

# Pinechas – Action and Reward

## Introduction

### Baal Peor and Zimri

Bemidbar 25 opens with the Children of Israel's fornication with Moabite women which leads to their idolatrous worship of Baal Peor and the ensuing Divine wrath. At Hashem's behest, Moshe then commands the Israelite judges to kill all of the worshipers of Baal Peor, and the reader waits apprehensively to see what will transpire:

(א) וַיֵּשֶׁב יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּשֹׁטִים וַיַּחֲלֵה עִם לְזָנוֹת אֶל בְּנוֹת מוֹאָב. (ב) וַתִּקְרְאוּ לָעָם לְזִבְחֵי אֱלֹהֵיהֶן וַיֹּאכְלֵה עָם וַיִּשְׁתַּחֲווּ לְאֱלֹהֵיהֶן. (ג) וַיִּצְמַד יִשְׂרָאֵל לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר וַיַּחֲרֵ אָף ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל. (ד) וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה קַח אֶת כָּל רֹאשֵׁי הָעָם וְהוֹקַע אוֹתָם לְה' נֶגֶד הַשָּׁמַיִם וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אָף ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל. (ה) וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל שֹׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הֲרֹגוּ אִישׁ אֶנְשָׁיו הַנִּצְמָדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר.

(1) And Israel camped in Shittim and the nation began to fornicate with the daughters of Moav. (2) And they called the nation to the sacrifices of their gods, and the nation ate and bowed down to their gods. (3) And Israel joined himself to Baal Peor, and Hashem was angry with Israel. (4) And Hashem said to Moshe, take all the heads of the nation and hang them for Hashem against the sun, and Hashem's anger will turn away from Israel. (5) And Moshe said to the judges of Israel, "Kill everyone who has joined themselves to Baal Peor".

Suddenly, though, the Torah shifts gears. Without telling us whether the judges fulfilled their mandate, the Torah instead recounts that a man (later identified as Zimri) brought a Midianite woman before the eyes of Moshe and the nation, that both of them were stabbed to death by Pinechas, and that Hashem's fury subsided as a result:

(ו) וְהִנֵּה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּא וַיִּקְרַב אֶל אָחִיו אֶת הַמְדִיָּנִית לְעֵינֵי מֹשֶׁה וּלְעֵינֵי כָּל עֵדַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהִמָּה בְּכִים פָּתַח אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד. (ז) וַיֵּרָא פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן וַיִּקָּם מִתּוֹךְ הָעֵדָה וַיִּקַּח רֶמֶחַ בְּיָדוֹ. (ח) וַיָּבֵא אַחֵר אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל הַקְּבָה וַיִּדְקַר אֶת שְׁנֵיהֶם אֶת אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאֶת הָאִשָּׁה אֶל קְבֹתָהּ וַתַּעֲצַר הַמַּגֵּפָה מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

(6) And behold, a man from the Children of Israel came and brought to his brothers a Midianite, before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the whole congregation of the Children of Israel, and they were crying in front of tent of meeting. (7) And Pinechas the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, saw it, and he got up from among the congregation and he took a spear in his hand. (8) And he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them, the man of Israel and the woman through her belly, and the plague was stopped among the Children of Israel.

What, though, is the relationship between Zimri's sin with the Midianite woman and the original sin of the people with the Moabite women and their worship of Baal Peor? Was Zimri's act of a completely distinct character, or did it also constitute ritual harlotry?<sup>1</sup> Why did Pinechas get involved? Was he one of the original judges tasked by Moshe with administering capital punishment, or did he act of his own initiative? And how exactly did Pinechas's action allay Hashem's anger and halt the plague which had begun because of the original sin of Peor?

## Covenant with Pinechas

Pinechas's deed not only succeeds in sparing the nation from further catastrophe, but also earns him special status and Divine favor:

(י) וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר. (יא) פִּינְחָס בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן הֵשִׁיב אֶת חַמְתִּי מֵעַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת קִנְאָתִי בְּתוֹכְכֶם וְלֹא כָלִיתִי אֶת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּקִנְאָתִי. (יב) לְכֵן אֶמַר הַנְּנִי נָתַן לִּי אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם. (יג) וְהָיְתָה לוֹ וּלְזֵרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו בְּרִית כְּהֻנַּת עוֹלָם תַּחַת אֲשֶׁר קָנָא לְאַלְהֵיו וַיִּכַּפֵּר עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

(10) And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: (11) Pinechas the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the priest, has turned My wrath away from the Children of Israel by his being zealous with My zeal among them, and I have not consumed the Children of Israel in My zeal. (12) Therefore say, "I am giving him My covenant of peace". (13) And it should be for him and his descendants after him a covenant of everlasting priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the Children of Israel.

These verses raise additional questions:

- What was so uniquely praiseworthy about Pinechas's violent act that it merited eternal covenants of peace and priesthood?
- If Pinechas was simply following the laws of the Torah, why did he deserve such an exceptional reward? And if not, what gave him the right to take the law into his own hands, let alone be recompensed for his bloodshed?
- Furthermore, what did these Divine promises add that Pinechas did not already possess by virtue of his priestly lineage?

---

<sup>1</sup> The precise nature of the worship of Baal Peor is not completely clear, but at least in this case it seems to be connected with the wiles of the Moabite women.

# Pinechas – Action and Reward

## Exegetical Approaches

### Overview

In struggling to understand the actions of Pinechas, many commentators attempt to strike a balance between identifying what was extraordinarily meritorious and Divinely praiseworthy about Pinechas's deed, while still keeping it firmly within the bounds of legitimate halakhic conduct and not glorifying unbridled extra-judicial violence.

The Yerushalmi and Bavli both imply that Zimri was guilty of only licentious behavior and not idolatry. While they, thus, view Pinechas as modeling a special statute of zealotry, they also make sure to note that this law was not Pinechas's own innovation. Most other commentators prefer to maintain that Pinechas was responding to Zimri's idolatrous behavior which was more obviously deserving of capital punishment. Philo and Josephus present Pinechas as initiating the purging of the Peor worshipers with the killing of Zimri, and serving as an example which others then followed. In contrast, the Sifre posits that Pinechas was the only one who followed Moshe's orders to eliminate the idolaters. Lastly, Abarbanel adopts a compromise position that while the judges had previously begun to fulfill Moshe's command, they were paralyzed by Zimri's defiance, and it was Pinechas who successfully concluded the mission by executing its ringleader.

**THIS PAGE HAS NOT YET UNDERGONE EDITORIAL REVIEW**

### Vigilante Justice

Pinechas took the law into his own hands when he killed Zimri. This position subdivides regarding the justification for Pinechas's action and the essence of Zimri's sin:

### Combatting Inter-marriage

Pinechas operated under a heretofore unknown law of "קנאין פוגעין בו" ("zealots may slay him") which applied to Zimri's act of having relations with a non-Israelite woman. This permitted Pinechas to act without due process.

**SOURCES:** Yerushalmi Sanhedrin, Bavli Sanhedrin, Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Rashi, Ralbag, Ma'asei Hashem, Netziv

**Zimri's sin** – These commentators emphasize Zimri's illicit relations with a non-Jew and omit any mention of idolatry.<sup>1</sup>

- Most of these exegetes<sup>2</sup> add a component of rebellion to his actions as well, having Zimri question the decision to kill the worshipers of Baal Peor, and/or asking Moshe why consorting with a Midianite is problematic, if after all Moshe, himself, had married Zipporah,<sup>3</sup> also a Midianite.<sup>4</sup>
- Ma'asei Hashem adds that Zimri wanted to demonstrate that he, a leader, was too powerful to be punished. Noting that only idolatrous worshipers were being killed, he decided to publicly engage in an illicit (non-idolatrous) sexual activity thinking that in doing so he would not be punished.<sup>5</sup>

## The judges' role

- **Punish the worshipers** – According to most of these commentators,<sup>6</sup> Hashem commanded Moshe to set up judges to punish those who had sinned with Baal Peor.<sup>7</sup> Rashi and Ralbag maintain that they did in fact do so, and had at least begun to punish the worshipers before Pinechas's actions.<sup>8</sup>
- **Punish the leaders** – Ma'asei Hashem, in contrast, asserts that Hashem was commanding Moshe to kill the leaders, who had themselves sinned with Baal Peor.<sup>9</sup> This would serve as an example for the rest of the nation. He does not say whether this was fulfilled, but suggests that this command is what prompted Zimri into defiant action.

**Why were the judges' actions insufficient?** Since Zimri's sin was distinct from that of the nation, it was not meant to be dealt with by the judges.

**Was Pinechas one of the appointed judges?** Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) suggests that Pinechas was actually one of the judges appointed to punish the Baal Peor offenders.<sup>10</sup> Upon seeing Zimri, he left his court to individually punish him for his separate offense.

**Intermarriage** – It is not clear how severely intermarriage with a non-Canaanite was viewed in Biblical times, making Pinechas's actions more questionable.

## Vigilante justice

- **In accordance with Halakhah** – According to all of these commentators, Pinechas was acting according to the law that a zealot is allowed to take the law into his own hands and kill one who is engaging in sexual activity with a non Jew, as long as they are in the midst of the act - "הבועל את הנכרית קנאין פוגעין בו".<sup>11</sup>
- **Preventing a desecration of Hashem's name** – Shemuel in the Bavli<sup>12</sup> and the Netziv add that Pinechas took matters into his own hands and did not consult first with Moshe since this was a חילול ה' and prompt action was needed to prevent any further desecration.
- **Preventing punishment of the nation** – According to R. Yitzchak in the Bavli,<sup>13</sup> Pinechas saw that the angel of death was beginning to destroy the nation and decided to act so as to save the nation from punishment.

**Why didn't Moshe act?** According to most of these commentators,<sup>14</sup> when faced with Zimri's taunting and defiance, Moshe was paralyzed into inaction and forgot the law.

**Why did Pinechas's act stop the plague?** If the plague was a response to the idolatrous acts of the nation at large, and especially if the perpetrators of that sin were already being punished by the judges,<sup>15</sup> it is not clear why the plague ceased in response to Pinechas's action specifically. Was he not killing Zimri for a different crime altogether?

- If one posits, like the Bavli, Rashi and Ralbag, that in his actions Zimri was representing his tribe and attempting to thwart the initial judicial proceedings against the worshipers, perhaps his death somehow represented an end to the original disobedience as well.
- According to the Ma'asei Hashem, Hashem had originally wanted to punish just the sinning leaders, to teach the nation that no one is above the law. In contrast, Zimri intended to demonstrate that leaders are immune to punishment. Thus, with his slaying, the lesson was taught and Hashem's anger could abate.

**Evaluation of Pinechas** – According to this position, it is not clear why Pinechas's action should have earned him such high accolades and rewards. It would seem that the sin he was punishing, intermarriage with a non-Jew, was not as severe as that of the rest of the nation who were cohabiting as part of an idolatrous ritual. Moreover, while others punished within the judicial framework, he took matters into his own hands. Though this was allowed in these circumstances, it is still not clear why the action made him so praiseworthy.<sup>16</sup>

**Pinechas's priestly reward** – According to all these commentators, Pinechas was rewarded with some new status:

- **Perpetual priesthood** – Bavli Sanhedrin<sup>17</sup> maintains that Pinechas was promised that the priesthood would always remain in his family.<sup>18</sup>
- **High priesthood** – Ralbag and Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) assert that Pinechas was promised a promotion, that he and his descendants would be the high priests.<sup>19</sup>
- **Priest** – According to Rashi, until this point Pinechas was not a priest at all. Only those anointed with Aharon and their descendants who were born thereafter had become priests. Pinechas who had already been born at the time of the dedication of the Mishkan had missed out.

"הִנְנִי נֹתֵן לוֹ אֶת בְּרִיתִי שְׁלוֹם" – Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan) asserts that this is a promise of eternal life,<sup>20</sup> while Netziv suggests that Hashem was granting Pinechas the inner trait of peace. Since the act of killing, however justified, has the potential to change someone's character, Pinechas was promised that he would not become prone to anger, but would instead have a calm demeanor.<sup>21</sup>



## Leading the Battle vs. Idolatry

Pinechas was the first to punish any of the worshipers of Baal Peor. His killing of Zimri paved the way for others to punish the rest of the offenders.

**SOURCES:** Philo, Josephus

**Zimri's sin** – According to both Philo and Josephus, Zimri participated in both the sexual and sacrificial component of Baal Peor worship. Philo emphasizes the licentiousness of his behavior and his shamelessness in displaying it publicly, while Josephus highlights how he used his actions to question Moshe's authority and express disregard for the laws Moshe had transmitted.

**The judges' role** – Both Philo and Josephus present the other judges as acting only in the aftermath of, and as a result of Pinechas's deed. This suggests that they had not been commanded to act beforehand. This is a difficult read of the Biblical text, and must assume that the Biblical story is not told chronologically, but rather as a split scene, where the text moves back and forth between two sets of locations and characters.<sup>22</sup>

**Why does Pinechas act?** According to this read of the story, Pinechas acts without due process, motivated by righteous anger at the sinning nation and Zimri in particular, and by a desire to prevent others from following suit. The decision to act is totally his own, as Moshe has not yet commanded anyone to penalize the worshipers.

**Why didn't Moshe act?**

- **Pinechas was quicker** – According to Philo, it seems that Pinechas simply acted first. Motivated by zeal, he acted on the spur of the moment, before anyone else, including Moshe, had an opportunity. Moshe viewed this eagerness positively, and would have rewarded Pinechas himself, had Hashem not done so.
- **Intentional restraint** – Josephus, in contrast, suggests that Moshe at first did chastise the people but was loathe to punish them, hoping that they would repent. Moreover, he decided not to respond to Zimri's outburst, fearful that doing so would just provoke others to be similarly insolent and disobedient.<sup>23</sup>

**Vigilante justice** – Philo commends Pinechas for his valorous act, and seems to have only praise for his decision to take the law into his own hands, with no need to justify it.<sup>24</sup> Josephus is more guarded in his evaluation. Though he too praises Pinechas's courage and ability to inspire others, he stops short of mentioning how this act appeased Hashem or that Pinechas was rewarded for it.<sup>25</sup>

**Pinechas's action and the plague** – According to both Philo and Josephus, Pinechas's deed did not lead to an early end of the plague.<sup>26</sup> The plague only ended when everyone who needed to be punished was killed. Philo suggests that Pinechas's greatness lay not in saving lives but in punishing the deserving and thus cleansing the nation from its sinners.

### What was the plague?

- **Human punishment of perpetrators** – According to Philo, there was no Divine plague at all. The plague spoken of refers to the human killing of the worshipers, which amounted to 24,000 men.
- **Divine punishment of supporters** – Josephus asserts that while the leaders killed the actual worshipers, Hashem punished all those who did not actively sin, but had nonetheless encouraged those who did.

**Pinechas's reward** – Josephus does not mention Pinechas's reward,<sup>27</sup> while Philo suggests that he was given both peace, something only Hashem could grant, and a promise of perpetual priesthood for his descendants.<sup>28</sup>



## Following Orders

When Pinechas killed Zimri, he was simply obeying the command of Moshe to kill those who had participated in the sin of Baal Peor. This approach subdivides regarding what distinguished Pinechas from the other Israelite judges:

### Alone in Loyalty to Moshe

The other judges were either unwilling or unable to carry out the killings. Only Pinechas did not hesitate to fulfill Moshe's directive and summoned the courage to slay the offenders.

**SOURCES:** Sifre Bemidbar, Chizkuni, Sforno, Hoil Moshe

**Zimri's sin** – According to all of these exegetes, Zimri's sin was related to that of the nation and connected to the worship of Baal Peor. Hoil Moshe asserts that he was even one of the first to sin, leading the others into similar wrongdoing. Sifre, like the sources above, adds an aspect of rebellion as well.

## The judges' role

- **Punish the worshipers** – According to Sifre, Chizkuni, and Sforno, the judges=leaders were directed to kill the Israelites who had worshiped Baal Peor,<sup>29</sup> but did not fulfill their task.
- **Punish the leaders** – Hoil Moshe, instead, raises the possibility that Hashem directed Moshe to appoint people to kill, not the laymen within Israel, but the leaders themselves, since it was they, with Zimri amongst them, who were at the forefront of the worship of Baal Peor.<sup>30</sup> The judges, though, were reluctant to act.

**Why didn't the judges act?** Chizkuni suggests that they hesitated to kill their relatives, while the Hoil Moshe posits that the judges, being of lesser status than the leaders they were to punish, feared to harm them. Sifre, instead, suggests that in the face of Zimri's public actions, the other leaders lost their courage and refused to step forward to kill.

**Why didn't Moshe act?** Moshe had originally delegated this responsibility to others. It is possible that when no one followed his orders he did not personally step in because his late age precluded him from taking quick action.

**Was Pinechas one of the appointed judges?** According to the Sifre, Pinechas was one of the judges appointed by Moshe.<sup>31</sup>

**Vigilante justice** – According to this position, Pinechas is following Moshe's directive (and might even have been one of the judges given the task of punishing), and thus the story raises no questions as to the legitimacy of taking the law into one's own hands.

**Why was Pinechas's action enough to stop the plague?** As Hashem had originally claimed that His wrath would only abate after the sinners were killed, this approach must deal with why it was sufficient to kill just one of the offenders and not all.

- **Human Punishment Preferred over Divine** – Hoil Moshe asserts that the plague began in the first place only because no one had been willing to stand up against the offending leaders.<sup>32</sup> Thus, as soon as Pinechas acted in place of the judges, Hashem no longer felt the need for His Divine punishment.
- **It allowed the nation to repent** – According to Sforno, even those who had not sinned with Baal Peor deserved punishment for not having protested against the misdeeds of their fellow Israelites.<sup>33</sup> Hashem's anger was calmed only when the nation repented by agreeing to the sinners being punished.<sup>34</sup> Thus, when Pinechas publicly killed one of the criminals and the nation quietly watched, Hashem was appeased and stopped the plague.<sup>35</sup>

**Pinechas's reward** – Since Pinechas was the only one to heed Hashem's call for punishment, he was deserving of a reward. The commentators differ, though, in their understanding of what he received:

- **High Priesthood** – Sifre and Chizkuni suggest that Hashem granted Pinechas a higher status, the high priesthood. Sifre also implies that there was a measure for measure component in this reward, as Pinechas was to receive 24 gifts granted to priests (matching the 24,000 who died.)
- **Eternal Life** – According to Sforno, the "covenant of peace" refers to peace from death and the promise that Pinechas would live forever.
- **Status Quo** - Chizkuni asserts that this covenant refers to peace from potential enemies and the promise that he need not fear retribution from the families of Zimri and Kozbi. Similarly, he was

reassured that despite having killed, he would still be able to serve as priest. Hoil Moshe also suggests that Pinechas was promised nothing in new; this is just a repetition of an old promise, much like the forefathers were continuously blessed by Hashem.



## Killed the Worst Offender

Although other judges also heeded Moshe's command and punished the offenders, Pinechas was the one who assuaged Hashem's wrath by killing Zimri, the esteemed leader of the evildoers.

**SOURCES:** Abarbanel

**Zimri's sin** – Zimri's union with Kozbi was connected to the worship of Baal Peor. Being a leader, though, his actions were more brazen and offensive than the others. Charged with killing the sinners, he not only refused to punish, but instead joined them and went so far as to commit his act in the very midst of these punishments. In this public act, he effectively permitted the rest of his tribe to act likewise.

**The judges' role** – According to Abarbanel, Hashem had directed Moshe to appoint judges to kill the leaders themselves for not having protested against and stopped the nation from sinning.<sup>36</sup> Upon hearing the command, Moshe, instead, immediately told the leaders to actively protest against the idolaters by killing them,<sup>37</sup> which the leaders (with the exception of Zimri) proceeded to do.

**Why didn't Moshe act?** There was no need for Moshe to act since others were doing their job.

**Was Pinechas a judge?** Abarbanel implies that he was not a judge<sup>38</sup> but that he was witness to Moshe's directive to kill the offenders.

**Vigilante justice** – According to Abarbanel, Pinechas was heeding Moshe's command,<sup>39</sup> and thus, this was not a case of vigilantism.

**What would have happened if Pinechas did not act?** Abarbanel asserts that all of Israel would have been wiped out.

**Why did Pinechas specifically stop the plague?** Though other leaders had similarly punished offenders, Pinechas was unique in that he killed the ringleader. Abarbanel assumes that most of the 24,000 killed in the plague were from the tribe of Shimon, who had acted in the wake of their leader, Zimri. Thus, it was his death that was most necessary to stop Hashem's wrath.

**Pinechas's reward** – Pinechas's killing of the leading offender earned him both protection and reward. Abarbanel asserts that Pinechas was assured protection from the families of Zimri and Kozbi and that his priestly status would not be harmed by his having killed, but rather, to the contrary, he was now promised high priesthood.

---

<sup>1</sup> The verses themselves also distinguish between Zimri's act, done with a Midianite, and that of the Israelites, who consorted instead with Moabite women. Moreover, Baal Peor is never mentioned in the context of his deed.

<sup>2</sup> Netziv is the exception.



<sup>3</sup> To read more about Moshe's marriage to Zipporah, see Moshe and Zipporah's Marriage.

<sup>4</sup> Bavli Sanhedrin, Rashi, and Ralbag present Zimri acting as a representative of his tribe who sought his aid in stopping the judicial killings against the worshipers of Baal Peor. It is possible, then, that Zimri's decision to sleep with Kozbi (and taunt Moshe) was a ploy to distract the proceedings. This read serves to connect the two otherwise distinct incidents. Cf. the Sifre below which has a very similar retelling of the episode, but which leaves out the crucial section which highlights Pinechas acting as a zealot to punish a sexual offender, and instead highlights his taking action when no one else was willing.

<sup>5</sup> Ma'asei Hashem, thus also connects the two incidents, despite distinguishing between the sins of the nation and Zimri.

<sup>6</sup> Yerushalmi Sanhedrin does not address the issue.

<sup>7</sup> The word "אוֹתָם" in Hashem's directive does not refer back to the phrase "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם" in the earlier part of the verse, but rather to the Israelites of the verse before. According to this read, the term "שִׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" of verse 5 refers to the same people as the "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם" of verse 4, and Moshe fulfills the command exactly as directed.

<sup>8</sup> Bavli Sanhedrin mentions the convening of the courts, but does not say explicitly whether anyone had yet carried out the killings.

<sup>9</sup> Thus, in verse 4 the words, "וְהִזְקַע אוֹתָם" refer to the previously mentioned "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם". The "שִׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" of verse 5 represent a different group of people, who were assigned to kill "הַנְּצַמְדִים לְבַעַל פְּעוֹר" which were the leaders (or "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם" of verse 4) themselves.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. the Sifre below. Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan)'s explanation of the episode combines motifs from both the Bavli and Sifre, being more similar to one source in some aspects and to the other source in other matters.

<sup>11</sup> Rav in the Bavli and Rashi add that, before acting, Pinechas sought the approval of Moshe who did not tell him explicitly to kill the couple but suggested that it was the right thing to do. This is in accordance with the law that states that though a person viewing such a deed might act on his own zealotry, an authoritative figure may not tell him explicitly to kill.

<sup>12</sup> It is unclear if Shemuel disagrees with Rav and does not think that this is a case of "קְנִיין פּוֹגְעִין בּוֹ", or if he is simply adding a second possibility to explain Pinechas's actions.

<sup>13</sup> He, too, might not be fundamentally disagreeing with Rav but rather adding another factor.

<sup>14</sup> The Ma'asei Hashem and Netziv do not address the question.

<sup>15</sup> When commanding the judges to punish the people, Moshe says that in doing so "וַיֵּשֶׁב חֲרוֹן אַף ה' מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל", suggesting that no more would be needed to stop the plague.

<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this is one of the reasons that almost all of the exegetes also portray Zimri as a rebel. Thus, Pinechas is depicted as one who acts to save the honor of Moshe and Hashem as well.

<sup>17</sup> See also the first possibility raised by Ralbag who suggests that this is actually a promise that his blood line will perpetuate, and therefore that their will always be priests from his descendants.

<sup>18</sup> This position is picking up on the word "עוֹלָם".

<sup>19</sup> The two see in this reward a measure for measure component. Since Pinechas atoned for others, he will continue to be able to do so. In addition, since he killed Zimri in the gut, that portion of sacrifices will be his in the role of priest. This specific suggestion might in part be motivated by the fact that Pinechas and his descendants were in fact high priests. Ralbag points out that the fact that there are known to be some high priests from other lines does not refute this possibility, since the promise could have been conditional.

<sup>20</sup> Another textual hook for this idea might be the words **עולם** בְּרִית כְּהֵנֶת, that Pinechas will somehow manage to be a priest forever.

<sup>21</sup> This, too, is measure for measure. Pinechas had assuaged Hashem's wrath so, now Hashem is ensuring that Pinechas himself would not be consumed by anger.

<sup>22</sup> According to Philo and Josephus, the story opens with the worship of Baal Peor and God's wrath. Zimri's participation leads to Pinechas's killing of him, which in turn prompts the others, too, to punish the rest of the offenders. [According to Philo, but not Josephus, this participation comes at the command of Moshe.] Only after this, does the plague stop. The Biblical account alternates between describing the role of Moshe and the other leaders and the interplay between Pinechas and Zimri.

<sup>23</sup> See the note below regarding Josephus's perspective on Pinechas's actions.

<sup>24</sup> The magnitude of the sin required such actions.

<sup>25</sup> L. Feldman, in his article, "The Portrayal of Phinehas by Philo, Pseudo-Philo and Josephus," JQR 92:2-3 (2002): 315-345, explains that Josephus was somewhat uncomfortable with the character of Pinechas since his zealous actions, and taking of the law into his own hands, were all too similar to those of the Zealots whom he opposed in the war against Rome.

<sup>26</sup> According to David Bernatt, "Josephus' Portrayal of Phinehas", JSP 13:2 (2002): 137-149, Josephus was loathe to include both the appeasement and the expiatory aspect of Pinechas's actions, because for him, the concept that killing, even of sinners, could pacify Hashem was an abhorrent one. Only penitence could serve that purpose. This is perhaps why he has Moshe not actively call to punish the sinners, but rather hoping for their repentance.

<sup>27</sup> See the above note that this might reflect his discomfort with Pinechas's vigilantism.

<sup>28</sup> Although he was already a priest, this ensured that the position would not be taken away from his family.

<sup>29</sup> As above, "אוֹתָם" in Hashem's directive refers to the Israelites of the previous verse and the terms "שִׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" and "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם" are interchangeable.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Ma'asei Hashem above. According to this reading, the phrase "וְהִזְקַע אוֹתָם" refers to the previously mentioned "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם". The "שִׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" of verse 5 represent a different group of people, who were assigned to kill them.

<sup>31</sup> The Midrash states, "כִּיּוֹן שְׂרָאָה שֶׁהֵיוּ הַכֹּל שׁוֹתֵקִים עִמָּד מִתּוֹךְ סִנְהֵדְרֵי שְׁלוֹ וְשִׁמַּט אֶת הַרֹמַח". The other commentators do not address this question.

<sup>32</sup> This is in contrast to those who maintain that "וַיִּחַר אַף ה' בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל" of v. 3 (before the directive to kill the sinners) represents the beginning of the plague.

<sup>33</sup> Though Sforino does not say so explicitly, it would seem that it was they who were targeted by the plague.

<sup>34</sup> By not protesting the sinners' deaths, they showed that they had repented of their previous inaction in not protesting their sin.

<sup>35</sup> It no longer mattered that other worshipers had not yet been punished, since the nation demonstrated that they had repented.

<sup>36</sup> Like Hoil Moshe above, he reads the words "וְהִזְקַע אוֹתָם" to refer to the earlier mentioned "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם", but suggests that they deserved death not because they had been active participants, but because they had been passive bystanders.

<sup>37</sup> Thus, according to Abarbanel, "שִׁפְטֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" of verse 5 is identical to the "רְאֵשֵׁי הָעָם" of verse 4, with both referring to the leaders. Though Hashem had wanted them punished, Moshe spares their lives by having them repent of their wrongdoing and actively show their protest.

<sup>38</sup> He stresses that, being a priest, Pinechas was not learned in the art of war and that weapons were new to him, suggesting that he had not been part of the earlier judicial process.

<sup>39</sup> He suggests that even Pinechas's choice to kill by sword related to Hashem's command, "הִזְקֵעַ אוֹתָם", which in Abarbanel's opinion refers to stabbing.

# Pinechas – Action and Reward

## Points of Dispute

These are some of the central points of dispute (נקודות המחלוקת) between the various exegetes:

- What was the nature of Zimri's sin?
  - Sexual and idolatrous (Philo, Josephus, Abarbanel)
  - Sexual only (Maasei Hashem, possibly others)
- Why did Pinechas take up arms?
  - His own initiative (Bavli Sanhedrin, Netziv)
  - He was one of the judges commanded by Moshe (Targum Yerushalmi (Yonatan), Sifre)
  - He was not a judge, but heard Moshe's command (Abarbanel)
- How exactly did Pinechas's action allay Hashem's anger and halt the plague?
  - Led the people to repent (Sforno)
  - Killed the ringleader of the sinners - since Zimri was from Shimon and the tribe of Shimon decreased in numbers (Abarbanel)
  - Once Israel was punishing its own sinners, God no longer had to intervene to punish (Hoil Moshe)
  - It did not; the plague continued until all sinners had died (Philo, Josephus)
- What did these Divine promises add that Pinechas did not already possess by virtue of his priestly lineage?
  - Nothing new - just a repetition, like the blessings to the Patriarchs (Hoil Moshe)
  - Reassurance that he had not lost his priestly role due to killing (Hizkuni, Abarbanel)
  - High priesthood (Sifrei, Hizkuni, Abarbanel)
  - Protection from retribution from the families of Zimri and Kozbi (Hizkuni, Abarbanel)