



## **SERMON EREV PINCHAS: A ZEALOT CANNOT BE THE LEADER**

Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Friday 15 July 2022  
Nottingham Liberal Synagogue

- 1 For Phinehas, everything had to be just so. His morality not only governed the way he behaved, it also governed the way in which other people behaved, or, failing that, his spear would govern them. When an Israelite was enjoying a personal moment with a Moabite woman,<sup>1</sup> Phinehas was so outraged that he perpetrated an astonishingly nasty, quasi-sexual attack on the two of them.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 The image of Phinehas sticking his spear – as my colleague Student Rabbi Avigayil Halpern has observed, a clear phallic symbol<sup>3</sup> – into a woman who was not doing anybody any harm, propelled by the burning force of his totalistic morality, has been in my mind rather a lot in recent weeks. Specifically, since the United States Supreme Court decided to overturn *Roe v Wade*<sup>4</sup> and deny American women the right to decide what to do with their own bodies.



- 3 A placard held by an un-named woman at a pro-choice rally in Austin, Texas last year captures the sense of both stories perfectly: “Why do old white men get to decide?”<sup>5</sup> The running theme is people who are entirely unaffected by others’ decisions, using coercive and violent means to deprive those others of decision-making power for no reason other than a sense of sanctimonious superiority.
  
- 4 The story of Phinehas’s zealotry appears immediately before the start of this Shabbat’s parashah, which bears his name. Towards the other end of the parashah we read something which appears entirely different in nature: Moses asking God about succession plans, about who would be the Israelites’ next leader.<sup>6</sup>
  
- 5 This mini-story, which culminates in the appointment of Joshua,<sup>7</sup> seems faintly out-of-place. It doesn’t obviously connect to anything that comes before or after it. The reader is left unclear as to why Moses suddenly started wondering about who would lead the people after his death.



- 6 But the Chassidic leader Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotzk connects it to the episode of Phinehas and his spear: specifically, he argues, Moses suddenly realised that Phinehas was the natural heir to the throne, but after he showed his true, extremist nature, that couldn't possibly be allowed to happen. "A zealot cannot be the leader of Israel!" he imagines Moses exclaiming.<sup>8</sup>
- 7 Zealots are, currently, exercising significant control over the present and future of the United States. They are forcing their own, steadfast beliefs on the entire population, and skewing and perverting the law in order to do so.
- 8 Zealotry is populism. Zealots flex their muscles because they know that un-muscled cowards will applaud them while those without a voice suffer.
- 9 One line from Justice Sotomayor's dissent in last month's judgment stands out for its wisdom, albeit wisdom cloaked in sadness and resignation. "We believe," she wrote, "in a constitution that puts



some issues off limits to majority rule. Even in the face of public opposition, we uphold the right of individuals – yes, including women – to make their own choices and chart their own futures. Or at least, we did once.”<sup>9</sup>

10 It is easy for zealots to paint this sentiment as being undemocratic: after all, it means that, sometimes, the majority will not get their way. But if bare numerical, 50%+1 democracy leads to vulnerable people having fewer rights than they deserve – “fewer rights than their mothers and grandmothers had”,<sup>10</sup> as Justice Sotomayor poignantly reminds us – then what is the good of it?

11 No matter what voters in the Bible Belt believe, no matter what the Supreme Court says, no matter what the 39 men who signed off the American constitution in 1787 wrote, there are some eternal truths.

12 Each of us has a Divine spark.



- 13 That spark entitles, enables and empowers us to take our own decisions.
- 14 That spark cannot be extinguished by any majority, no matter how powerful, zealous or masculine.
- 15 A 3rd-century midrash<sup>11</sup> commented on this Shabbat's parashah as follows: "The mercy of human beings is not like the mercy of the Eternal One. Human beings value men above women. But the One who spoke and thereby created the world, values all: men and women alike."
- 16 We pray that God's mercy for those whose lives have been blighted or endangered by last month's obnoxious ruling, will give them strength. We pray that it will inspire our sisters and brothers in America to show love, support and understanding to women in need, and that it will strengthen the hand of those who seek to restore justice to America. Kein y'hi ratzon: may this be God's will.



<sup>1</sup> Numbers 25:6

<sup>2</sup> Numbers 25:7-8, read alongside b.Sanhedrin 82b

<sup>3</sup> Avigayil Halpern. "Balak: hollow centre and outermost extremity", *Approaching* (23 June 2021): <<https://avigayil.substack.com/p/balak-hollow-center-and-outermost>>

<sup>4</sup> *Dobbs v Jackson Women's Health Organisation*: 24 June 2022, slip opinion 19-1392

<sup>5</sup> Photographed by Montinique Monroe and featured by Jodi Rudoren, Laura E Adkins and Nora Berman in "We don't live in the abstract': three Jewish women on the fall of *Roe v Wade*", *The Forward* (24 June 2022): <<https://forward.com/opinion/507589/jewish-women-on-the-fall-of-roe-v-wade/>>

<sup>6</sup> Numbers 27:15-17

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 27:18ff

<sup>8</sup> Amud ha-Emet, p 42.

<sup>9</sup> *Dobbs* (supra), p 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid: p 55.

<sup>11</sup> Sifrei B'midbar 133