

How to be an Authentic Zealot!

by Ariel Bar Tzadok

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Religious zealotry is considered by many religious people to be a good and noble expression of their faith. Modern day zealots will point to Biblical and other examples from the past to justify their taking radical, and often violent action, in the present, to promote their religious agendas.

While many of the faithful are persuaded by these religious arguments, I believe that it is imperative for the rest of us, the faithful or otherwise, to ask the necessary question, **does God really want us, and need us humans to act with violent hostility towards our fellow human beings?** Does God really want us human beings to zealously attack and harm others simply because they do not embrace our agenda, or because their have agendas of their own?

From my religious background, I have been led to believe that God is all powerful. If so, then why would God need human beings to act for Him, when He is very capable of acting for Himself?

God certainly did not need any human involvement with the Flood, when He wanted to punish humanity. Why should we believe that God is now any less powerful than He once was? Is not this train of thought considered blasphemous by the religious faithful?

Is not blasphemy punishable by religious zealots? But how can this be? **If religious zealots do the work that they say God should be doing, then are not they themselves guilty of the very blasphemy that they see, condemn and punish in others?**

If it is God that punishes us, who gave the right to the zealots to usurp the power and authority of God? Can any of our Biblical or later examples really justify the faithful today acting with blasphemous disregard?

When one looks closely at Biblical and other examples of ancient zealotry, one finds that each of these examples were unique to their times and places, and none were meant too serve as archetypes, or role models for the future.

With regards to the Biblical example of Pinhas, recorded in Numbers 25, Pinhas carried out a political assassination based upon a high ranking official's sexual exploits. What does this mean to us today? Should we seek out politicians whose sexual practices we disapprove of, and subject them to vigilante assassination? Is this what Pinhas comes to teach us?

In the Book of First Kings 18, we have the example of Elijah the Prophet challenging the priests of a competing religion to a test of faith. Each was to build an altar to offer sacrifice, and the altar that received supernatural fire from Heaven to ignite the sacrifice would prove which the true God favored.

Should we today set up tests of faith between the world's religions, and await a supernatural response from Heaven? What if such a response was never forthcoming? What would that say about all our religions?

What if fire came down from Heaven on the other altar? There are midrashic legends that state that in the End-of-Days such a test will be performed, and that such a result will occur. Now, if this were to occur, it would certainly test and confuse many!

I do not believe that we can apply ancient lessons to modern times unless they are indeed universal and archetypal in nature. **Lessons of ancient religious zealotry can be interpreted today in a positive way to suggest to us lessons of faith in times of adversity, and courage in times of fear.** But we should never look to the violence of an ancient time, and think that violence is the archetype and role model for all times. That is a lesson not taught by the Bible, or any later Torah source.

Desperate times create desperate people. Yet, the definition of desperation is certainly subject to some wild interpretations. Using desperation as a justification, many religious so-called zealots commit all types of crimes, and justify this to themselves saying that they are acting as God's agents and thus doing God's Work. Yet, forgive me for asking, but when did God speak to them and instruct them to act on Heaven's behalf?

When did the desperate zealots become prophets? The answer is that they are not prophets. They did not hear God talk to them, and God did not talk to them, or tell them to do anything, not now, and not ever, period! **These dangerous, desperate souls are twisting God's Word to justify their own evils,** to rationalize in their own minds, the performance of crimes against any others not of their own camp.

The Biblical Pinhas and Elijah were authentic prophetic zealots of God. They either acted by God's direct prophetic command (Elijah), or were justified by God through direct prophecy (Pinhas). We have no such direct Divine communication today, and anyone who claims such a connection these days is rightfully viewed with suspicion of suffering from mental illness. We have no shortage today of those who claim to be prophets, messiahs and zealots. In my opinion, all such claims should be understood as indicative of a serious, and possibly dangerous, disconnection from the realities of this world.

Years ago, when learning in Jerusalem, my Rabbi warned me to watch others for religious imbalance. It can be identified as those who become so heavenly minded, that they become no earthly good. Religious cultism, especially, gives rise to this dangerous, delusional outlook. **People become so engrossed in their little bubble of a world that they cannot tolerate anyone outside of it.** This is how extremism is

born, with all its accompanying evils, like elitism, racism and chauvinism. This dangerous mentality quickly degenerates into thoughts, or outright expressions, of beliefs such as, **“no one is good enough, all are evil, and God wants “me” to teach them all a lesson.”** Beware! Zealots in the name of God have a terrible reputation for illogical thinking and violent behavior.

Especially in mystical studies (Kabbalah) this danger dominates. There are those who have the psychological disposition to become imbalanced. And why? Because they learn a lot of mystical metaphors and symbolisms that are meant to poetically describe realities of the inner mind of man, and confuse these symbols and metaphors to have some sense of literalness to them. They then seek to rectify the worlds by acting in ways that, in their deluded minds, make sense within the context of their misinterpreting the poetic for the literal.

Not for naught, for thousands of years, have Torah Sages warned us that there are those who, when exposed to mysticism, can go crazy. These individuals do not become raving lunatics in the street, (at least not most of them), but they do become convinced of some out-of-proportion sense of self-aggrandizement, and thus feel that they must become involved in the redemption process, by acting out in some specific, (often criminal) manner. We see this mentality today in other religions, as motivations in suicide attacks, how long will it take before this disease of the mind begins affecting more and more individuals?

Let us again return to our Biblical examples of Pinhas and Elijah to understand even their righteous actions in the greater light of the rest of the Biblical narratives. First, Pinhas, zealous for God as he was, nevertheless, committed an act of murder, worse it was a political assassination. Pinhas is lucky that his victim did not have a chance to fight back, because if Pinhas was killed, it would have been an act of self defense. Pinhas would have been the guilty party. Pinhas was indeed legally guilty, nevertheless. He committed a crime, and if God did not directly intervene to override the Divinely ordained system, the legal Torah justice system of the day would have tried Pinhas for murder, found him guilty and then execute him. In other words, the Bible makes very clear that Pinhas is not a role model, but rather a unique exception to the rule.

Elijah also fought for God. He called down fire from Heaven. He proved to the people of Israel that YHWH was indeed their God, and that to Him alone is the power. So, what rewards did this great man of God receive? His actions, however blessed by God, still were illegal in Israel at the time. Elijah had to flee the country, fearing for his life. He was so despondent and depressed that he actually prayed for God to kill him. Elijah's reward for his zealotry was suicidal depression. Again, his act also stands out as a unique example of righteousness, one which we, however, cannot repeat!

While Pinhas and Elijah are great examples of Biblical zealotry, their literal examples cannot serve as role models for the generations. Indeed, whenever in the past, anyone has claimed to be following in their footsteps, they have brought nothing but disaster upon themselves, anyone following them, and anyone else who got in their way. While

being zealous for one's beliefs can be a good thing, it also must be a grounded and practical thing. As zealous as one wishes to be about one's beliefs, one is, nevertheless, still required to respect the lives, choices, decisions, and differences of others.

We do not have to like everybody else. We have no moral obligation to interact with, or engage in any way, those whom we find objectionable. However, if we chose to make such divisions, then we must also be willing to accept the consequences of our own actions.

Everyone has the right to live life as each sees fit, as long as their choices do not interfere in the lives, or choices, of others. ***If two people, or groups, cannot get along under any circumstances, then better peace from afar, then war up close.*** In other words, keep your distances! However, never should our personal prejudices or values, regardless of what they may be, be used to justify religiously based hatred. ***Let one be zealous in improving one's self, instead of worrying about improving others.*** Let a role model arise who leads by exemplary moral example, and not by sanctimonious words alone.

In the future, Elijah is to return to Earth to prepare the way for the Mashiah. Yet his mission is not one of war, or one of zeal, but rather one of peace. Elijah is to turn the hearts of the fathers to their sons, and the hearts of the sons to their fathers. Elijah is the End-Times peacemaker, not the harbinger of doom!

I pray that modern day zealousness be properly devoted to individual self improvement, instead of towards divisions and violence in God's Name. Remember, God does not need us to act as judges for Him. No one made us judges, and the world is not our courtroom.

God is in charge, not us! Why don't we let God do His Divine work, while we mortals here on Earth perform our human work.

Maybe the best way to serve God, like Pinhas and Elijah, is not to kill others, but rather to kill out bad influences within ourselves. Those doing this are the true spiritual children of Pinhas and Elijah. You will find this sentiment expressed by many of our Sages.

Peacemakers are be blessed because making peace is what God does. ***“Oseh Shalom Bim'ro'mav Hu Ya'aseh Shalom Aleynu, May He who makes peace above, also make peace upon us.”***

When we act like God, God in turn will smile upon us. If one is to be a zealot, then let one focus one's zealousness on this!