

## VIGILANT(E)

A commentary on *Parashat Pinchas*  
By Rabbi Richard Jacobi

In the *Parasha* for this week, we have examples of what are, to my mind, the best and the worst of humanity. At the beginning of the *Parasha* is the conclusion of a story about relations with the Midianites involving idolatry and intermarriage. There, Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron, is rewarded by G-d for murdering an Israelite notable, Zimri and the Midianite woman, Cozbi, whom he had possibly – we cannot be sure from the text – taken as his wife. Pinchas's action had apparently checked a plague, but we should sit very uncomfortably anytime we read of vigilante action being taken against someone, and then the vigilante being rewarded. If such an act were committed today, it would rightly cause outrage and disgust, and the perpetrator would, we hope, be punished. It is a story wherein the woman is painted as the major actor in the scandal – G-d is depicted in Chapter 25 v.18 as calling it “*the affair of Cozbi*”, with the man seemingly less to blame than her.

Centuries later, in rabbinic attempts to explain this story, an elaborate plot is suggested in which the Israelite men are seduced by young Midianite women. The evidence to support this plot is paper-thin, but it enables the rabbis of the early centuries in the common era to justify what we should nowadays find unacceptable. Civilised society ought never reward a Pinchas for such a vigilante act of self-righteous indignation and fatal aggression. In our era, although it might sometimes be cumbersome and get things wrong, we have to uphold

the rule of law and reinforce this respect for the law in our children.

At all times, people who value pluralism, equality, fairness, and the rule of law in a civilised society must be vigilant in support of these principles. This is, as history repeatedly has shown, especially important in times of economic, social or political turmoil, when people seek others on whom to vent their frustrations. Women, foreign workers, asylum seekers, Jews, Muslims, other minorities – all can be vulnerable and blamed in such times.

That is why the story of the daughters of Zelophehad that appears in Numbers 27 is one that we can celebrate and, I hope, use to empower ourselves. The five women – Machlah, Noah, Choglah, Malkah and Tirtsah – who are always named whenever they appear, present their case to Moses and everyone, using the legal systems of their time. G-d is portrayed clearly and unequivocally as asserting that their case is right, and the law of the Torah takes a major step towards fair treatment of the women. We can all be successors to these five women

if we choose. We can all work cooperatively to peacefully improve the law and safeguard the rights of those who could be marginalised. In contrast with satisfying the desire for instant redress or revenge, it takes patience, persistence and clarity of purpose to keep on pursuing just and peaceful change.

If *Parashat Pinchas* teaches us one thing though, it is that the distance between a vigilante and being vigilant is only as much as a finger stroke. Which will you be this week?

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