

Dear Chavraya,

This week's Torah portion, *Parashat Pinchas*, begins in a dark place. Difficult to navigate, the beginning of this *parasha* continues an incident from the end of the preceding portion, forming one of those places in Torah that Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel so instructively calls a "harsh passage." Very simply, this portion is named for a violent zealot, Pinchas. At a difficult time, when the Midianites are seeking to lure Israel away from God and their holy mission, Zimri, an Israelite prince, flaunts his relationship with a Midianite woman, Cozbi. Pinchas takes it upon himself to kill the two of them.

Most disturbingly, God appears to reward Pinchas for his zealotry, saying, *Behold, I give to him My covenant of Peace*. Some strands of the tradition and some of our people today would celebrate Pinchas' deed and see God's words as commendation. There is another strand, however, that is rooted in the letters of Torah themselves, a condemnation woven into every Torah scroll at the hand of every scribe who lifts quill to parchment. The traditional manner of writing the word *shalom* in God's promise to Pinchas is an anomaly. The letter *vav* is written everywhere else in Torah in a manner straight and true. Here, it is bisected by a small line. It is a broken letter.

In the Talmud, of God's promise to give to Pinchas a covenant of peace, Rav Yehudah says in the name of Shmuel, *when he is whole and not when he is lacking*. In the broken letter is a promise deferred, a rebuke and a challenge to Pinchas to indeed become whole, to break the spear and the way of violence from his heart. In reading the Torah on this Shabbos, the startling anomaly of the broken *vav* is a call to each of us to make whole the Pinchas within ourselves. So may we bring God's covenant of peace to the world.

Shabbat shalom,  
Rabbi Victor