

The Extremist

By: Yanki Tauber

He's the person we love to hate. And hate to love.

The extremist is someone about whom we say things like, "I wish I had the courage to do that" (if the position being taken to the extreme is our own), and, "It just goes to show where that kind of thinking can lead you" (if it's not). We also say things like, "I'm one hundred percent against that kind of thing, but..." or "Someone has to do it, but..."

We say to ourselves, "If you truly believe in something, well, then you have to go all the way with it." But we also say, "There must be boundaries. Without boundaries, the greatest good becomes evil."

The extremist makes us feel uncomfortable, because he makes hypocrites of us all: if we all acted on what we believed in, we'd all be extremists. The extremist also puts our minds at ease: at least someone is doing it. He makes us question our most deeply-held convictions: "I think he's doing the right thing; so why are his actions abhorrent to me?" And: "I totally disagree with what he's doing, so why do I admire him so?"

The extremist scares us because he says: "There is me and there is my G-d. There is nothing else." "Nothing else?!" we cry. "Did not G-d create a world, too?" But we also have a deep need for the extremist. We need truth in our lives. And can anything be true unless someone, somewhere, has carried it to its ultimate conclusions?

Chassidic master Rabbi Mendel of Kotzk once asked: The latter part of the book of Numbers consists of five Torah readings: *Chukat*, *Balak*, *Pinchas*, *Mattot* and *Massei*. *Chukat* and *Balak* are sometimes read together. The same is the case with *Mattot* and *Massei*. But the Torah section of [Pinchas](#), which is smack in the middle of these readings, is always read alone. Why?

Replied the Kotzker: Pinchas was an extremist. An extremist always stands alone.

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15 July | 13 Tammuz

Pinchas

Shabbat Begins: 8:57 pm

Shabbat Ends: 10:12 pm