

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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WHAT'S YOUR TRUE MOTIVE?

Parshas Balak concludes with the story of Pinchas. When praising Pinchas for his deed, the Torah traces his lineage to Aharon: "Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohen..." Rashi explains that the *shevatim* attempted to shame Pinchas by remarking that the same person whose maternal grandfather, Yisro, had overfed calves for the purpose of idolatrous sacrifices, had gone on to murder Zimri, the leader of the tribe of Shimon. Hashem responded to this by having the *pasuk* emphasize that his paternal grandfather was Aharon.

What is the basis for Rashi's insight?

Pinchas's ancestry is already listed earlier in the story. This suggests that the repetition here was specifically intended to praise him. Since the praise relates to his pedigree, it follows that it was in response to criticism of a similar nature.

THE SHEVATIM'S REMARKS

There are a number of difficulties with Rashi's statement.

First of all, why does Rashi assume that *everyone* took part in demeaning him? Wouldn't it seem more reasonable to identify the detractors as belonging to Shevet Shimon, whose *nasi* he'd killed? After all, we're told that everyone wept as Zimri committed his sin; obviously, they held he had acted improperly. Additionally, the plague afflicting them had ceased immediately after Pinchas's response. It would appear more logical to say that most Jews sympathized with Pinchas, and only Zimri's tribesmen belittled his deed!

Moreover, did those who disparaged him agree that he acted justifiably or not? If they were unaware of the law that "zealots may avenge one who sins with an Aramite woman," or if they felt Pinchas was not truly a "zealot," then why insult him by way of Yisro? He did an outright act of murder! And if they acknowledged his right to act and had no substantive complaint, then who cares how his grandfather acted?!

Finally, had they wished to simply denigrate Yisro, they should have pointed directly to his idol worship. Referring to his cattle feeding practices seems like an insignificant detail compared to the fact that he personally was an idolatrous priest!

HEREDITARY ANALYSIS

There are certain people who react passionately whenever they witness something incorrect. They immediately begin shouting and fighting—with their hands, or at least verbally—ostensibly on the grounds of piety. However, it may be that this reaction is not truly virtuous. After all, there are greater *yirei shamayim* present, and they are not creating such a tumult. It's possible that he simply possesses hostile tendencies—of which he himself may not be consciously aware—which he'd been suppressing all along. Although he would never hurt someone for no reason, when a righteous cause finally comes along, it allows him to channel that aggression.

This can be applied to our case as well. The *shevatim* knew the *halachah* that allowed for Zimri's death, and they witnessed the miracles which aided Pinchas. It was clear that his actions were valid. However, why is it that all the other great *yirei shamayim* present, including Moshe, forgot this *halachah*, and only Pinchas remembered and executed it? This suggested that his actions had emanated not from piety, but from poor character.

However, they couldn't make Pinchas out to be an evil person without basis. This is where his grandfather came into the picture. Particularly, they focused not on his actual idolatry but on his animal farming record. Overfeeding calves is painful to them. It was particularly inhumane considering that his goal was not to benefit them, but to slaughter them! Fattening animals for slaughter is more cruel than slaughtering alone.

The *shevatim* therefore claimed that Yisro had passed this trait to his grandson. Yes, what he did was halachically correct, but he was at least partially motivated by hereditary cruelty.

DEFENDING MOSHE

This wasn't just a mean-spirited attack on Pinchas, but also a defense of Moshe. Why is it that Moshe happened to forget this *din* and Pinchas happened to remember it? (True, Rashi explains that Hashem caused Moshe to forget it so that Pinchas would have the opportunity to receive *kehunah*. But obviously, this wasn't something the rest of Bnei Yisrael could have known!) It must be, they concluded, that Moshe's forgetfulness was the result of his *ahavas yisrael*, while

It was compassion,
 not cruelty, which led
 Pinchas to take action.

Pinchas's memory reflected his negative character.

Moreover, they emphasized the identity of his victim, a *nasi*, whose role is to protect and look after his *shevet*. In fact, Zimri's very act was a misguided expression of kindness. As Rashi tells us, his *shevet* complained to him about being stricken by the plague, and he therefore sought to challenge Moshe and demonstrate that their behavior wasn't sinful and they were undeserving of death. The *shevatim* therefore argued that Pinchas, possessing a cruel nature, couldn't tolerate Zimri and his radical display of good-heartedness, and this is what led him to intervene.

This is the logic underlying Rashi's depiction of *all* of the *shevatim* making these arguments about Pinchas, not just the tribe of Shimon: *everyone* wanted to stand up for Moshe Rabbeinu!

In response to this, Hashem drew attention to his other grandfather, Aharon, who was the paragon of peace. Pinchas inherited this attitude, which included (not only making peace between Jews, but also) making peace between the Jewish people and Hashem. It was this compassionate motive which led Pinchas to take action, to appease Hashem's anger and thus end the plague.

WHOSE YESHUS IS IT?

We can learn a number of lessons from this. First of all, the *shevatim's* argument teaches us to be wary of our own vehemence.

When aroused to attack, we must thoroughly inspect ourselves: is our reaction purely fueled by Torah and Yiddishkeit, or is it partially the expression of a flawed character?

On the other hand, we sometimes suspect others of having ulterior motives, yet we can't objectively identify their motivations, which may be entirely valid. For example, we might feel that someone is being pious because of *gaavah*, out of a desire for respect. We may feel inclined to come to the defense of "Moshe," namely, the values of humility and *bittul*, and condemn this individual for appearing to operate out of personal ambition.

But firstly, you can't know what's in his heart, and he might be doing things *lishmah* after all. And secondly, even if you're correct, the Torah still asserts that one should act *shelo lishmah* in

anticipation of ultimately doing it *lishmah*. So why put him down for doing the right thing?

Now, while the other person is certainly following the Torah's directive, whether you are acting properly is awfully questionable. Perhaps it is not his actions that are motivated by *yeshus*, but your urge to criticize him! Maybe you aren't truly bothered by the possibility that he's influenced by *gaavah*. Instead, *you* are the one who has an ulterior motive: How can it be that he is doing something positive while I am not (due to laziness or other factors)? To preserve your *yeshus*, you maintain that he is acting out of *gaavah*!

Moreover, even if he is motivated by *gaavah*, he never actually claims to be championing for *bittul*. But if your reaction is based on *yeshus*, it turns out that you are supposedly defending *bittul*, while in truth operating out of *yeshus*!

ZIMRI'S MISTAKE

We must also avoid falling into Zimri's trap of attempting to diminish the severity of a sin to "protect" those who transgressed it. When there's a plague, which can only be stopped if Jews do *teshuvah*, defending their actions and thus preventing them from repenting is actually tremendously cruel! Never mind those who react by claiming that these actions are actually permitted!

True kindness means to patiently and kindly urge them to amend their ways. If they are doing something based on ulterior motives, we must certainly not disparage them—which contravenes the *halachah* that one should serve Hashem even *shelo lishmah*—but instead gently encourage them to reach greater heights and serve Hashem *lishmah*.

Zimri and Pinchas were thus exact opposites: Zimri's act seemed to have been fueled by kindness, but in truth entailed cruelty. Pinchas, on the other hand, did something which appeared brutal, but the Torah testified that it stemmed from the peaceful ways of his grandfather Aharon.

For further learning see לקוטי שיחות חלק ה' פרשת פנחס שיחה א'

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merkazanash.com
info@merkazanash.com
347.471.1770

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