

Commentary on Parashat Pinchas

July 12, 2014

Our Torah portion is Pinchas.

My good friend, classmate and colleague, Rabbi David Cohen-Henriquez, posted on Facebook yesterday an essay about the connection between our Torah portion and our response to the attacks by Hamas on Israel. I cannot improve upon David's essay, so I am going to read it.

Among all the images and videos transmitted in the parallel media war, we encounter a very striking image: fundamentalist Muslim mothers dressing their children in terrorist costumes. There are many videos of mothers declaring their greatest dream is for their sons or daughters to become martyrs in their holy Jihad. Sometimes these images remain just children's role-playing games and fantasies. At other times, they become horrible realities.

We have been struggling with the same type of enemies since the dawn of our nation: those who use their women and their children to attain their nefarious goals. These are people whose appreciation for Life and the value of Human Dignity, even of their own children, is lower than ours, sometimes even non-existent.

At the end of last week's Torah reading, after the failed attempts of the prophet Balaam to bring about the downfall of the Israelites, the Midianites send their own daughters and sisters to seduce the men and, through ritual harlotry, bring them to their pagan religion. Pinchas, Aaron's grandson, in an act of zealotry, kills the Midianite princess Cozbi and one of the Israelite tribe leaders while they publicly defile the camp and defy God and Moses. For his zealous act, Pinchas in today's portion is rewarded with a covenant of peace.

This story made our rabbis and leaders uncomfortable. They condemned his actions. Already as early as in Psalms the story is recounted with Pinchas not killing but interceding in prayer.

We have to admit that the anger of Pinchas sometimes enters our thoughts when we see how much of the world keeps a blind eye, and how many open their mouths only to criticize the Jewish State when Israel wants to defend herself after absorbing attacks with an almost stoic patience. The frustration makes us wonder about total annihilation of Hamas and their allies. Dark thoughts sometimes cross our minds. "Israel could finish with all of them in 10 minutes", we sometimes hear. "Wipe them out, all of them. Finish this once and for all"

But immediately we remember we have an “operating system” that regulates these very human passions that cross our hearts. It is called Judaism.

Our enemies want to destroy us for the very reason that we run under that “operating system,” that “core processor” of values, that allows us to view and experience reality in a very different way. That system has been the foundational pillar, not only of Israel, but also of all Western Civilization.

Yet we encounter the Western world with a double morality. Many support exclusively the Palestinian cause, calling Israel a colonialist state, or they support both sides. We rarely hear a strong non-Jewish voice supporting Israel’s view.

Of course we are all human beings on both sides of this conflict. We are all made of flesh and bones. We bleed when you cut us and we cry when you destroy our homes. Nobody should experience war and death. The question is: do you ally with those humans who dedicate their whole energies as a nation to protect their children, to build bunkers, hospitals, and even send food and medicine to their enemies? Or do you support those who dance in the streets and shoot guns in the air when they hear one of theirs has killed three teenagers, who behead their captive enemies, who hide among civilians and use their children and their women as human shields when the opposite side goes out of their way to announce a military incursion in advance?

Which side represents your values, as a human being, and as a civilization?

Our war is not with the Palestinian people. They face the same enemy we do. Our war is a cultural war against those who don’t appreciate life and don’t see its intrinsic sacredness.

Pray, not for the destruction of lives, but to help eradicate the evil that dwells in so many people.

Save Israel AND the Palestinians from the toxic presence of Hamas and fundamentalists.

May we receive the covenant of eternal peace that Pinchas receives in today’s portion, and may we refrain from succumbing to rage.