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Shiur in the Spotlight

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Between Justice and Zealotry, Batman and Phineas

Rabbi Yehuda Sarna | Shiur in the Spotlight | Pinchas 2017

This week, we're sharing a synopsis of a shiur taught to the Fellows by Rabbi Yehuda Sarna, a member of the 2017 Bronfman Fellowship educational team.

The five-session shiur, "Justice: Five Ways of Thinking About What Makes Something Right," explores five stations in Jewish legal, moral and philosophical development to more deeply understand some fundamental notions of justice. Fellows will seek both to problematize simplistic understandings, and apply more nuanced approaches to contemporary moral and political issues.

***Rabbi Yehuda Sarna** serves as the Executive Director of the Edgar M. Bronfman Center for Jewish Student Life at NYU and as the University Chaplain at New York University. Originally from Montreal, Canada, he studied at Yeshiva University and received his ordination from RIETS. Yehuda co-founded the Of Many Institute for Multifaith Leadership at NYU, where he is a Senior Fellow, and teaches Jewish Law and Multifaith Leadership in the Wagner School for Public Service.*

[Phineas](#) (also known as Pinchas) is, in some ways, a [biblical version of Batman](#), taking the law into his own hands and staving off God's wrath through an extra-judicial killing. Was he right?

If you know any of the Bronfman Fellows this summer, please don't let on that it is with this hypothetical that I plan to close my shiur, "Justice: Five Ways of Thinking

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about What Makes Something Right". We've been studying different moral and legal frameworks which Jews have employed over our history to decide the thorniest of questions. The most pointed comparative question we've asked is about the source of authority. Moral authority can rest in [text](#) or [tradition](#), a [covenant](#) or a [vote](#), or maybe, more simply, a matter of [negotiation](#) between aggrieved and aggressor without invoking higher principles. I'll ask the Fellows to "judge" various actors in the Phineas narrative from each of these five perspectives.

Without digging too deeply here into the details of the case, I anticipate the Fellows addressing some of the most profound questions of justice. Who is entitled to judge and by what standard? When is a punishment disproportionate? Is collective punishment unjust? Is it fair to make an example out of one person in order to stop the actions of many? Does Phineas, acting beyond Moses' word, eclipse him in stature?

But the most important question I want the Fellows to engage is this one: How do you weigh different moral frameworks against each other? I've been inspired recently by a colleague of mine at NYU named [Jonathan Haidt](#). Haidt's recent research focuses on the different "moral palates" of political liberals and conservatives. He claims that [righteousness](#), the belief that I am right and you are wrong, is a natural human trait, explaining how good people become divided by religion and politics. Although he personally is a political liberal, he believes that societies are better off when liberals and conservatives [hear each other](#).

Our Fellows are growing up in an age of increasing moral complexity. The dilemmas they face are not only local in character, but global as well. They encounter problems at an accelerating pace. Many situations increasingly emerge from new technologies scantily understood by the broader public. Typically, when people are asked to decide on more complicated questions more rapidly, they either freeze, retreat, or simplify their moral framework. None of these are options for our Fellows.

Batman could operate in the shadows; our Fellows cannot. Phineas lived in an age of prophecy; our Fellows will not. Our future depends on their ability to enlarge

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their moral palates, yet to act decisively in confronting increasing complexity. They are up to the challenge.

Continue the conversation. Send Rabbi Sarna your thoughts:
rabbi.sarna@nyu.edu.

P.S.: We're always looking for more dvar torah writers. Interested? Contact stefanie@byfi.org. We look forward to hearing from you.



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