

Derech Ha-rif

Excerpts from the Torah discourse delivered by The great Rabbi Yoshiyahu Yosef Pinto Shlita

For the Torah portion of Pinchas | Volume 35 | 19 tamoz



First Shabbat Meal

"Pinchas, son of Ela'azar, son of Aharon HaCohen, calmed my anger from about the Jewish people, when he responded to my jealousy"

Specifically Pinchas recalled the law that "zealots can attack one who cohabits with a gentile woman" because his soul had a spiritual connection to that law.

Pinchas had asked Moshe about how to react to Zimri's publicly committed sin, and Moshe responded that that specific law had slipped from his memory. Pinchas recalls the law and enacts it. As a reward, Hashem grants Pinchas the status of Cohen. What is the significance of the conversation between Moshe and Pinchas that emphasis is drawn to it?

The Talmud in Sanhedrin details the particulars of the Zimri incident. Zimri, tribal leader among the nation, presented himself to Moshe Rabbenu with a gentile Medianite woman and asked if she was permissible to him. He figured, if Moshe would allow him to take her then all would be well, but if not, then he would confront him for his wife Tziporah. She too was a Medianite, the daughter of Yitro; who had permitted him to marry her?

At that very moment, Moshe forgot that very law. Pinchas spoke up and reminded Moshe the law as he himself had taught it at Sinai; zealots can strike an offender in the act. Moshe then responded: "go and implement what you know." Pinchas grabbed a spear and killed Zimri and the Medianite woman in one act. There were numerous miracles that occurred then, all detailed in the Talmud, and Pinchas was awarded the status of Cohen.

The obvious question is how did Moshe, the leader of the Jewish nation and the very person that brought the Torah down from Mount Sinai, forget a law and such an important one besides?

The word Yisrael, in Hebrew, is an acronym for "Yesh Shishim Ribo Otivot LaTorah," which translates as, "there are 600,000 words to the Torah." The Arizal teaches that this number is directly related to the 600,000 souls which makeup the Jewish nation; each person's soul has its corresponding letter in the Torah. Seeing and focusing on that letter brings significant spiritual influence on one's soul. That is why one must pay attention to the letters of the Torah when it is opened and lifted up before the reading. King David prayed to Hashem in Tehillim (86:17), "reveal a letter for me, and let my enemies see and be silenced." David asked Hashem to reveal his letter to the entire world. David's enemies were constantly claiming that David, Heaven Forbid, was a convert, and converts do not have a letter associated with their name, rather a decorative crown found on almost all Hebrew script.

(Rabbi Akiva was said to draw laws from every crown of the Torah- and specifically Rabbi Akiva was the one who taught this because he was descendant of converts.) "An eternal letter (Shemot (31:17)," states the verse; each person has a letter from which his soul draws spiritual force. The area in the Torah where the letter is found will also have an effect on the particular Mitzvot to which a person has particular affinity for. For example, the Rav of Rufschtitz had a particular affinity to the Mitzvah of Sukkah: he would talk about it more than other Mitzvot, focus upon it, and was very particular in performing it in all its details. Other Tzadikim were particular in the Mitzvah of Channukah lights and yet others regarding Shabbat lights, and they would have the habit of expressing their behavior by noting that their soul was associated to that Mitzvah.

The Talmud in Shabbat 118b tells over how the Tannaim and Amoraim would ask one another: " regarding which Mitzvah was your father careful in?" Metaphorically, they were wondering which Mitzvah they were very particular in keeping in their previous incarnation. Regarding this concept, David prays in Tehillim (119:93), " never will I forget your commandments, because it is in them I draw my life." David was specifically referring to the Mitzvot that are associated with his soul. Getting back to the question of how Moshe had come to forget that particular law concerning striking an individual who cohabits with a gentile woman and why was it that only Pinchas had come to remember it: these were both due to the nature of Pinchas' soul. Because his soul was associated with that Mitzvah, he was the one to recall it, and Hashem made Moshe forget to give Pinchas the opportunity to apply his knowledge and thereby rectify and complete his soul.

As an allegory, the first letters of Pinchas Ben Elazar are the same letters as those of Boel Aramit Pogi'in (one who cohabits with a gentile can be struck...) to reinforce the point that the Mitzvah was associated to Pinchas' soul.



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Soul Of the Rif

One must be psychologically strong- when you are at the lowest and hardest times- do not despair, it is only temporary and will pass. When you are at the highest and happiest points- you should know that this too is only temporary and will pass. Therefore, one should cleave to, and only follow, one path- the path of Torah and Mitzvot. The path of Torah and Mitzvot is the most stable- high points will eventually come back down and low points will eventually come back up, but the path of Torah and Mitzvot and cleaving to Hashem remains true and constant.

During these sad, uncomfortable and trying times of Ben HaMetzarim (the three weeks between the 17th of Tamuz and the 9th of Av)- cleave to Hashem- it is only temporary and will pass. When one cleaves to Hashem, whatever situation a person is in, it will only be temporary and will pass.



2nd Shabbat Meal

"Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen turned back My wrath" Pinchas came to remedy the error of Nadav and Avihu and therefore saw the sin of Zimri Ben Salu.

There is a great principle that we must be cognizant of- when one sees something negative in someone else, it is a sign that that person themselves is deficient. One who says of someone else that they are a liar or a thief- it is a sign that they themselves are deficient, because a holy Tzadik with lofty character traits does not see anything negative in others. If a Jew desecrates Shabbat or steals- a Tzadik would not even see this- as a Tzadik does not see any bad at all.

One only sees the bad in others when one is in spiritual descent. They then notice that their fellow friend is a thief, liar or desecrator of Shabbat- he sees all the bad in people. When one is in a spiritually high place, they do not see the bad. Indeed, there are stories of great Tzadikim in front of whom someone desecrated Shabbat and kindled a light- they said that they do not see light, only darkness- they did not see bad in others.

This was the claim in this week's Torah portion against Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen- Zimri Ben Salu who was the prince of the tribe of Shimon and was a great Tzadik committed a sin with the Midianite woman. Moshe did not see the sin. Pinchas saw Zimri sinning and fornicating with the Midianite woman in front of the entire Jewish people, and so he approached Moshe and told him that when he had descended from Sinai he had taught them that one who fornicates with a gentile woman- zealous ones strike them; and here was Zimri fornicating with a gentile woman. But Moshe who was pure and holy did not see any of this- he did not see anything negative.

All the mockers of that generation said that Pinchas was not a Tzadik as he had seen Zimri's sin but Moshe Rabenu, with his great sanctity and purity, had not seen it. This is in the vein of the Gemarra (Sanhedrin 82b) that teaches that the mockers would say "Have you seen this son of Puti (A reference to Pinchas) whose maternal grandfather fattened calves for Avoda Zara?

(Now) he has killed a prince of a Jewish tribe!". They wanted to say that Pinchas was at a low spiritual level. For this reason, the Torah teaches "Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen"- clarifying that Pinchas was a Tzadik- the son of Elazar and Aharon the Kohen,

in whom the souls of Nadav and Avihu, the sons of Aharon entered. Nadav and Avihu's souls, having entered Pinchas, made him not only the son of Elazar, but also the son of Aharon HaKohen.

Pinchas merited to have the power to see Zimri's sin- not because he was, Heaven forbid, at a low spiritual level, but because he had come to remedy the sin of Nadav and Avihu whose sin was that they ruled a Halachic ruling in front of Moshe and Aharon and did not consult with them, when they offered up "a foreign fire". Pinchas came to remedy this sin, and consulted with Moshe regarding Zimri's sin, although the Halacha is that in the case of someone who fornicates with a gentile woman, one does not consult with a Rav- but zealous ones strike them (without consultation). It was for this remedying of Nadav and Avihu's sin that Hashem caused Pinchas to see Zimri's sin.

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Q & A with the Rif



Question:

Dear Rav, would it be better to live in a religious neighborhood or in a regular irreligious neighborhood?

Answer:

The question of where one should live is a complex one with many factors.

We would advise that before taking any decision over where to live, one should consult with a Rav. When my parents, may they live, consulted with the Baba Meir over where they should live, he advised them to live in an irreligious neighborhood.

Consulting with a Rav before deciding on where to live is the correct thing to do, as a Rav may understand the individual's soul and what would be best for that specific individual. There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question.





3rd Shabbat meal

The Torah exhibits consideration for Zimri's honor, because he had thoughts of repentance when being struck by Pinchas

These days are particularly holy days, as the Hiloula of Rabbi Haim Ben Attar, the saintly Ohr HaHaim, who was unique in his saintliness among all generations.

The Rebbes of Chassidut would repeat time and again that the study of Ohr HaChaim purifies the soul and spirit of the learner; it opens new horizons in the psyche and soul of that person. At times, there are spiritual blockages in one's psyche and studying Ohr HaChaim opens new gates.

The Torah tells the unusual incident with the leader of the tribe of Shimon, Zimri Ben Salu. After all the failed attempts of Balak and Bilaam to cause harm to the Jewish nation, they succeeded in causing Zimri to sin in front of the entire nation. He presented his question to Moshe, about the permissibility of marrying a gentile woman, and when Moshe failed to establish the law, Zimri proceeded to sin before the entire nation.

Pinchas, who saw what was happening and recalled the law allowing a zealot to avenge Hashem's honor in such a disgraceful situation as Zimri partook in, jumped forward and shared his knowledge with Moshe. Moshe then instructed him to act upon his knowledge, as he was the one to recall it. Pinchas grabbed a spear, stabbed Zimri and the princess in one action and raised them up so that the nation could witness the sin that had taken place. What he did sounds straightforward, but in truth was incredibly dangerous and a very difficult feat to accomplish; the Talmud states that ten miracles occurred to Pinchas then and there.

Firstly, that the tribe of Shimon didn't kill him when he approached Zimri and even after he stabbed them. Then, that Zimri himself didn't kill him in self defense. Also, Hashem made it that Zimri stayed alive the entire time that Pinchas was displaying him around the camp.

During the entire episode the Torah did not mention Zimri's name. "Behold, a man came forward..." is how the Torah describes Zimri. Only in the following Torah portion of Pinchas, once the episode has already occurred, the Torah details his name.

The Ohr HaChaim asks the obvious question: if Hashem wished to disgrace the sinner, why not mention his name? And if the opposite is correct, why mention his name at all? Concerning the sinner who gathered branches in Shabbat, the Torah left his name out entirely. So why not here too?

The Ohr HaChaim explains that although Zimri sinned, he was a great personality prior. Thus, when Pinchas came forward with great zeal, focus and sanctity, his intensity spilled over onto Zimri and caused him to have thoughts of repentance.

This is what the Torah is hinting to when it says: "when he avenged my zeal within them..." Pinchas' holy zeal affected Zimri to repent. Zimri could have reacted and defended himself or even killed Pinchas, but he decided to remain silent and accept his fate; this was his repentance for the sin.

This answers the Ohr HaChaim's question of why Zimri's name wasn't mentioned. Because he had thoughts of repentance and regret, the Torah acknowledged his deed and spared him the disgrace of publicizing his name



Treasure charms from the Rif



Regarding performing acts to honor one's deceased parents- the Ben Ish Chai says that one should provide people with fragrant substances to make the blessings "Boreh Atzeh Besamim", "Boreh Mineh Besamim" and "Boreh Isbeh Besamim" for the uplifting of their parents' souls. Enabling people to bless over fragrant substances provides a great merit for one's parents in Heaven.



The fourth Post Shabbat meal

Storys from the Rif

The Baal Shem Tov

It is told that once, in the time of the Baal Shem Tov, a terrible decree was to be decreed on the Jewish people in Heaven. The Baal Shem Tov told his students to quickly go to a certain place in a certain city, where they will find a person who will be able to pray that the Jewish people be saved from this terrible decree.

The students went to the street in the city that the Baal Shem Tov had instructed them to go to, and in the home the Baal Shem Tov had described to them they found a drunk person sitting asleep at a table with an empty bottle of wine beside him, and his head resting on the table in a pool of his own vomit. He was utterly inebriated.

The students were surprised that the Baal Shem Tov had sent them to a drunkard to pray for the Jewish people, but proceeded with their rabbi's instructions and attempted to arouse the drunk person. They tried shaking him awake and waited a long time until they could get some sense out of the drunk person. The drunk person stubbornly refused to listen to them and asked them to leave him alone and just let him be.

The students were adamant, and begged him profusely, until he acquiesced. He asked what they wanted of him, and so they told him of the terrible decree that was to be decreed in Heaven and that he should pray to annul the decree. He stood up and prayed a short prayer. When the students returned to the Baal Shem Tov he informed them that the decree had been annulled.

The Baal Shem Tov said to his students "Let me tell you the story of this person I sent you to..." The Baal Shem Tov went on to explain that this person was once a greatly wealthy merchant, who one day resolved to liquidate all of his assets and use all the money to commit the most terrible sins, to have illicit intimate relations and do all the evil in the world. And so, he went on his way with all of his great fortune liquidated into money, to commit sins.

On his way, he heard crying in a certain home. The door was ajar, and so he entered the home to discover the source of the great wailing. Inside he saw a dead body lying supine on the floor. The widow of the deceased was beside the body crying profusely with the seven children. When he asked why they were crying so profusely for the deceased, the widow explained that her husband had died and she had no money to bury him, and had no way to provide for her children. She was in great despair with no idea how to proceed.

That person's heart became filled with mercy over the widow's plight, and so he took all the money for which he had worked his whole life, and handed it over to the widow telling her "Here, do as you see fit with this money. You will have enough money for life- to bury your husband, provide for your children and marry them off." And so, he gave the widow a very great sum of money.

At that moment, there was a great disturbance in Heaven. This person's selfless act had a great effect in Heaven, and Hashem decreed that whatever this person shall request shall be granted. His deed was so great that anything he asks for shall be given to him.

Upon hearing this, the ministering angels approached Hashem and said "Master of the Universe, this person is a bad person, a sinner. If You will grant him such a power he will request evil things and will cause great destruction in the world.

Hashem resolved that this person will be granted everything he asks for, but he will have a great weakness for alcohol. He will always be drunk and so will not be able to request evil things from Heaven.

Indeed, from then on, this person had become a drunkard, and he never requested of Hashem neither gold nor silver.

All he would ask for would be for more wine. And so, he lived his life either completely inebriated, or sober enough to ask for more wine, which he was promptly supplied with from Heaven.

The Baal Shem Tov explained that only this person was able to annul the decree as Hashem would grant everything he asked for. The students just had to convince him to utter one short prayer for the salvation of the Jewish people and Hashem would grant it.



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