

The Spear or the Speech

Parshat Pinchas, Romemu, July 3, 2026

There are many ways to characterize this moment for Jews, for citizens of this country, many ways to enter into that thicket, that heavy experience that, maybe I'll speak for myself, that I'm experiencing at this moment. Many avenues, many portals, many doors. One door in particular that is alive for me almost weekly, maybe daily, I should say, definitely weekly, is a kind of conversation that no longer is really a conversation, just basically an argument from the get-go.

Starting from disagreement, starting from conflict, starting from a place of assurance and certainty, starting from a perspective that is professed more than shared. Maybe none of you have ever done this. Maybe I mistook this synagogue for a church, and I'm confessing at this moment.

But certainly, I feel at this moment, in myself and in those I'm engaging with, there's a kind of protection and fierce vigilance happening in the ways in which we're showing up in spaces, in shared spaces. There's heat, there's intensity, and I think it's a feeling that lives not only in me, although I gave you an out. No one has to confess I'm the one up here.

I think it lives in almost every one of us, and that almost none of us knows exactly, I certainly don't, what exactly to call it. It's that thing that kind of rises up in your chest when something that you love is threatened, when something that you love is threatened, when a person you'd give your life for is diminished in front of you, when a name, maybe your father's name, your people's name, maybe your own name, it starts to shrink in a room and nobody else is coming to your defense or the defense of that name. And our tradition has a word for it, and the word is kinah.

Kinah. Kinah in modern Hebrew and also in rabbinic Hebrew, certainly, it has this valence of jealousy. Jealousy.

To be mekaneh is to be somebody that's jealous. It's a quality often in the literature of ethical perfection in our tradition, Mitzvah Yisharim, the Paleo-Aids, and Orchot Tzadikim, all of the different books on ethical and moral perfection speak about kinah. The Muslim movement, or Esau Salanter and his various movements, kinah, what it is to be jealous of someone else.

We have Cain and Havel, the primordial, primal myth of kinah, Cain and Abel. Kinah, you have something that I want. You got something that I wanted.

You were given preferential treatment, whatever it might be. But there's another valence, and the valence of kinah is not jealous, but zealous. They're connected.

Jealous on someone's behalf. To be jealous on behalf of, to be zealous for. It's really, it's kind of a word that flinches away from what it actually really is, which is kinah is the fire that expresses this is mine to guard.

This is mine to guard. And here's what I've come to believe and what I think is happening in this week's Torah wisdom. That fire is not good, and it's not evil.

It's fuel. The whole moral question of our life is not about whether we have that fire, but how we use it. And so this fire is handed to us in two ways in this week's Torah portion.

And one time, it becomes a spear. And another time, it becomes an inheritance. Same fire.

And the distance between these two outcomes is, I think, the distance that we're all trying to cross in some way. Does that make sense? Is the heat getting, are you with me? It's hard to read the room because I barely can, I can't see anything. It's like I'm a little, are you with me? So let's look at these two moments, these two kalim, these two vessels.

The parasha opens in the aftermath of violence. In last week's Torah portion, we ended with violence. In this week's Torah portion, we begin in its aftermath.

Pinchas, who is the grandson of Aharon, of Aaron the priest, has killed two people in front of the entire community, the wholeedah. There was no court. There was no trial.

His own hand has taken it upon himself to be a vigilante. And God says to him, Beqano et kinati betocham, that he was jealous or zealous on my behalf, for my zealousness. Beqano et kinati.

It's kinah twice over. Double kinah, double zealousness. It is not only our zealousness, but God's own zealousness.

Kinati. God's kinah has been fused. And for this, the Torah tells us Pinchas gets a briti shalom, he gets a covenant of peace.

But we all know this, maybe not everybody here, but many of you who do know this will remember it every year. That briti shalom, the Torah says you get a covenant of peace, but it's not, something's off slightly. Because in the word shalom, which means peace, in the Torah, there's what's known as a vav kitiyah.

There's a vav, the letter vav, which is in the O of the shalom. The O, that vowel, that vav, which actually stands tall like a human, actually has the shape of a human. Orthographically, it's a straight line, little head on the top.

It's cut in the middle. And any letter other than that vav in the whole Torah that would be thus cut, wouldn't render the entire Torah pasul. It would render the whole Torah completely un-kosher.

But here, it's actually, you have to write it broken. It's only kosher if it's broken. In the Talmud, in the Mesachet Kiddushin, the Talmud of Kiddushin says very clearly, the vav kitiyah, the severed vav, is the one letter that a Torah scribe is commanded to write incomplete.

Anywhere else, the Gemara says it would be pasul, and here, wholeness would be its defect. And the Ishbitzer rabbi brings, the Hasidic rabbi, Ishbitzer, writes that God gave Pinchas this covenant. God gives him a brit shalom, a covenant of peace.

And at that moment, the ministering angels, the malachi ashare, wanted to punish Pinchas. They wanted to punish Pinchas. And even in heaven, says the Ishbitzer, quoting an earlier source, they weren't sure, they were mifupak, like, they weren't sure.

The covenant, when it comes, arrives with the objection written into its calligraphy, a piece with a fracture in it forever. We record, that discord is recorded. The record of the angelic protest is in the vavkitia, in that split, broken vav, forever telling us that it wasn't a complete peace.

How could there be a complete peace? How could it be possible? The kinah there, the zealotry, becomes a spear, and the spear that stopped a plague. The Torah tells us that it stopped a plague. You can't get around the actual, simple meaning of the Torah.

The Torah says, it worked. It's kind of like a chemo of sorts. It was intense, it worked, but the body was no longer whole.

The body was now broken, and no matter what, the peace was going to be broken. Kinah, that becomes a spear, and even stops a plague, the Torah still will not let the peace it produced be written in a whole way. And then, just a few chapters later, in the same parasha, something amazing happens.

The same zealotry, the same fire appears, but it appears now in a completely different valence. Something remarkably different. And if you're reading straight through the parasha, I invite anybody tonight, spare time, safari, get out your chumash, do something.

Tomorrow morning, read it, it's unbelievable. Just read and ask yourself, if you were editing this text, would each of these pieces be contiguous, or if they are, why are they this way? We read about a jealous act, a zealous act, a spear that stops this magifah, this plague, and then immediately after this, the Torah decides to introduce us to five amazing women. The Slovak daughters, right? The shvesters, the sisters, you know? They come along, the big five amazing women, perhaps in all of Tanakh, and their names are amazing, Mahla, and Chagla, and Mikla, and Tirza, and Noah.

We have these five sisters, and they appear before Moses, and they say, Moses, our father died in the wilderness. He didn't die because of the sin of the spies, he died becheto, it was his own coming of old age, he passed away, and he had no male children, no sons, which means under the law that, as it stood at the time, that his portion of the land in the land of Israel was gonna go to someone else. It would leave the family system, and so these remarkable, remarkable women stand forward, and they say, our father's name is about to be erased.

We have lineage, our father belongs to us, too. Lama nigara, and lama yigara shema vi, it doesn't even say, why should we be left out, it says, why should the name of our father be

left out? On our father's behalf, bikano et kinati, we're also zealous, just like Pinchas was zealous. Pinchas was zealous for you, God, we're zealous for our father.

But they don't pick up a spear. They ask a really good question. From the coarseness of the effective, but incomplete actions of Pinchas, something shifts in the text to five women who bring a voice, who bring a rationale, who bring something powerful.

They say, Moshe, listen, we also should be able to inherit. Lama nigara shema vi mitoch mishpachtenu, and then Moshe says back to them, wait a second, let me go talk to God. It's an amazing moment.

Maybe Pinchas should have done the same thing. But he didn't come to Moshe. They come to Moshe.

What should we do? We have a legitimate complaint. Teyn benot savchat dovrot, God says, yes, teyn. Teyn benot savchat dovrot.

They're speaking truth. They're speaking right. Nahon, teyn, it's straight, it's good.

These women essentially force God's hand to rewrite the laws of inheritance. These five women come forward and change the course of the Jewish constitution. An amendment is made on the spot in the Torah and it's recorded.

They intervene with God and God said, you know what? I didn't think about it. It's a wonderful moment. If you think about 100 other places in the Torah where someone could say, God, you didn't think about this beforehand? Right? It's like, hey, wait a second.

It's a moment. It's a little bit crazy. We assume that the whole Torah, God, was had beyond time and space.

We kind of imagine things to be, it's kind of chronological. And God said, oh, I did not think about this circumstance. What would happen if somebody would not have children who are male children? It's an amazing moment of what we call in Kabbalah, in itaruta miletata, an awakening from below.

Upward causation. From the lowest to the highest, not just from the highest to the lowest, not hierarchically situated, only God can tell us what to do. God says, I leave room in the text for you to tell me how the Torah should be applied.

This is an example of the oral tradition within the written tradition. We have somebody coming and asking for an amendment to a document that's omnipotent, omniscient. It's remarkable.

And it's recorded for posterity, meaning anybody can be the daughter of God going forward. So I want to be really careful here. This law was not an exception made for these five women.

This becomes the codified law for everyone. The same kinah, the same, we will not let our father's lineage die. We are still imbued with the fire of protection and guarding that which we call precious.

But a completely different instrument is chosen with a completely different result. And yet, if I were to end the sermon here, here at this moment, which maybe some of you would like, I'm just, I'm not, but it might be the valence here of Pinchas bad and Benot Sofchad good, the daughters of Sofchad, that's the right way to go, and Pinchas always wrong. But I don't want to rank them.

Pinchas is not only the cautionary tale and the daughters, the heroes. The Torah simply will not let anyone preach that version. Pinchas' act did indeed stop the plague, as I mentioned.

God covenants with him, and the Holy Zohar goes even further. It says, his act repaired something that was broken between heaven and earth. These are not a good kinah and a bad kinah, a good zealousness and a bad zealousness.

These are two moments that demanded different vessels and each vessel told the truth about its moment. The daughters stood in a moment where speech was possible. There was a tent of meeting.

There was a court of Moshe to hear them, and Pinchas stood in a moment when the court had collapsed and Moshe himself was frozen, and the leadership weeping at the entrance to the very tent where the daughters would later be heard. The claim that I'm making is not what kinah, is not kinah looks like when the world can still listen. The spear is what kinah looks like when it can't.

The spear is what it looks like when there isn't listening, and yet the Torah does mark the difference. It's not grading them, but it's telling us the truth. The peace that follows the spear might be peace and might be real, and it might even be covenanted peace, and it is written broken.

Not to shame Pinchas, but to be honest about what kind of moment that moment costs forever, even when it was necessary. Even when heaven itself signed off on it, some peace carries its scar in the calligraphy, and the Torah loves us too much to airbrush that out. The same fire that raises a spear can rewrite the law of a nation.

Kinah is not the question, the moment is the question, and the vessel must tell the truth about that moment. So what about our fire, the Shabbos? Your fire, because all of you have one. Everyone in this room has felt kinah at certain moments, and most of us were taught somewhere along the way to be ashamed of our kinah, kinah bad.

Jealousy, zealous, also bad. We were taught that the fierce thing in us is also the dangerous thing in us. That jealousy for what we love, protectiveness that borders on a ferocity, the refusal to watch a name be diminished, that these are parts of ourselves to suppress, to civilize, to apologize for, and to sand it down.

And sometimes that is absolutely true. Sometimes the fire becomes a spear, an email that you send at night, which you should have waited to send in the morning, or the tweet, or the post, or the Instagram, the righteousness that wins an argument but loses the person you're arguing with. And here's what I want most to say about these moments, because the parasha, it says it before I said it.

Some of them might have been necessary. Some of them might have been necessary. Some of you had to be Pinchas in certain ways.

You had to act, you had to act fast and quickly without any process because someone that you loved was in danger, and there was no tent, and no court, and no time. And the Torah does not ask you to disown those moments, it asks you to be honest about them. That even necessary force leaves a piece that writes a broken letter.

You can stand behind what you did and still let the vav show its crack for all to see, both and all at once. But the Daughters of Sofrad story teaches us also, it teaches the thing that our shame couldn't teach us about kinah, that the fire itself wasn't the sin, suppressed kinah doesn't become peace, it becomes silence. Suppressed kinah does not become peace, it becomes silence.

And silence is how names become diminished. If those five women had done the acceptance of the uncomfortable thing, the modest thing, the thing that made no one uncomfortable in the interest of the tent of meeting, guess what would have happened, everybody? Their father's name would never have continued. The law would have stayed as it was, and it would have been unjust for every daughter that ever came after them.

So the discernment of our parasha asks us not to choose the spear or the claim, the act or the verbal. It asks us what moment am I actually standing in? What is the moment now that is requiring my discernment? Because the gravest mistakes of kinah run in both directions. The spear raised in a moment that could have been a listening moment, and the silence kept in a moment that was begging for that claim that the daughters used.

And because, and this is one last thing here, and because there is a grave danger in all of us that we say out loud that my moment couldn't listen, there was no listening available, which apes everything every zealot in history ever said. Every zealot in history was sure that there was no one to listen to. And so no matter what I do, no matter what I'm saying to you about they're equal, we have to discern, the Talmud says actually a little bit stronger, it's more likely in almost every case that if someone has the time to ask, should I act boldly or should I wait? It's clear that they should wait.

That that space itself is a space of discernment. That space itself means that there's still what can be said, there's still space for listening to happen. The law tells us very explicitly that if someone comes to a court and asks whether they may act as Pinchas has acted, the answer is always automatically no.

And not because the question is wrong, but because the asking is proof. If you had time to ask, you had time to think, and if you have time to think, then the court was open to hear you. The tent could hear you.

Pinchas is never a precedent for anyone who is calm enough to cite him as their source. But here's where I need to bring this all back to us, into our mouths today, this weekend, this unique moment, because there's a way of prying that lock open, and we're living in an age of it. You don't have to find yourself at a moment that can't listen, you can build one with language.

When people call other human beings monsters, they're closing down the conversation and inviting incitement to violence. When other people call fellow Jews kapos, the same thing. When we use language to close the aperture of humanity, we lock ourselves in to a not-listening moment.

We don't build a world that can listen, we build a world that is spiraling towards pinchas and pinchas and pinchas. So in that interstice, in that space between, we have to begin to build a world where the daughters of Slovakia's claim become the most common way that we make change possible. And that brings us here to our wonderful United States of America and its birthday, this Shabbos.

It's impossible on this Shabbos to not recognize this sphere and the claim as it has been navigated in our own remarkable projects. There have been moments certainly, and we all know them in our history, as Americans, where decisive action was required, where pinchas rose and leaders did what needed to be done even though it broke many vavs and left brokenness in many places. The founding act of America was an act of kinah.

The founding act was a fierce, protective group who were fiercely jealous for something. And like all kinah, we've had two and a half centuries navigating various moments of pinchas and the daughters of Slovakia. So much of the freedoms that so many of us here this evening and over this weekend will celebrate were only made possible because they were daughters of Slovakia who had the courage not to be silent and to speak up and to move the needle forward in a country that could hear it and pivot not always as quickly as many of us would like, but still.

And at this moment still, as we celebrate moments of great leadership in a world that desperately needs an America that is leading and so often isn't. We can hear the daughters of Slovakia outside of this room and outside of this building. We can hear them saying, Lama Yigara Hashem Avinu.

There are more claims and more erasures and more people needing to be seen and more people needing to be honored. There are immigrants and trans folk, black people and brown people and Jews who stand together with the daughters of Slavs saying, a more perfect union. Let's go, hurry up.

Let's heal that broken love. The Torah is so mature. The Torah is so bold.

The Torah is so honest. It refuses to let go of the covenants of peace that were compromised but were necessary even as we honor the daughters of Sofhad in our midst. And so should we.

So should we be able to hold both of these truths as we honor America this weekend. We should be able to hold its brokenness with its possibilities, its light and its lightness. And its shadow, the work already done and the work yet to be done.

And we ourselves too. Jews who enter the Shabbat with great questions about our homeland and its place in the broader world. We Jews who recognize that over the course of the last couple of years, the broken love of peace has been a very apt metaphor for what many of us have been saying, has been happening.

Acting necessarily but painfully and tragically. And we can still hear now, even there in our homeland, the daughters of Sofhad calling on us to a better Israel, to a greater homeland, to a greater place. It is upon all of us to hold those two things true.

It is upon all of us to honor both of these moments in this week's Torah reading. To refuse simplified and airbrushed Torah that allied over broken vavs, that lift up only one face of what is necessary to bring us to where we need to go. It takes great courage to hold that broken vav.

And like I've said in the shul over the last 20 years, vav is all you need, that's true. And the only way forward is through vav. It's in that space between the top of the vav and the bottom of the vav, where we have to live in that space.

May God bless us on this weekend with the clarity and the ability to discern between what belongs in the camp of Finchas and what belongs in the camp of Sofhad. And his broken vav. And what belongs in the claims of the daughters of Sofhad.

As we ourselves make our way towards a more perfect shalom and a more perfect union. Please rise.