



## What Do You Have to Do to Get a *Parsha* Named After You?

Rabbi Jim Rogozen

Headmaster

[Rogozen@grossschechter.org](mailto:Rogozen@grossschechter.org)

While we encouraged people to “sponsor” a *parasha* when we wrote our school’s new *Sefer Torah*, did you ever wonder how it was that certain *parashiyot* were originally named? There are six portions named after people: three after non-Jews (Noach, Yitro, and Balak) and three named for Jews (Chaye Sarah, Korach and Pinchas.)

While in some cases the person named plays a key role in that week’s portion, in other weeks the person is actually mentioned *after* some great event in their life. For instance, the *parsha* named for Sarah describes her death in the first verse!

Another idea might be that the people for whom portions are named are all great people, but Balak and Korach certainly weren’t “good guys” as described in their *parashiyot*.

The truth is the *parashiyot* were given names based on a word or two in the first verse of each Torah portion. This happens throughout the Torah; in many cases the title does not really describe the content.

Nevertheless, there is quite an attempt in Rabbinic literature to make heroes out of those who appear to be “bad” including Balak, Korach and, in this week’s *parasha*, Pinchas.

Pinchas’s fame was actually established in *last week’s parasha* when, upon seeing an Israelite man and a Moabite woman engaged in immoral behavior, Pinchas ran them through with a spear. The larger context was that the Israelites were camped at Shittim and began to be lured into idolatry by the Moabites, causing a plague to break out among the Israelites. God commanded Moses (specifically) to round up the ringleaders and impale them, as a warning to the others. Pinchas, not waiting for anyone else to act, steps in and does his deed, with the result being that God’s anger (expressed as a plague) ended.

Was Pinchas a hero? Was he the kind of person whose quick assessment of the situation helped him “see” what he had to do, even if others could not? Or was he an extremist, not looking at the big picture, but acting rashly? How do we judge this? I can think of two situations in which Jewish leaders in ancient times made decisions under pressure which we are still trying to understand.

When Abraham was commanded to banish his son Ishmael he hesitated, even though it seemed that the boy was having a bad influence on Isaac, his favored son. Yet, when God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the “chosen” one, Abraham hurried to fulfill God’s word. In one case he didn’t want to do something, even though it would help guard his future lineage, but in the

second case he was more than willing to do something, actually kill his son, even though that action would certainly endanger his lineage.

In another setting, Elazar ben Yair, the leader at Masada, convinced the people gathered on that mountain top that suicide was better than being taken captive by the Romans. While this sounds honorable, the context was that the group who had fled the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. believed they were the last Jews left on earth. How would mass suicide help the Jewish People in the long run?

Leaders need to make tough decisions. One can't always know in the heat of the moment if a decision will prove to be correct. Over time Pinchas's reputation was rehabilitated by Jewish Tradition, but if we leave it there, we may tend to hold up his actions as an example for others to follow.

So here's one source, from the Talmud (Sanhedrin 82a), that shows a discomfort with Pinchas's actions. Rabbah b. Bar Hana said in R. Johanan's name that if Pinchas had asked a Rabbinical court if he had permission to kill the two people, the court would have told him not to. In another source, centuries later, Rabbi Moses of Coucy points out that Pinchas's name is attached to the *next* parsha. He sees this as an indication that we should not rush to undertake extreme actions.

Even though the names of *Torah* portions have been in place for generations, the debate goes on about Pinchas, as well as Balak and Korach. Our tradition is kept alive by such debates. In the meantime, I recommend finding other ways to become famous.

Shabbat Shalom!

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION:

How do you know when you are doing the "right" thing? The "wrong" thing?

Was Pinchas correct in his actions? What else could he have done?

Does the Torah ever allow a person to kill another human being? If so, when?