

A few months ago when I came to interview at Temple Micah, the United States had just begun its war on Iraq. President Bush and his administration had convinced us in their zeal that there was no other alternative but war. Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership were in direct violation of the covenant that was made between Iraq and the United Nations in regard to their developing or possessing weapons of mass destruction.

A few months later as I stand before you as your rabbi, the heavy military action has ended and the United States currently occupies Iraq. The troops stationed there have found mass graves of Iraqis, murdered by Saddam and his party. The troops have found evidence showing the level of decadence enjoyed by the ruling party AND the destitution suffered by the Iraqi people. While this evidence suggests that Saddam and his party violated the moral covenant a government has with its citizens, they have found no evidence, yet, to show that Saddam did, indeed, violate his covenant with the U.N. – the primary reason that we were given for war

While there is plenty of time to uncover such proof, I speak to you tonight in the wake of the revelation that not all of the information that President Bush shared with us those few months ago is, well, true. No doubt that it is very unclear how such information found its way into the President's State of the Union. Far be it for me or anyone else to expect the President to take responsibility for what he says and does. What is abundantly clear is President Bush's resolve about fighting Saddam Hussein and Iraq. He clearly saw right and wrong, good and evil

and then zealously pursued a course of action based upon his assessment of the situation.

Questions remain ... how do we regard our President's apparent zealotry? If weapons of mass destruction are found, do we celebrate it? If they are not found, do we condemn it – even though in the big picture Saddam Hussein was clearly a diabolical leader whose former citizens are better off without him?

In this week's Torah portion we read about Pinchas – who authored the most famous act of zealotry in the Torah. Pinchas sees a fellow Israelite violating a term of the covenant that God had made with the people. The Israelites had been interacting with the Midianites – specifically the men were consorting with Midianite women as a part of the Midianite sacrificial cult. Moses commands the Israelite officials to kill each of the men who have already committed this offense. At this point, Zimri, an Israelite, brings one of these women in plain sight of the rest of the Israelites. Pinchas reacts at this sight and follows them into a tent and impales both of them on a spear. God then ends the plague that has killed 24,000 Israelites because of their transgressions and Pinchas received God's Brit Shalom – Covenant of Peace.

Jews throughout the centuries have wrestled with Pinchas' zealotry. Did he act just as God would have him act – hence the Covenant of Peace? Were there errors in Pinchas' assessment of the situation and in the nature of his response? As we may find as we look at the zealotry of President Bush, there are many readings of the situation.

One reading of the texts sees Zimri's entrance into the tent with the Midianite women as a euphemism for exactly what God was punishing the Israelites. In this reading ... Pinchas sees clearly, does what he is obligated to do and is justly rewarded. The Midianites and their way of life is a direct threat to the Israelites ... God, Moses and Pinchas act to preserve it.

Still, there are other ways to see the story and other questions that arise ... Rabbi Moshe ben Chaim Alshech, a 16<sup>th</sup> century Turkish scholar, wonders if Pinchas is motivated by other things rather than defending the covenant. He suggests that Pinchas is concerned with looking good to his fellow priests – and that this act may help him secure the office of priesthood for himself and his offspring. For Rabbi Alshech, even if Pinchas' action seemed in accordance with the Divine will, because of his true intention – the act must be denounced.

Moses Maimonides defends Pinchas' act – in the context of a bit of caution. The Rambam acknowledges that a zealot is justified in killing a person who transgresses in this manner – IF they are caught in the act itself. If the zealot acts in anticipation of the act or in reaction to it – then the zealot can be charged with murder. Only within the context of definite knowledge of the act – can a zealot act with justified severity.

If we ask these questions of the President – we may end up as unsure as our tradition may be about Pinchas. It is difficult to know the President's true intentions in leading us to war against Iraq. Questions about this matter have existed since the possibility of war existed – was it WMD, or was it oil? Drawing

attention away from the economy or Afghanistan? Finishing what Bush I started? In any case, the recent revelations about what the President told us about his intentions make it more difficult to give him the benefit of the doubt in the matter, as tradition does to a certain extent to Pinchas.

Was Iraq caught in the act – so to speak? No doubt that the Iraqi leadership was despicable in its treatment of its citizens, but the act they were supposed to be caught in has to do with WMD? President Bush may have reacted in anticipation, but in light of Rambam's comment on Pinchas, it is not clear or evident that our military actions were and are just.

There is a curious idiosyncrasy to this story ... it is actually spread over two weekly portions. The action occurred in last week's portion, Balak. When this week picks up, it is then that Pinchas is rewarded with the Brit Shalom – the Covenant of Peace. Rabbi Moshe of Coucy suggests that the Torah is set up in this manner to because all acts of zeal are not all virtuous. Time is needed to determine if acts of zeal are immature impulsiveness or intolerance of opinions and values other than one's own OR if they are sincere and commendable. In that view, Pinchas' character and his act are eventually looked upon with favor.

We are in between portions, if you will, with President Bush – the beginning of the War was the end of the last portion and since then we have been evaluating his decisions and actions – looking for signs of his character. The question now becomes, has the new portion arrived and is it time for us to make our assessment? ... Or does the new portion begin in November of next year? As

we learn from our tradition's treatment of Pinchas – it not to us to merely accept his or anyone's actions. We must question and challenge them and sincerely seek the truth within the story. In the end we must consider the actions and decisions of our President and determine if they are truly in the spirit of the Divine Will and respond to the question, 'Is he worthy of our Brit Shalom or deserving of our dismissal?' May we and our fellow citizens know that truth when we see it and accept all that it demands of us.