



Rabbi David Silverberg
Parashat Pinchas

Parashat Pinchas begins with God rewarding Pinchas for his act of zealotry during the tragic incident of *Ba'al Pe'or*. As we read in the final section of Parashat Balak, an Israelite leader named Zimri committed a public offense with a Midyanite woman, Kozbi. Pinchas, a grandson of Aharon, immediately arose and killed the two transgressors, which brought an abrupt end to the deadly plague that God had sent upon *Benei Yisrael* as punishment for their sexual and religious involvement with the women of Moav. Here, in Parashat Pinchas, God promises to reward Pinchas with a “*berit kehunat olam*,” or “covenant of eternal priesthood” (25:13). Rashi explains (based on Masekhet Zevachim 101b) that Pinchas had not originally been named a *kohen* (due to a technicality), and it was only in reward for his heroic act of zealotry that he earned the status of priesthood for himself and his progeny.

It appears that Maimonides interpreted this verse differently. In *Hilkhot Talmud Torah* (3:1), Maimonides makes reference to God’s reward to Pinchas as part of his description of the three “crowns” bestowed upon *Am Yisrael*:

Israel was crowned with three crowns: the crown of Torah, the crown of priesthood, and the crown of kingship. The crown of priesthood was granted to Aharon, as it says, “And he [Pinchas] and his offspring shall have a covenant of eternal priesthood.” The crown of kingship was granted to David... But the crown of Torah stands ready and available to all Israel...

Curiously, Maimonides cites God’s reward to Pinchas as the Biblical source for the assignment of the priesthood to Aharon and his descendants. According to the conventional reading of this verse, however, as noted, this reward pertained only to Pinchas’ personal status as *kohen*, a status that he had not been granted earlier. But Maimonides invokes this verse as the source for the priestly status of all *kohanim* – all descendants of Aharon – indicating that the reward for Pinchas’ zealotry affected not only him and his descendants, but rather the entire priestly tribe.

The obvious question arises, what new dimension was added to the *kohanim* in response to Pinchas’ heroism that had not existed previously? God had already appointed Aharon and his descendants as *kohanim*. What new status was afforded in the wake of Pinchas’ zealotry?

Rabbi Chaim Brovender (www.yhoh.org.il/parsha/5760/pinchas60.htm) suggested that according to Maimonides’ reading, God promises that the descendants of Aharon would never forfeit the status of *kehuna*. Tradition teaches that the firstborn of *Benei Yisrael* were slated to serve as *kohanim*, but as a result of their participation in the sin of the golden calf this privilege was transferred to Aharon and his descendants. Theoretically, the possibility existed that Aharon’s descendants, too, like the firstborn, could relinquish this special status by committing a sin similar to the sin of the calf. However, in reward for

Pinchas' zealotry, God promised the *kohanim* a "covenant of eternal priesthood," that the status of *kehuna* would remain with them unconditionally for all time. Pinchas' fervent devotion to God and willingness to risk his life for God's honor guaranteed the *kohanim* that the priestly status would stay with them forever more.

(It should be noted that Maimonides' reading of this verse remains difficult in light of the fact that God here makes this promise to "him [Pinchas] and his descendants after him," suggesting that this reward affected only Pinchas and his progeny. Maimonides apparently understood that this verse nevertheless refers to the entire priestly tribe, and not specifically to the family of Pinchas.)

Much has been and will be written about the ambivalence toward Pinchas' act expressed in rabbinic literature. Pinchas' violent act is condoned and hailed only in the very specific context of the incident of *Ba'al Pe'or*. Generally speaking, the role of the *kohanim* is to respond to Torah neglect through instruction and inspiration, rather than through anger and zealotry: "They shall teach Your statutes to Yaakov, Your Torah to Israel..." (Devarim 33:10). However, the notion of priesthood as a reward for Pinchas' zealotry perhaps demonstrates the central importance of zeal and passion when fulfilling the role of the *kohen*. In order to teach, guide, lead and inspire, one must possess the kind of fervor that motivated Pinchas to act as he did during the incident of *Ba'al Pe'or*. Whereas this particular kind of zealotry is undoubtedly reserved for only very specific contexts, the intense feeling of devotion to God and His Torah that drove Pinchas must be felt and exhibited by all those seeking to fulfill the role of the *kohen*, to invigorate his fellow Jews in their religious commitment.