation on the western side of the Jordan.

Pinchas the Priest thus merited to play a crucial role in preventing a costly war within Israel, as he declared:

... הַיּוֹם יִדְעֻנוּ כִּי בְּתוֹכֵנוּ ה', אֲשֶׁר לֹא מָעַלְתֶּם בּוֹ הַמַּעַל הַזֶּה,  
אִז הִצַּלְתֶּם אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד ה'.

*We know today that G-d is with us,  
as you have not sinned against G-d, and you have saved  
the Children of Israel from the hand of G-d. (22,31)*

He championed the message of peace and unity within the Nation of Israel, justifying his coronation with “the covenant of life and peace.”

From here on in, however, Pinchas disappears from the Biblical account. Throughout the period of the Judges and the Prophet Samuel, the name of Pinchas is never mentioned, except for the incident of Pilegish B'Givah (Judges 20). Was he dead? Not physically – but the prophetic inspiration was no longer upon him. We know this from this verse:

וּפִינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר נָגִיד הָיָה עֲלֵיהֶם, לְפָנִים ה' עִמּוֹ.

*And Pinchas ben Elazar was ruler over the Priests;  
G-d had been with him. (Chronicles I 9,20)*

What does “G-d had been with him” mean? Was there ever a time that Hashem was not with him? Yes, there was, and this verse alludes to a certain dramatic event in his life that caused him not to be mentioned in the Scriptures. The Sages say it occurred during the time of the Judges, when Yiftach the Gil'adite led Israel to victory against the Ammonites – but not before he uttered a frightening oath to G-d:

אם נתון תתן את בני עמון בְּיָדִי, וְהָיָה הַיּוֹצֵא אֲשֶׁר יֵצֵא מִדְּלֶתִי בְּיָתִי  
 לְקִרְאָתִי בְּשׁוּבִי בְּשָׁלוֹם... וְהָיָה לָהּ וְהֵעֲלִיתִיהָ עוֹלָה.

*If You deliver the Amonites into my hands, then that which will  
 exit the door of my house towards me when I return safely...  
 will be for G-d; I will bring [it] as an offering.* (Judges 11,30-31)

And who in fact greeted Yiftach when he returned victoriously from battle?  
 The answer is not pleasant:

וְהָיָה בָתוּר יֵצֵאת לְקִרְאָתוֹ בְּתַפִּים וּבְמַחֲוֹלוֹת...  
 וַיְהִי כִּרְאוֹתוֹ אוֹתָהּ וַיִּקְרַע אֶת בְּגָדָיו...

*...behold, his daughter was coming  
 to greet him with drums and dancing... When he saw her,  
 he tore his clothes in mourning...* (verse 34)

A tragic turn of events! Yiftach must sacrifice his daughter in order to fulfill his vow! Is there any way out? There is; all that is needed is a great scholar – such as Pinchas – who can legally “overturn” the vow. Why, then, did the story end in tragedy? The Medrash Rabba (B’reshit 60,3) explains:

Was not Pinchas the High Priest on the scene to nullify the vow? Yes, but Pinchas said: “He needs me; should I go to him?!” And Yiftach, too, said: “I am the Commander-General in Israel; should I go to Pinchas?!” And between the two of them, the girl was lost.

Both of them were punished for the shedding of the girl’s blood... Pinchas lost his holy spirit and gift of prophecy. As the [above-quoted] verse in Chronicles states: *‘Hashem had been with him.’*

Thus, throughout the era of Shmuel the Prophet and the Kings of Israel, a period of some 200 years, Pinchas was barely mentioned in the Scriptures. He did not die, for he had received the covenant of eternal life – but he received no prophecy.

## ■ The Advent of the Prophet Eliyahu

With no advance notice, the Bible abruptly introduces us to a new personality: Eliyahu the Tishbite, the Prophet Elijah. This heretofore unknown prophet informs King Ahab of Israel that he now holds the keys to rainfall in the Land of Israel, and that there will in fact be no rain until further notice: *“As the G-d of Israel lives, there will be no dew or rain these years, except according to my word.”* (Kings II 17,1)

During the ensuing three-year drought, a fascinating incident occurred: G-d commanded Eliyahu to live in the home of a widow in Tzidon, and while he was there, the woman's small son became sick "*until there was no breath left in him*" (Kings I 17,17). The woman put the blame on Eliyahu:

מָה לִּי וְלָךְ אִישׁ הָאֵלֹהִים בָּאתָ אֵלַי לְהַזְכִּיר אֶת עֲוֹנֵי וְלָהֵמִית אֶת בְּנִי.

*What do I have to do with you, O man of G-d?*

*Did you come to me to recall my iniquity and kill my son?* (verse 18)

Eliyahu took the dead boy and prayed strongly to G-d:

ה' אֱלֹהֵי תִשָּׁב נָא נַפְשׁ הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה עַל קִרְבוֹ.

*Lord, my G-d, please return this boy's soul unto him.* (verse 21)

And in fact, for the first time in history, the miracle of "revival of the dead" occurs:

וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' בְּקוֹל אֵלֵיהֶו וַתָּשָׁב נַפְשׁ הַיֶּלֶד עַל קִרְבוֹ וַיְחִי.

*G-d hearkened to the voice of Eliyahu,*

*and the boy's soul was restored and he lived.* (verse 22)

Who is this Eliyahu, that Hashem listens to him and brings about the greatest of all miracles, that of reviving the dead? The Sages disputed this point – and in the middle of the attempt to ascertain his identity, a surprising interlocutor arrived to settle the matter:

Our teachers once disagreed on this point: Some said that Eliyahu was descended from the Tribe of Gad [Gil'ad is in the inheritance of Gad]; others said he was from Binyamin.

Eliyahu himself then stood before them and said: "Our teachers, why are you arguing about me? I am from the descendants of Rachel's sons." (Medrash B'reshit Rabba 71,10)

Elsewhere a third Rabbinic opinion is cited, according to which Eliyahu was a Cohen, descended from the Tribe of Levi:

Rabba the son of Avuha found Eliyahu in a Gentile cemetery, and said to him: "Aren't you a Cohen? Why, then, are you inside a cemetery?" Eliyahu answered: "Did you not learn the Talmudic Order of Taharot [Purities], in which it is taught in the name of R. Shimon bar Yochai that the graves of non-Jews do not become impure..." (Bava Metzia 114a)

The opinion that Eliyahu was a Priest jibes with the following Midrash (Yalkut Shimoni, Pinchas 771), which teaches that Eliyahu was none other than Pinchas ben Elazar HaCohen!

**R. Shimon ben Lakish said: Pinchas is Eliyahu. G-d told Pinchas: “You have placed peace between Israel and Myself in this world. Therefore, in the future, you will also be the one to place peace between us, as is written: ‘Behold, I am sending you Elijah the Prophet... And he will return the heart of fathers to their sons...’”** (Malachi 3,23-24)

Let us elaborate on the seemingly strange identification of Eliyahu HaNavi as Pinchas. The Medrash (Pirkei D'Rebbi Eliezer 47) teaches that “G-d caused the name of Pinchas to be like that of Eliyahu the Gil'adite.” That is, for hundreds of years, Pinchas walked around anonymously, receiving no prophetic inspiration, until one day the spirit of prophecy suddenly awakened intensely within him. Signifying his new status, his name also changed, and he became “Eliyahu.”

Identifying these two prominent figures, Pinchas and Eliyahu, as one and the same, opens many doors towards an in-depth understanding of parallel events between the two of them. Let us begin with the resurrection of the widow's son by Eliyahu: This was actually the rectification of Pinchas' terrible sin, mentioned above, that led to the death of the daughter of Yiftach the Gil'adite. This is also the reason for his re-appearance as Eliyahu specifically in the land of Gil'ad, as emphasized in the above-mentioned verse from Kings II: *“Elijah the Tishbite, a resident of Gil'ad...”*

Identifying Pinchas with Eliyahu also sheds light on an incident in Kings I. It happened after the great miracle of the sudden rainfall after the years of drought that Eliyahu had decreed:

... וְהַשָּׁמַיִם הִתְקַדְּרוּ עִבִים וְרוּחַ וַיְהִי גֶשֶׁם גָּדוֹל וַיִּרְכַּב אַחָאָב וַיֵּלֶךְ  
 יִזְרְעֵאלָהָ. וַיַּד ה' הִיְתָה אֶל אֱלִיָּהוּ וַיִּשָּׂא מִתַּנְיֹו  
 וַיִּרֶץ לִפְנֵי אַחָאָב עַד בְּאֶכָה יִזְרְעֵאלָהָ.

*The sky filled with clouds and wind, and there was a great rain,  
 and [King] Ahab rode to Jezreel. G-d's hand was upon Eliyahu,  
 who girded his loins and ran before Ahab,  
 until they reached Jezreel.* (Kings I 18,45-46)

A very strange scene indeed: Eliyahu HaNavi running in the pouring rain, from the Carmel in Haifa all the way to the Jezreel Valley – while King Ahab sits behind him in the royal carriage, protected from the rain. What lies behind this?

The explanation is that Eliyahu/Pinchas is rectifying the sin of Pinchas, who did not show honor to Judge Yiftach when it was so sorely needed. He refused to go to Yiftach to overturn the lethal vow, and instead demanded that the judge come to him. Now, he showed extra honor to King Ahab, by running before him in the rain.

Let us see additional critical incidents and actions in the lives of Pinchas the Priest and Eliyahu the Prophet.

### ■ Zealousness and Peace

Pinchas was uncompromising in his loyalty to Hashem. It was this zealousness that raised him over and above everyone else, giving him the strength and daring to strike and kill the sinning prince Zimri ben Salu, who defiantly desecrated G-d's Name by taking the Midianite woman to his tent in full view of all. This brazen sin was not only the climax of the People of Israel's sinful passions with the daughters of Moav, but it also led to a parallel deterioration towards the abominable idol-worship of Peor. Pinchas put an end to it.

Eliyahu also acted zealously for G-d in his uncompromising war against the idol-worship of Baal and Asherah – a practice imported to the kingdom of Ahab by the evil Queen Jezebel, daughter of King Etbaal of Tsidon. (Kings I 16,31)

Both Pinchas and Eliyahu are described as being “extra zealous” for G-d. Regarding Pinchas, we saw above that G-d said he “*turned back My anger from upon the Children of Israel when he acted zealously for My sake among them*” (Bamidbar 25,11). And Eliyahu, after seeing the extent of the idol-worship in the kingdom and expressing his wish to die, lamented: “*I am very zealous for G-d, the Lord of Hosts, because Israel has left Your covenant...*” (Kings I 19,10)

We have thus seen that Pinchas was involved in two very dramatic and decisive acts in the history of Israel: Killing Zimri ben Salu when he sinned with the Midianite princess, and uniting the tribes on both sides of the Jordan River.

Eliyahu, too, acted zealously against idol-worship – but how did he parallel Pinchas in unifying the nation? We find the answer in the Book of Malachi, in a prophecy foreseeing the End of Days. The Prophet declares:

הַנֶּה אֲנֹכִי שֶׁלַח לָכֶם אֶת אֵלֶיָּה הַנְּבִיא לְפָנַי בּוֹא יוֹם ה' הַגָּדוֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא.  
וְהָשִׁיב לֵב אָבוֹת עַל בְּנֵים וְלֵב בְּנֵים עַל אָבוֹתָם...

*Behold, I am sending you Elijah the Prophet ahead of  
the arrival of the awesome day of Divine Judgment.  
And he will return the heart of fathers to their sons,  
and the heart of sons to their fathers...* (Malachi 3,23-24)

Bringing peace and forging bonds between the generations, and helping them to meet in repentance and return to G-d and His Torah - this is the mission of Eliyahu HaNavi, the messenger of Redemption who will arrive, speedily in our time, with the Moshiach ben David.

Let us now return once more to the unique Divine promise made to Pinchas at the beginning of Parashat Pinchas: *“Behold I grant you My covenant of peace.”* G-d forged with him a covenant of peace and everlasting life, and Pinchas became Eliyahu, who ascended - alive! - to the heavens in a chariot of fire. He did not die, and he will appear again to bring us the tidings of Redemption and Salvation.

### ■ Purifying the Zealousness

It is one thing to be zealous for G-d – but how can we be sure that it is rightfully motivated?

Let us recall the alliance between Shimon and Levi, sons of Yaakov Avinu, which resulted in two very serious and vengeful acts. The first was when they wiped out the people of Shechem following the attack on their sister Dina, and the second was when they sought to kill their brother Yosef. Yaakov did not, at first, condemn them for their actions of fury against Shechem, but on his deathbed, he spoke most forcefully:

כִּי בְאַפָּם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ וּבְרִצְנָם עָקְרוּ שׂוֹר.  
אָרוּר אַפָּם כִּי עָזוּ וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קִשְׁתָּהּ אֲחִלָּקֶם בְּיַעֲקֹב וְאֶפְיָצִים בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל.  
*In their anger they slew men... Cursed be their anger,  
for it was fierce. I will divide them in Yaakov,  
and I will disperse them in Yisrael.* (B'reshit 49,6-7)

By plotting to kill Yosef, Yaakov said, the two brothers showed that personal jealousy was a factor in their motives. Yaakov thus realized retroactively that their zealousness for their sister Dina, though it appeared to be righteous, was also not totally pure. This is why Yaakov cursed their actions.



Some 20 years later, Yosef behaved very differently. Having miraculously become the viceroy of Egypt, Yosef understood the mission he had been given, with the retroactive participation of his brothers, to help establish his family in Egypt. He told his brothers:

וְאַתֶּם חֲשַׁבְתֶּם עָלַי רָעָה, אֲיֹ-לֵהִים חֲשַׁבָה לְטוֹבָהּ, לְמַעַן עֲשֶׂה בַיּוֹם הַזֶּה  
 לְהַחֲיִית עַם רַב. וְעַתָּה אֵל תִּירָאוּ אֲנֹכִי אֲכַלְכֵּל אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת טַפְכֶם,  
 וַיְנַחֵם אוֹתָם וַיְדַבֵּר עַל לִבָּם.

*“You thought evil against me, but G-d meant it for good,  
 in order that many people should survive.*

*Now do not fear; I will nourish you and your children.”*

*He comforted them and spoke kindly to them.* (B'reshit 50,20-21)

Yosef forgave his brothers for what they did to him personally, and concentrated on his national mission. Centuries later, Moshe Rabbeinu carried Yosef's bones with him from Egypt towards the Land of Israel – a message to Moshe's tribe of Levi that they must adhere to the ways of Yosef. And in fact, in the merit of Levi's devotion to Yosef's example, the Tribe of Levi merited to display pure zealotry in their fight for Hashem's honor against the worshippers of the Golden Calf, without involving their personal emotions. Moshe declared, מִי לֵה' אֲלֵי, *“Whoever is for G-d, come to me!”* – and *“the sons of Levi all gathered towards him”* (Sh'mot 32,26). It was this pure zealotry that raised the Levites to the level of “servers of G-d,” in place of the first-borns.

Pinchas, a Levite, also stood out in his pure zealotry – with a purity that stemmed from the fact of his mother's descent from Yosef. When he struck out at Zimri, the prince of Shimon, it was totally for “the sake of Heaven,” with no personal motivations at all. Shimon, on the other hand, did not reach this level. His zealotry was not free of personal interest, and therefore, when the Land of Israel was divided among the tribes, his descendants were assimilated within the Tribe of Yehuda.

Pinchas, in standing up for Hashem and stabbing Zimri, endangered his own life in the process. For our Sages teach: “If someone tries to kill you, kill him first.” This means that for Zimri, Pinchas was considered a *rodef*, a “pursuer” – and Zimri would have been allowed to fight back and slay Pinchas in order to save his own life.

By thus putting his life in danger with no hope of legal protection, Pinchas attained the level of his venerated grandfather, Aharon HaCohen – who

had similarly endangered himself in order to save Israel during a plague. It happened after the rebellion of Korach: As a result of the ensuing unrest and accusations against Moshe and Aharon, Hashem punished the agitators with a plague – which was stopped only when Aharon took the incense as Moshe commanded and ran into the crowd: *“Aharon stood between the dead and the living, and the plague was stopped”* (Bamidbar 17,13). By running into the plague-stricken congregation, Aharon endangered himself on behalf of Israel.

These incidents are manifestations of the G-d-given mission to the Priests to protect Israel from the dangers of “coming too close” to G-d’s holiness. The priests’ task, as we see in Bamidbar 18 and 8,19, is to be close to His sanctuary and to bodily protect the Children of Israel from death when they sin there. Pinchas received the status of Priesthood because of his willingness to act in this way.

#### ■ They Wish to Take My Soul

When Eliyahu HaNavi bore the flag of fighting zealously for G-d, he also did this at risk to his own life, against the worshippers of Baal. When he escaped from Queen Jezebel, he reached the Mountain of G-d, where he stood and prayed to Hashem:

קָנָא קִנְאָתִי לַה' אֱ-לֹהֵי צְבָאוֹת כִּי עָזְבוּ בְרִיתְךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, אֶת מִזְבְּחֹתֶיךָ  
הָרָסוּ וְאֶת נְבִיאֶיךָ הָרְגוּ בְחָרֶב, וְאֹתָר אֲנִי לְבַדִּי וַיִּבְקְשׂוּ אֶת נַפְשִׁי לְקַחְתָּהּ.

*I acted zealously for G-d, the L-rd of Hosts,  
for Israel left Your covenant, destroyed Your altars,  
and killed Your Prophets. I remained alone,  
and they want to take my soul [as well].* (Kings I 19,10)

The Medrash (Shir HaShirim Rabba 1) analyzes Eliyahu’s actions very penetratingly. It teaches that though his life was endangered, Eliyahu should have continued the fight even then. G-d said to Eliyahu:

“What do you mean *‘they left My covenant’* – is it not yours as well?... They broke My altars, and not yours?... They killed My prophets? Then why do you care?”

Eliyahu answered, *“They wish to take my soul...”*

We see here a clear hint of rebuke against Eliyahu, who ran for his life rather than continue the fight against the evil queen at risk to his personal safety.

But what Eliyahu did not do, his student Elisha completed. Elisha did not run away from King Yehoram, son of Ahab, who had threatened to kill him, but rather stood bravely against him:

וְאֵלִישָׁעַ ... אָמַר אֶל הַזְּקֵנִים הָרְאִיתֶם ... רְאוּ כָּבֵא הַמַּלְאָךְ,  
סָגְרוּ הַדְּלֵת וּלְחַצְתֶּם אֹתוֹ בַּדְּלֵת הַלּוֹא קוֹל רַגְלֵי אֲדֹנָיו אַחֲרָיו.

*And Elisha [said], "Have you seen that this son of a murderer has sent to remove my head? When the messenger comes, close the door and hold it fast against him, for surely the sound of his master's footsteps will follow him."* (Kings II 6,32)

This would also seem to have been Elisha's intention when he requested to be blessed with double the amount of Eliyahu's spirit (Kings II 2,9) – that he should have not only Eliyahu's ability to stand before G-d, but also the strength to stand up against those who would kill him.

We have seen that Pinchas received a Divine covenant of eternal life and peace. For a long period of time, he lived physically, but without prophecy – until he reappeared on the scene as Eliyahu. This is borne out by the similar behavior of both Pinchas and Eliyahu, and by the fact that deeds by one rectified sins of the other.

We have thus accompanied, to a certain extent, the flag-bearers of zealotry on behalf of Hashem. "Zealotry" often has a negative connotation of fanaticism. But there are some very few individuals who know how to turn it into something positive – by ensuring that it is pure of any germ of individual vengeance and the like. And if the striving for peace is added as well, it becomes complete and perfect.

