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Wherefore Our Passion?

The passion that was displayed by Zimri, the prince of the tribe of Shimmon, leads us to consider the source of his seemingly unbridled lust. How could a leader of a tribe so brazenly consort with a Midianite Princess in full view of Moshe and Aharon, standing mortified at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting?

So who is Zimri? The rabbis identify him with Shlumiel, the son of Tzurishaddai, one of the princes “of their ancestral houses and leaders of Israel’s thousands.” Rabbi U. Milevsky maintains that the name Shlumiel, intimating God’s perfection, describes Zimri’s dissenting philosophy. Zimri could not accept that mankind could reach perfection as long as there remained religious differences between nations. By bringing his Midianite

mistress before the entire Jewish people, Zimri tried to demonstrate that Gentiles could be raised to the spiritual level of Jews.

Following the Midrash, one of the meanings of the name Shimmon is “Sham Avon,” meaning that ‘There [in him] is sin.’ This interpretation, perhaps, leads us to focus on Shimmon’s dark side: The one brother who is jealous of Yosef and on account of his zealous nature is the one who seeks Yosef’s death. He is the one who, with Levi, redeems Dina’s honor in the unbridled, angry, and vengeful massacre of the male citizens of Shechem.

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In this latter case, Shimon is seen



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as protecting the honor of the family. Nevertheless, Ya'akov, on his deathbed, chooses to bring Shimon and Levi to account: "For when angry, they slay men...I will divide them in Ya'akov [and] scatter them in Israel."

For Ya'akov, Shimon and Levi, "Are a pair." However, their respective descendants, Zimri and Pinchas, eventually part ways. Ironically, although both tribes are characterized by zealotness, it is Pinchas of the tribe of Levi who will slay the Shimonite Zimri in the act of what Hashem declares was zealotness "for My sake." In this context, Tamar Weisman notes wisely that the attribute of zealotness is a powerful tool if used correctly – but deadly if misemployed.

Both tribes, Levi and Shimon, were indeed scattered. The Levites, however, merited their own cities while Shimon was absorbed mainly into the larger, more powerful tribes of Judah – and was all but left out of Ya'akov's blessings. It seems, then, that these considerations lead us to ask, should we better divert our passions towards ourselves, to the nations at large, or "For Hashem"? ■

Shabbat Shalom!

Menachem Pessell

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