



RABBI AARON

Editor, Torah Tidbits

GOLDSCHIEDER

Healing By Way of Humility

When the illustrious Avraham Dov Auerbach, the Rebbe of Avritch (1765-1840) took leave from his followers to fulfill his lifelong dream of living in Eretz Yisrael one of his chassidim approached him and asked, “Who should we draw close to from now on? The Rebbe lovingly answered: “It says in the Torah – *Ubo tidbak* – that you should attach yourselves to Hashem. The Sages ask how we can attach ourselves to Hashem? They answered that we should attach ourselves to His attributes and emulate them: Just as He is merciful and kind so should we be merciful and kind etc. This teaches us that to emulate the ways and character of another is to be truly attached to that person.”

The Rebbe continued, “I have tried to refine my *middot* since the days of my youth until this very day. So too, you should see to it to emulate and copy my attributes and character. In this way you will be truly connected with me, as if ‘face to face.’... and these are the three attributes that I have been carefully

safeguarding against my entire life: *Lashon Hara* – slander, *Sheker* – speaking falsehood, *Gasut Ruach* – arrogance and vanity. Therefore see to it that you also accustom yourselves to safeguard and attach yourself to my *middot* and then you too shall be attached to me and we will be connected always.” (*Sefer Bat Ayin*, Oz Ve’Hadar Edition, Introduction)

In the Rebbe of Avritch’s brilliant work on the weekly *parsha*, *Bat Ayin*, he consistently underscores these traits. Most notably the Rebbe emphasizes the *midah* of humility. His profound insight on *Parshat Pinchas* is no exception. (ספר בת עין פרשת פנחס ד"ה וידבר ה' אל משה)

The *parsha* opens celebrating Pinchas’ stirring heroism. At an explosive hour he springs into action. His decisive decision to take the lives of Zimri and Cozbi brings to a halt the horrendous plague ravaging the nation. The *pasuk* states that Pinchas’ exceptional *kanaut*, zealotry, was the key to turning the tide.

The illustrious Avritcher Rebbe perceives another dimension at play. Namely, Pinchas’ deep humility and selflessness.

When throngs of Israelites were engaged in lewd behavior, Pinchas was sitting at the feet of his beloved teacher Moshe (*Talmud Sanhedrin 82b*). “Pinchas

the son of Elazar...saw..." (*Bemidbar* 25:6). The Talmud explains that "seeing" in this context was an act of comprehension rather than a visual sighting (*Ibid*). When made aware of this incident involving Zimri and Cozbi, he recalled a ruling in Jewish law. Pinchas then said to Moshe, "Did you not teach me on your descent from Mount Sinai regarding one who cohabits with a Cuthean woman - zealots may kill him?" Moshe responds to him and adjures that *he* should be the agent to carry out this act.

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The Gemara offers yet another interpretation of what Pinchas "saw": "Pinchas saw that the Angel of Death had come and sowed destruction among the people" He realized that immediate action was required. The Torah relates, "...and he arose from amid the assembly and took a spear in his hand..." he couldn't bear to see the suffering of his brethren. He went and slew Zimri to stop the plague (*Ibid*).

Both of these Talmudic interpretations plainly suggest that Pinchas acted judicially, with caution, and, moreover, his sole concern was the welfare of others.

Pinchas was also keenly aware that as a result of his actions he would likely be shunned by his peers. Indeed, this is exactly what happened. Rashi fills in the details: "The men of the tribes were ridiculing him, saying, have you seen the *son of Puti* (they called Pinchas "ben Puti" in reference to the fact that he was maternal grandson of Yitro, who had been a priest in the service of idolatry), whose mother's father stuffed calves in honor of idol worship, and yet he had the audacity to eliminate a Jewish tribal prince?" Apparently, there were those who were convinced that his ability to act in this way could only have been inherited from his mother's idolatrous family (*Rashi, Bemidbar* 25:11). Although Pinchas knew full well he would likely be judged harshly by his peers, even humiliated for the remainder of his life, he was determined to come to their aid.

Additionally, we should duly note that Pinchas jeopardized, arguably his most precious asset. Namely, the opportunity to serve as a *Kohen*. A *Kohen* who kills is disqualified from the privileges of *kehunah* and forfeits all the honors that are due to one who dons the mantle of priesthood. Pinchas is willing to give all of this up for the sake of saving others. He places the well being of others before his own. This is the precise definition of humility.

ויבא אחר איש וישׁרׁאל וידקור אֶת־שׁוֹנֵיָהֶם אֶת אִישׁ וישׁרׁאל וְאֶת־הָאִשָּׁה אֶל־קִבְרָתָהּ וַתַּעֲצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה מֵעַל בְּנֵי וישׁרׁאל:(במדבר כ"ה:ח)

The Avritcher Rebbe pinpoints this one pasuk which discloses Pinchas' true intent. Pinchas enters the inner chamber where the illicit act was transpiring. "And he walked in after the man of Israel, *'achar ish Yisrael'*, he did not place himself above the other individual, he actually placed himself to be deferential to the other individual.

The next words in the verse *el hakuba*, אֶל הַקִּבָּה, 'to the inner chamber', can also be read as אֱלֹהֵי הַקִּבּוּב - the Holy One blessed be He. His act was in service to the Almighty.

The next phrase in the verse is "and he thrust both of them through"; the simple meaning refers of course to the two individuals. However if that is the case then why do we need the next phrase, "the man of Israel and the woman"? The Rebbe boldly suggested that the phrase "he thrust both of them through" hints to the relationship between HKB"H and his people. Pinchas was successful in reinstating the *kedusha* and *bracha* in the nation that had been tarnished due the people's sinful behavior.

The pasuk continues: "...and the plague was stayed from the children of Israel." What brought the dreadful punishment to a halt? In the Rebbe's opinion, God witnessed the selflessness of Pinchas. The nation did as well. So many among the nation who brazenly and arrogantly had rejected God's word, were now moved by the actions of Pinchas. They were inspired to regain their own self respect and return.

The Avritcher Rebbe goes on to identify

subtle examples within the text that hint to Pinchas' true nature. The name of Pinchas is spelled with a letter *yud*, in its full form. The smallest letter included in his name alludes to humility. Second, he takes a *romach* (רֹמַח) in his hand (an unusual choice of word for 'a spear'). This is an allusion to the 248 words in the prayer of the *Shema*, when we accept upon ourselves the yoke of Heaven. Additionally, that same number, 248, equals the gematria of *Avraham*, a model of modesty, who exclaimed "I am merely dust and ashes" (*Bereshit 18:27*).

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The Rebbe posits that even after Pinchas and the nation recognize that his heroic actions were responsible for stemming the plague, Pinchas remains humble. His ego could easily have been inflated, realizing his astounding accomplishment. He is a man of exquisite modesty. For this reason as well, Pinchas is deserving of God's loftiest praise - "everlasting priesthood and peace."

Throughout his book of *Tehillim*, King David recalls past events in Jewish history. When citing the story of Pinchas, King David addresses the cure to halting the plague from taking any more lives:

וַיַּעֲמֵד פִּינְחָס וַיִּפְלַל וַתֵּצֵר הַמַּגֵּפָה:

"And Pinchas stood and prayed and the plague came to a stop." (106:30) Strikingly,

the answer he offered was not Pinchas' zealotry but rather his prayers.

An eminent contemporary teacher of chassidut, Rabbi Moshe Wolfson *shlit"á*, points out that the pasuk does not use the word וַיִּתְפַּלֵּל, *vayitpalel*, rather it says וַיִּפְּלֵל, *va'yephalel*. The term '*vayitpalel*' is the reflexive form, which means that one is praying for oneself and with one's own needs in mind. *Va'yephalel*, is suggestive of the notion that it was a prayer that had no selfless motive. It was purely a prayer intended to help the thousands who were dying and assuage God's anger. (Heard from Rav Zev Reichman who heard it from his Rebbe, HaRav Wolfson)

The portrait of Pinchas we now conjure up in our mind is not of a warrior or man brandishing his bravado. He never intended to impress or to intimidate. Quite the contrary. He humbly and self-effacingly acted on behalf of God, Moshe and his beloved people. His intentions were with utmost sincerity. Simply put, he longed to reestablish harmony between the parties who ostensibly were heading in separate directions: He made peace between *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* and *Am Yisrael*.

The Sages of the Mishnah lavish praise on one who engages in reestablishing peace and helping to achieve reconciliation where there is dissent. "These are the things whose fruit we eat in this world but whose full reward awaits us in the World to Come...and bringing peace between people" (*Talmud Shabbat* 127a). Pinchas does even more. The near

impossible. He reestablishes harmony not between people, but between the Holy One and His people.

Parshat Pinchas opens with the Almighty himself bestowing blessing on Pinchas; the blessing of *Shalom*, peace. The Talmud states the tradition that the letter *vav* that appears in the word *shalom* is severed, known as a '*vav katia*' (Kiddushin 66b). This custom is maintained still today in our *sifrei Torah*. It is the only example of a letter that is required to be written 'defectively'.

Pinchas is rewarded with the crown of peace (*shalom*). Since the letter *vav* is not written fully, the Talmud says that the word means *shalem*, שָׁלֵם, 'whole'. In other words, one might suggest that the symbol of the broken letter hints to the trait of a contrite heart, humility, which brings *shalom*, peace, and wholeness.

Although Pinchas is often referred to as a zealot, in truth, his zealotry was only external. His core motivation stemmed from his compassion and was activated by his remarkable selflessness.

The Avritcher Rebbe's message to his chassidim was to constantly pursue the path of humility. In so doing, *kedusha*, 'holiness', and *bracha*, 'blessing', fill our lives which in turn offer us true wholeness (*shleimut*) and inner-peace (*shalom*). ■

Dr. Eliezer Rosenblum

NYS Licensed and Board Certified

Chiropractor

Offices in Jerusalem, Ramat Beit Shemesh

052-662-4658