

Parashat Pinchas 5772, 2012:

*What Can We Learn from Pinchas?*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, my sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, and Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Yehonatan Binyamin Halevy ben Golda Friedel, and Moshe Reuven ben Chaya.

The previous week's Torah portion, Parashat Balak, ends with the sad story of the forbidden physical relations practiced by many of the men of the Jewish people with the wanton daughters of Moab. This, however, was only part of the story. The Moabite women set a pre-condition to their debauched activity: the men would first have to join them in worshipping their deity, Baal Peor, via bizarre and disgusting practices. Thus we read in *Sefer Bamidbar* 25:1-7:

Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of the Moabites. They invited the people to the sacrifices of their gods, and the people ate and prostrated themselves to their gods. Israel became attached to Baal Peor, and the anger of the L-rd flared against Israel. The L-rd said to Moses, "Take all the leaders of the people and hang them before the L-rd, facing the sun, and then the flaring anger of the L-rd will be removed from Israel."

Moses said to the judges of Israel, "Each of you shall kill the men who became attached to Baal Peor." Then an Israelite man came and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moses and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, while they were weeping at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting. (This and all, Tanach translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

It is hard to imagine that we fell so far. After all, the participants in these horrendous activities had heard Hashem speak at Mt. Sinai. Truly, it has been said that when a Jew falls, he falls a far distance from the source of *kedushah* (holiness).

The above quoted section, however, is immediately followed by a verse that contains a ray of hope and the potential salvation of the Jewish nation: “Phinehas the son of Eleazar the son of Aaron the Kohen saw this, arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand.” At first glance, it appears very straightforward. It seems that Pinchas directly witnessed the publicly displayed immoral behavior of a Jewish man, identified as “Zimri the son of Salu, the chieftain of the Simeonite paternal house”, and his Midianite consort, later identified as “Cozbi the daughter of Zur, a national leader of a paternal house in Midian.” Apparently upon witnessing Zimri and Cozbi entering Zimri’s tent, Pinchas “arose from the congregation, and took a spear in his hand” in preparation for executing this lewd and licentious couple. The Talmud, however, offers three possibilities as to what exactly Pinchas saw:

And it is also written, And Phineas, the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it. **Now, what did he see?** — Rab said: He saw what was happening and remembered the halacha, and said to him, ‘O great-uncle! did you not teach us this on thy descent from Mount Sinai: He who cohabits with a heathen woman is punished by zealots?’ He replied. ‘He who reads the letter, let him be the agent [to carry out its instructions].’ Samuel said: “He saw that ‘There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the L-rd’: Whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one’s teacher.” R. Isaac said in R. Eleazar’s name: “He saw the angel wreaking destruction amongst the people.” (*Talmud Bavli* 82a, translation, *Soncino Talmud*, emphasis my own)

Let us briefly review these three positions:

1. Rab (Rav): Pinchas saw “what was happening and remembered the halacha” regarding the permissibility of summarily executing “he who [publicly] cohabits with a heathen woman.”
2. Samuel (Shmuel): Pinchas “remembered” a yet-to-be formally given verse from *Shlomo Hamelech’s Sefer Mishle* (21:30) that served as the warrant for his zealous behavior, without having first sought out Moshe’s permission, since he deemed this to be a moment of *chilul Hashem* (defamation of the Divine Name).
3. Rabbi Yitzchak, in the name of Rabbi Eleazar: Pinchas had a prophetic vision: “He saw the angel wreaking destruction amongst the people,” and did everything

in his power to stop this from happening – namely, the execution of Zimri and Cozbi.

I would like to focus upon Shmuel's explanation. I believe it is best understood in the context of the incredible respect we are obligated to demonstrate to our Torah scholars and teachers. The Rambam (1135-1204) codifies this requirement in *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 5:1:

Just as one is commanded to honor and hold one's father in awe, so also is one obligated to honor and hold one's Rabbi in awe even more so than one's father, for the reason that one's father brings one into this world, but one's Rabbi brings one into the World To Come by teaching one... There is no honor or awe greater than that which one's Rabbi deserves. The Sages said that one should hold one's Rabbi in awe as one who holds G-d in awe, and that anyone who disagrees with his Rabbi is like someone who disputes G-d, as it is written, "...when they contended against the L-rd."...  
(Translation, O'Levy)

The Rambam clearly set a high, but accessible, bar of judgment as to the full extent of our obligations toward our Torah scholars. Building upon the foundation of his formulation, it is quite safe to say that under normal situations, Pinchas surely would have sought out Moshe's sagacious counsel. Yet, in the case of Zimri and Cozbi, Pinchas was thrust into the realm of competing claims: He knew full well that he was commanded to give Moshe Rabbeinu the greatest possible respect. He also knew, however, that he had an even greater obligation to serve Hashem, since both Moshe and he were mandated to do so. (Compare Rashi's, 1040-1105, explanation to *Sefer Vayikra* 19:3 regarding honoring one's parents and keeping Shabbat.) In such an instance, honoring Hashem takes precedence over honoring even His most beloved servant – the Torah scholar. Therefore, Shmuel opines that this was what Pinchas saw: "There is no wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against the L-rd': whenever the Divine Name is being profaned, honor must not be paid to one's teacher." That is, Pinchas saw the moment as

calling for a temporary suspension of the rule of honoring one's rebbi, in deference to the meta-obligation of honoring Hashem. Nothing, not even awe and respect for one's rebbi, takes precedence over preventing a *chilul Hashem*. As the Rambam states:

It is permitted to set aside something which is forbidden, even in one's Rabbi's presence. For example, if one sees someone unknowingly doing something forbidden, one is allowed to tell him that it is forbidden, even if one's Rabbi is present and even without his permission, because whenever there is a desecration of G-d's Name, we don't worry about the honor of a Rabbi. This is talking about a situation when something has already happened... (Ibid., 5:3)

Given the above, it is clear that the veneration and awe that we are obligated to demonstrate toward our scholars and sages is a hallmark of the authentic Torah personality. Moreover, the case of preventing a *chilul Hashem* when one's rebbi is present is, in actuality, a demonstration of the reverence we have for our spiritual leaders since they, too, are obligated to honor Hashem. Therefore, by honoring our Creator, we are actually revering our teachers who have taught us to respond in this fashion.

I believe we are now ready to ask two difficult, yet necessary, questions: “Why are our shul rabbis, and even our *gedolim*, so often maligned and treated with disdain and disrespect?” and “Why do so many people act in a dismissive manner toward these leaders when their purpose is to enable us to spiritually rise and grow in our respect for, and practice of, Torah and mitzvot?” In the time honored Jewish tradition, “I have bad news and good news” in answering these questions. The bad news is that we have been mistreating our Torah sages for a very long time. In fact, even a cursory reading of the Torah teaches us that we rebelled against Hashem Himself! Thus we read in *Pirkei Avot* (*Ethics of the Fathers* 5:4): “With ten acts of rebellion did our forefathers rebel against the Omnipresent One blessed be He in the desert, as it says in the Torah [*Sefer Bamidbar*

14:22]: ‘And you rebelled against me these ten times and you did not listen to My voice.’” As a result, Hashem labeled us an “*am keshay oref*” (“a stiff-necked people”) no less than five times – clearly demonstrating His disfavor with this behavioral attribute and the actions that followed, and continue to follow, in its wake.

The good news is that we can rise above our rebellious nature, and give Hashem and our sages the proper honor and dignity they deserve. We can properly observe His Torah as defined by our scholars, and thereby bring about a *Kiddush Hashem* (sanctification of G-d’s name). Our G-d-given ability to conquer our passions and control improper behavior traits was first pointed out to Cain at the very dawn of the creation of mankind (*Sefer Bereishit 4:5-7*):

But to Cain and to his offering He did not turn, and it annoyed Cain exceedingly, and his countenance fell. And the L-rd said to Cain, "Why are you annoyed, and why has your countenance fallen? Is it not so that if you improve, it will be forgiven you? If you do not improve, however, at the entrance, sin is lying, and to you is its longing, **but you can rule over it.**" (Emphasis my own)

Based upon the Almighty’s response to Cain, it is clear we have the inherent ability to rule over any desire to rebel against G-d and His Torah scholars. While this may be a formidable task, we “can rule over it.” In this way, we can be *mekadash shame shamaim* (sanctify G-d’s name), and rise to unheralded spiritual heights. In this sense, may Pinchas, the great sanctifier of Hashem’s Name, be forever our model and guide. *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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My audio *shiurim* on *Tefilah and Haskafah* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/7sp5vt3>

\*\*\* I have recently posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:  
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