



Weaving Peace

| Waskow, Arthur

Rabbi Waskow interprets the meaning of the Pinhas story in Numbers 25 and the weaving of the Jewish tzitzit in its relation to peace-making.

Weaving Peace

By Arthur Waskow

Two peoples meet. There's danger in their meeting, perhaps also a possible profit, even delight. But the leadership of at least one of the peoples is frightened and forbids all contact.

It happens anyway. Some of it is literal, physical contact: sexual relationships. As a result, reality itself may bring on a plague of death. For example: When the age-old barriers of ocean were torn aside after 1492, two cultures came together that had never met and measles decimated the Native Americans, while syphilis struck the Europeans.

Was this because their intimate connection was in itself a "sin" or because the hurry to make new connection outran the care necessary to make the connection holy? When the sea splits or ghetto walls fall, how do we deal with the newly fuzzy boundaries between two peoples?

Between one single person and another, we have a symbol for how to honor fuzzy boundaries. As Jews, we tie *tzitzit*, fringes, on the corners of our clothing, the edges of our individual identities. These fringes are mixtures of "my" cloth and the universe's air. Not good fences, but good fringes make good neighbors. Nor do I let these fringes simply unfold unplanned from the cutting of the fabric, helter-skelter. I make a careful pattern of this zone of fuzziness: I tie a certain number of knots with a certain number of spiral twists. The *tzitzit* are threads of connection, tied with care and consciousness. Likewise, when whole peoples find blurred boundaries where the walls and fences used to be impermeable, we must find the way to tie sacred fringes.

The Torah's story of Pinhas poses our archetypal test in this regard. The Israelites make friends with the people of Moab, joining with them sexually and celebrating their gods. God — Reality Itself, YHWH who is the zealous breath of life — sends a plague upon them.

Pinhas, a priest and one of Aaron's grandsons, sees an Israelite and a Midianite having sex. In rage, he flings his lance at them, killing them both. The plague ends. And the Torah continues (Num. 25:10-13): "YHWH spoke to Moses, saying: "Pinhas has turned back my hot wrath from upon the Children of Israel by expressing zealously My zeal amidst them. And so I did not finish off the Children of Israel in My zealotry. Therefore say: Here! I give him my covenant of peace; it shall be for him and his seed after him a covenant of priesthood forever, because of his zealotry for his God, through which he atoned for the Israelites.""

Most readers take this to mean that God was pleased with Pinhas. But the Hebrew is fluid; "zealotry" can be "jealousy," and you can hear God's words this way: "In a blind rage, consumed with jealousy, I began killing My people with the plague. Then Pinhas imitated Me — he turned his hand to killing. His act opened my eyes, shocked me into shame at what I was doing. That is why I stopped the plague; and why I made with Pinhas my covenant of peace." In this

reading, God grows, does *tshuvah*. The God who begins by bringing a plague ends by making a covenant of peace: No more killing.

What does it mean for us today? Two peoples long separated, the Jews and Palestinians, have suddenly found the boundaries between them permeable. Plagues of possessiveness, violence, hatred, have surfaced in them both. Each has already given birth to more than one Pinhas: zealous murderers, home-demolishers, wielders of asphalt to bury farmland and divide communities. And some have praised these Pinhas followers, seeing in their zealotry God's will. We need, instead, to learn from the horror that God felt when God saw Pinhas imitating God, to create a new covenant of peace.

For Jews, that means not only undertaking a public, clear, explicit and vigorous effort to reeducate all Jews to see that God learned from Pinhas to repudiate such acts of zealotry. It also means that we must shape our contacts with other peoples in as much mindfulness as the weaver shapes the intricate boundaries of *tzitzit*.

When Palestinians and Israelis join with each other to mourn those who have died at each other's hands, as bereaved families from both sides recently did in Jerusalem, that act weaves a sacred fringe between us. When Israelis and Palestinians work together to rebuild the homes destroyed by order of the Israeli government, that weaves a sacred fringe between us. When Jews and Arabs come together, as they did in a number of American synagogues and communities this past Pesah, to celebrate a Seder built around the conflicts and reconciliation of Abraham's two families — Sarah and Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac — it does the same. And so it would if this coming Rosh Hashanah, at the sixth anniversary of the White House handshake, synagogues were to invite Palestinians to speak as part of the service — inviting Hagar and Ishmael to join in reweaving the threads of family connection that were cut when they were sent out into the wilderness, as the Rosh Hashanah reading itself recalls.

These are the common ceremonies, the common tasks, we can weave onto the corners of our peoplehoods, so as to create a covenant of peace.

Rabbi Arthur Waskow is director of The Shalom Center (<http://www.shalomctr.org>) in Accord, New York, and author of *Godwrestling — Round 2*. Jewish Lights of Woodstock, VT, 1997. It addresses many of the issues touched upon in this article from a Torah-renewal standpoint.

© Copyright 1999 Arthur Waskow. With kind permission of the author.