

Re-Evaluating Heroes in a Turbulent Time

Shabbat Pinchas 5780

July 10, 2020

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Decades ago, an adult Bat Mitzvah discussed Korach's rebellion against Moses, which we read a few weeks ago. She suggested that the revolt might never have happened if Moses were a more collaborative leader. After the service, I was accosted by a guest: How, she demanded, could I have let the name of our sainted rabbi—Moses, of all people—be defamed on the *bimah*?

I tried to explain. Yes, Moses is the greatest of prophets. Still, like all human beings, and like all characters in the Torah, he is flawed. Our appreciation of Moses's teachings and emulating his best qualities are undiminished by acknowledging his imperfections and learning from them, too.

I tell this story frequently, because the point is so central to the very goal of Judaism and the sacred purpose of our human lives. In Torah, Moses is the primary human agent of God's saving power. Like Israelites in the wilderness, we are enjoined to follow Moses's lead: Bringing our people and all the world into the Promised Land of a more perfect world. If perfection were the standard for a person to take part in that sacred work, then we should all be disqualified. Admitting that Moses was imperfect—and yet precisely the right person to be God's mouthpiece, hands, and feet here on Earth—we may understand that, imperfect though we, be, we, too, can change the world for the better.

Speaking of imperfect: This week's Torah portion builds a monument, if you will, to Pinchas, a biblical character that some revere and others revile. Pinchas is honored with the portion's name, and God establishes a *brit shalom*, a covenant of peace, with him, one that will extend to future generations,ⁱ all a "monument" to Pinchas's actions in last this week's portion. There, Pinchas sees an Israelite man consorting with a Midianite woman. He takes his spear and brutally runs it through their bellies, murdering both.ⁱⁱ

Many Jews revere Pinchas as an unadulterated hero—after all, as Rabbi Pam Wax writes, "[F]rom the thrust of the Rabbinic tradition, we are meant to consider Pinchas's action as passion in the service of a just cause, namely preventing a further disintegration of the covenant, as well as providing an imperative ceasefire to God's destructive wrath."ⁱⁱⁱ

On the other hand, Rabbi Wax writes that Pinchas "was an enabler, not the friend that God needed" to control and channel God's anger at the Israelites' sins.^{iv} For Rabbi Wax, the episode "is a perfect reminder that we all, even God, [and

certainly Pinchas,] ‘are on the path,’”^v learning to control our anger and our other evil impulses.

Should this week’s portion be renamed for a less tainted hero, or should Pinchas be revered as unblemished?

I would suggest a third course: We have much to learn from Pinchas. Zeal is sometimes required to overcome evil. And yet, the passion that defeats tyranny may also leave innocent victims in its wake. Moreover, the same people who do good inevitably also do evil.

We are living through a turbulent time in American life. To quote the editorial in this morning’s *Democrat-Gazette*, “The country is going through a sickness now. Fevers, it should be noted, have purposes. The body heats up enough to destroy what’s attacking it from the inside. And eventually it becomes healthier in the process.”^{vi} The allusion to Covid-19 notwithstanding, the sickness is a four-century legacy of violent white supremacy. The fever is angry protest, sweeping the nation, standing up to racism with a force not seen in this country in a half century. The healing is yet to come.

One of the proposed prescriptions has been to remove offensive monuments that are a blight upon America and perpetuate a legacy of white supremacy. Part of this conversation ought to be easy: Confederate monuments must go. As I said on Rosh Hashanah in 2017, memorials established to glorify secession—that is, treason—are about forgetting history, not remembering it truthfully. They were built to intimidate Black Americans and to justify their continued oppression under Jim Crow. There ought to be no debate, except perhaps about what to do with these monstrosities once they are removed from their places of honor.

But what of our American heroes—Thomas Jefferson, for example—who declared that “all men [sic] are created equal” while enslaving human beings? Who built a nation founded on freedom and democracy, but denied the same to members of his own household, even his own family? Jefferson famously had an “affair” with one of his slaves. “Affair” though, is not the word for a sexual relationship between an enslaver and a woman he is enslaving. “Rape” is the word. And Jefferson continued to enslave Sally Hemings—and then, his own children.

Many people insist that Jefferson must not be judged by modern standards, so let’s judge him by his own. “Throughout his entire life, Thomas Jefferson was publicly a consistent opponent of slavery. Calling it a ‘moral depravity and a ‘hideous blot,’ he believed that slavery presented the greatest threat to the survival of the new American nation. Jefferson also thought that slavery was contrary to the

laws of nature, which decreed that everyone had a right to personal liberty.”^{vii} Jefferson continued to promulgate evil, and he knew it.

We would do well to evaluate all our American heroes, and our Jewish ones, honestly. I would not advocate tearing down the Jefferson Memorial, but I would favor adding a depiction of Sally Hemings and the children he continued to enslave, appropriately complicating the reverence due an American hero.

Jana is about to sing, *Tzadik Katamar*, words from Psalm 92: “The righteous bloom like a date-palm; they thrive like a cedar in Lebanon, planted in the house of Adonai, they flourish in the courts of God.” Let us ever honor the righteous in our past, and let us celebrate the fruit of their goodness: Moses’s teachings, Jefferson’s magnificent words that built this great nation. And let us also acknowledge that not all the fruit they bore was sweet. Even two centuries after his death, many Americans cannot taste the goodness, but only the bitterness, that Jefferson bequeathed.

And let the misdeeds—of Moses, of Pinchas, of Jefferson, and of countless others who are rightly remembered as heroes, and rightly also criticized for their wrongdoing—inspire each of us to ensure that our next actions will be good, not evil. Our legacy, indeed the future of the world, is in the balance.

ⁱ Numbers 25:11:13.

ⁱⁱ Numbers 25:6-8.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rabbi Pamela Wax, “*Kaas—An Anger Banquet*”, in Rabbi Barry H. Block, *The Mussar Torah Commentary*, New York: CCAR Press, 2020, p. 254.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} “The letter: A bit of hope, even today,” *The Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, July 10, 2020, p. 6B.

^{vii} “Jefferson’s Attitudes Toward Slavery,” accessed June 10, 2020 at <https://monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/jefferson-s-attitudes-toward-slavery/>.