



The Pardes Parsha Discussion by Rabbi Alex Israel

Pinchas: Two Elements

A few years back, my teenage daughter introduced me to the poem *Two Elements* by the Israeli poet Zelda:

TWO ELEMENTSⁱ

The flame says to the cypress:
“When I see how calm,
how full of pride you are,
something inside me goes wild –
How can one live this awesome life
without a touch of madness,
of spirit,
of imagination,
of freedom,
with only a grim, ancient pride?
If I could, I would burn down
the establishment
that we call the seasons,
along with your cursed dependence
on earth and air and sun,
on rain and dew.”

The cypress does not answer.
He knows there is madness in him,
and freedom,
and imagination,
and spirit.
But the flame will not understand,
the flame will not believe.

The poem talks of the tension and contradiction between the flame – hot, passionate, free, energetic, jumping and gyrating, wild and dangerous – and the cypress tree, the tall evergreen conifer – controlled, perfect in form and shape, quiet, elegant, old, consistent, never changing.



It is the perfect poem to pit the ideological purism of youth against the steadiness of middle age. For my daughter, it may have represented the tension between the “secular,” open world outside Judaism on the one hand and a halakhic lifestyle, a life regulated by ancient laws on the other. Possibly, it was the tension between a passionate Hassidic, spiritual, expressive Judaism that she sees around her, in contradistinction to a more intellectual, quiet, conformist, Judaism that I practice. Or as I said above, the fire is the passion of youth, and the tree is the stability, staidness and caution of middle age.

But it raises a great set of questions.

Please discuss:

- Do we prefer the “zeal” of the flame, or the quiet “madness” of the cypress?
- According to the poem, why does the cypress drive the flame crazy?
- What are the **advantages** of outward passion, idealistic outrage, passionate protest? What are the **dangers**? Is zealous action responsible? Controlled? Where can it go wrong?
- And what are the advantages of quiet principled living? And does that temperament, as the poem suggests, hide madness, freedom, imagination and spirit; or possibly apathy and lethargy?

Pinchas is the quintessential biblical zealot.

Pinchas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was zealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my zeal. Therefore say, ‘Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was zealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.’ (Bamidbar 25:11-13)

- Pinchas “made atonement for the people” here, but his action was a violent one. Is this a sustainable course of behaviour for a Jewish leader?
- And, when it comes to select a national leader, Joshua is chosen rather than Pinchas. Does zeal lend itself to long-term national leadership or is it a mere stimulant, a catalyst to change, but after every fire, we need a cypress tree?

And which are you? The flame, or the cypress?

Shabbat Shalom!

ⁱ © Translation: 2004, Marcia Lee Falk. From: The Spectacular Difference. Publisher: Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, 2004, 0-87820-222-6