

Cantor sings:

“Boy, the way Glenn Miller played!

Songs that made the Hit Parade.

Guys like us, we had it made.

Those were the days!

And you knew where you were then.

Girls were girls and men were men.

Mister, we could use a man like Herbert Hoover again.

Didn't need no welfare state.

Everybody pulled his weight.

Gee, our old LaSalle ran great.

Those were the days!”

Of course, that was the familiar theme song from the 1970s sitcoms - "All in the Family", sung at the piano by characters Archie and Edith Bunker. How many of you watched All in the Family back in the 1970s? I remember gathering around the television set with my parents and siblings every week to watch

this very popular show. Now you may wonder, why is the cantor beginning his sermon with the theme from "All in the Family"? Funny you should ask, you see, one of the reasons for the show's immense popularity was its willingness to deal head on with many social and moral issues including racism, anti-Semitism, homosexuality, women's liberation, rape, religion, miscarriage, abortion, breast cancer and others. It's television Torah at its finest. Therefore, while I was reading this week's Torah portion, Pinchas, it reminded me of a powerful episode from the show that I still have a vivid memory of after all of these years. The Torah portion tells a disturbing story about the leader, Pinchas who took the law into his own hands and resorted to violence to punish immorality. The TV show tells the story of a Jewish vigilante group and their response to the hate crimes of a neo-Nazi organization. It's one of the most intense episodes in the series.

The episode begins when Archie goes out onto the front porch to retrieve the morning paper and shockingly finds that a Swastika has been painted on his front door. It was a warning from a neo-Nazi group that was meant for a Jewish public figure in the town. As fear overcomes the family and they debate what to do a young man comes to the door claiming to be a member of a Jewish group called the HDA - The Hebrew Defense Association. This strong arm group believe in an eye for an eye and offered the Bunkers "protection" from the violent Neo Nazi group. The young Jewish man, Paul Benjamin, wants the Bunkers to buy into a plot to fight back against the Nazi group. Archie is taken with the young charismatic leader but son in law Mike argues fruitlessly that violence will only bring about more violence. When they learn

that the Nazi group realized they had targeted the wrong house, Paul bids the Bunkers "Shalom!" and leaves to continue his mission

Archie, Edith, Mike and Gloria breathe a sigh of relief and try to relax. All of a sudden, they hear a loud blast outside the house ... and rush to the door to see what happened. The episode ends with Archie saying in a tense voice "it's Paul, they blew him up in his car".

This story communicates a warning about zealousness and its possible consequences. The vigilante perceives that the authorities are not reliably punishing wrong doers, and they take the law into their own hands. The ending was intended to disturb us and make us question the tactics of groups like the JDL at that time which was the inspiration for the HDA, the Hebrew Defense Association in the episode.

Our Torah portion this week has its own version of the television character Paul Benjamin from the HDA. The Israelite leader Pinchas witnesses the moral degradation of the people Israel and is terribly troubled by it. According to the narrative in this parsha the Israelites have been on a downward spiral of immoral behavior. The text says they "profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women and the people partook of the sacrifices and worshiped their god". God became enraged and was set on

severely punishing the people. A plague killed thousands of Israelites. When an Israelite chieftain brazenly engages in public lewdness with a Midianite women, Pinchas, a descendant of Aaron the priest, witnessed Moses passivity and had seen enough. Pinchas “left the assembly and, taking a spear in his hand, he followed the Israelite [leader] into the chamber and stabbed the Israelite and the woman” The Torah praises Pinchas action which stops the plague that had broken out among the people (25:6-9).

The Torah clearly sees Pinchas as a hero whose brave initiative stopped a plague and saved many Israelite lives, but rabbinic tradition is uneasy with this zealot, even though God praises and rewards him. Some commentators acknowledge his heroism while simultaneously stating that his zealotry disqualifies him from succeeding Moses as the leader of the people. Others, however, doubt whether this kind of passion in the name of God can ever be harnessed or contained properly. They're worried that passion in the service of God could easily become passion in the service of oneself. In our All in the Family episode violence begets violence and proves Mike and Gloria's point that vigilantism is not the answer. The rabbis are concerned as well with the dangers of unchecked, blind passion even for a Godly cause. Unfortunately, today we continue to see zealous ideologues disrupting civil society around the world. Social media can also be a modern engine to spread their ideology. We need to combat this in our world today by being champions of civil discourse. So often our discourse, especially in the anonymous cloak of the Internet and social media becomes disrespectful and worse.

Zealots are dangerous. It's great to believe in a cause and to be passionate about it. But when people become blinded by rigid ideology, they lose perspective and have no room for any differing viewpoints.

There's a wonderful message for us which is applicable in our daily lives hidden in this Torah portion. God says that because Pinchas acted in zeal for God's sake "I grant him a covenant of peace". This is a hint for us about an underlying message that the zealot more than anything is in need of peace. Pinchas' zealous act is surely disruptive of his own sense of well-being. God blessed him with the attribute of peace, so he shouldn't be quick-tempered or angry. Since it is in the nature of Pinchas' action—killing human beings with his own hands—to leave an intense emotional unrest in the soul... the blessing he received was to be in a state of peace and tranquility. So, the blessing Pinchas receives is the one he most needs: A zealot needs help in discovering calm. Let's think about how we act in the face of injustice or fear. What do we teach our children about responding to being wronged? When someone hits you do you just hit back like the characters we have looked at today? I'd rather remember that old saying "two wrongs don't make a right". This covenant of peace promised to Pinchas is a key for all of us.

In Jewish tradition, peace has always been viewed as the greatest blessing. That's why every Amida ends with a prayer for

peace. May we not be reactive in fear or anger. May we have peace in our homes, in our community and in our world. Ose Shalom Bimromav...