

## Leave the Zealot Alone

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*Parshat Pinhas*

**Pinhas . . . has turned My wrath away from the Children of Israel. . . .**  
(Numbers 25:11)

The story of Pinhas begins in *Parshat Balak* (which we read last week) and concludes this week. Why is his story so divided, especially since it occupies only a single chapter of the Book of Numbers?

Pinhas, it seems, is a zealot and an extremist. Indeed, the text (Numbers 25:11) tells us so explicitly – **Pinhas . . . zealously took up my cause.** The conclusion of his story is postponed to the week after its beginning, as a way of teaching us never to draw quick conclusions about any extreme position.

And there is even more. The two *Parshayot* preceding Pinhas – Hukkat and Balak – are often read in the same week, when it is necessary to do so in order to make the annual cycle of Torah readings come out even. And the two *Parshayot* following Pinhas – Matot and Masei – may also be so combined. But Pinhas always stands alone. Again, the Torah is teaching us a lesson about zealots and extremists. Leave them alone; do not join with them. Even with Balak, the king of Moab and implacable enemy of the Israelites, we can be united, as *Parshat Hukkat* is sometimes united with *Parshat Balak*. We can work with those who would constitute themselves our enemies, but we cannot work with extremists, even if they choose to take up our own cause!

A Talmudic tale warns against extremism. An army was once marching along a narrow road. On one side of the road was a raging fire; on the other side was a great mountain of ice. If the army marched too close to the fire, they would be burned. If they marched too close to the ice, they would freeze. Their wise commander ordered them to march in the exact center of the road and thus derive benefit from both the warmth of the fire and the coolness of the ice.

Shabbat Shalom.

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