

# *Parshas Pinchas*

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## *1. Hashem Helps Us In all of Our Pursuits*

In the portion of Balak, the Torah tells us how the Jews were seduced by the Moabite women to worship Baal Peor and how they subsequently cohabited with these women. As a result of their idol worship and involvement with the Moabite women, the Torah states **“The wrath of Hashem flared up against Israel,”** a ravaging plague descended upon the Jewish people. In addition to the average Jew’s participation in this desecration of G-d’s name, Zimri, the son of Salu, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, cohabited with Cozbi, the daughter of Tzur, a Midianite princess. Pinchas the son of Elazar, the grandson of Aaron, acted zealously by taking his spear and piercing Zimri and Cozbi during the act of cohabitation, thus killing both of them. The zealous act of Pinchas and his self-sacrifice caused the plague to cease. The Midrash tells us that under normal circumstances it would have been impossible for Pinchas to survive his attack on Zimri. Many miracles transpired in order to allow Pinchas to bring about this Kiddush Hashem (Sanctification of G-d’s name) Because of Pinchas’ zealotry, Hashem said to Moshe, **“Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged Me among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My Vengeance.”**

The Sforno explains when Pinchas avenged G-d’s Honor to bring about this Kiddush Hashem; the Jewish people did not interfere but remained silent and allowed this Kiddush Hashem to take place. This silence was an atonement for their initial non-intervention when they allowed the name of Hashem to be desecrated.

Prior to taking action, Pinchas consulted with Moshe saying, “You had taught us that one who cohabits with a non-Jew in a public setting, if one is zealous he is permitted to kill those who are involved in the desecrating of G-d’s name.” The Midrash tells us that prior to Pinchas’ statement Moshe had forgotten this law that was transmitted to him at Sinai. Moshe responded to Pinchas by saying, “The one who reads the proclamation should be the agent to carry out the order!” As a result of Pinchas’ selfless act, he merited that the entire Jewish people should be saved from plague. The question is why was Pinchas worthy to have such an opportunity presented to him and to reap such unlimited reward?

The Gemara in *Tractate Sanhedrin* tells us during the time of the evil king Achov, he ordered all of the prophets be killed. Ovadia, who was a courtier in the court of Achov, secretly concealed the existence of one hundred prophets by placing one group of fifty in one cave and another group of fifty in another cave. For a year’s time, Ovadia provided for these prophets. Because of Ovadia’s initiative, prophecy continued until the beginning of the Second Temple period. The Gemara tells us that Ovadia is esteemed to a greater degree than Avraham Avinu. The Torah states that Avraham, “Feared G-d” but regarding Ovadia, the verse in Prophets states that he “Feared G-d very much.” Ovadia understood that if he acted at that moment, then prophecy would continue: if not - it would have come to an end. The question is - How does one merit to have the opportunity and the clarity to do as Ovadia had done in the face of great danger?

Pinchas and Ovadia both merited an opportunity of Kiddush Hashem. The Gemara in *Tractate Makkos* states a principle in life, “Whatever path that one chooses to walk in life he will be led along that path (by Hashem).” For example, if a person chooses (G-d Forbid) to lead a life of crime, Hashem will present situations that he can act upon towards that end. If a person wants to lead a life of righteousness then Hashem will give him opportunities in that direction. Zealotry is only an expression of one’s internalization of spirituality to such a degree that he is willing to sacrifice his life for Kiddush Hashem. Since Pinchas and Ovadia lived their lives in pursuit of

Kiddush Hashem to the highest degree, they merited the opportunities where they were able to actualize that yearning through Kiddush Hashem – by saving the entire Jewish people or guaranteeing the perpetuation of prophecy.

When a person's life is devoted completely to Torah the classification of such a person is "Tohroso umnaso," (His profession is Torah, as per the Talmud). This is a person who invests every waking moment to Torah study. Since this type of person yearns only for spiritual growth, Hashem will provide him every opportunity to bring this to fruition. Pinchas and Ovadia were people who lived their lives only to sanctify Hashem's name; therefore, in each of their contexts, the opportunities presented themselves.

## ***2. How to Recognize the Cause Rather than the Symptom***

The Torah tells us that as a result of the zealous act of Pinchas, Hashem did not destroy the Jewish people because, "***B'kino es kinosee, (when he (Pinchas) zealously avenged My Vengeance...)***" Rashi explains that since Pinchas was angered to the same degree that Hashem should have been angered, the Klal Yisroel was not destroyed. Because Pinchas experienced Hashem's pain as a result of the Chilul Hashem that was perpetrated by Zimri, Hashem did not need to express His Wrath. If Pinchas had not responded to the Chilul Hashem, then the Jewish people would have been destroyed (G-d Forbid).

We see from the incident of Pinchas, that if there is a public Chilul Hashem and no one is pained sufficiently to respond, then Hashem will respond to the desecration of His name. When Hashem intervenes to awaken us He brings about compelling situations which force us to address the cause of our problem. If a person regards these difficulties as mere happenstance, then Hashem will force the person to recognize the problem by increasing the severity of these misfortunes. However, if we preemptively recognize our shortcomings and are pained by them to the point of repenting, then Hashem will not need to intervene.

The Gemara in *Tractate Avodah Zarah* tells us that Yitzchok, our Patriarch, enacted the afternoon prayer service (Mincha). The Gemara explains that the verse, "Yitzchok went out into the field *l'suach* (to speak)" means that he prayed. The Ritva (an earlier Talmudic Commentator) explains that it is known that tzaddikim (devoutly righteous) pray on behalf of their generation and not themselves. They pray for forgiveness and enlightenment for their generation and that spiritual shortcomings will be recognized and proper initiatives will be taken to correct them. Why does the Torah sage pray for his generation while the average person prays only for himself or those with whom he is associated?

The answer is – the average person is consumed with his own needs and concerns and therefore is only sensitive to what he does or does not have. However, if one would feel the pain of others, he definitely would pray for them. The tzaddik and Torah sage, who lives his life for the sake of G-d and the Jewish people, is focused on the needs of the Jewish people and therefore prays for their well being. If we look beyond ourselves we will recognize the spiritual failings of Klal Yisroel and the community and address them. If we do this, then Hashem would not need to react because we would already be dealing with them. Just as Hashem refrained from punishing the Jewish people because of Pinchas' intervention, so too, Hashem would refrain from punishing the Jewish people because of our intervention. This can be accomplished through tefilla (Prayer), increased Torah study, or teshuvah (repentance).

We pray every day that Hashem should give us understanding to comprehend His Will and to serve Him. If during prayer we are truly in touch with what we say and are able to internalize these realities, we could easily recognize and address our own spiritual shortcomings and those of our community. There would be no need for Hashem to intervene with a "wake up call" (G-d Forbid). There would be no reason any longer to pray for what we do not have (such as livelihood, health, success, etc.) because if we address and correct our shortcomings then all of our other needs will be provided.

### ***3. Having the Proper Mindset***

After Baal Peor, which caused 24,000 Jews to perish by plague, the Torah states **“You should harass the Midianites.”** The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh asks since the Jewish people are later told to *destroy* the Midianite people, (in *Mattos*, a later portion), **“Harass the Midianites and destroy them,”** what is the purpose of Hashem commanding Moshe at this point tell the Jewish people **“You should harass the Midianites”**?

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh answers that the Jews who remained alive after the plague needed to be atoned for the lust that they had in their hearts after witnessing the Baal Peor. The Jews who were exposed to the Baal Peor and the seductive behavior of the non-Jewish women were affected to a great degree. Although the event had passed they still had the lust in their hearts. A person is not able to do teshuvah and be fully forgiven unless he is fully purged from that desire. Therefore Hashem commanded the Jewish people, “You should Harass the Midianite and see them in the most detestable light.” The Jew should despise them for what they represent. As a result of this mindset, there will no longer be any trace of that previous experience and then the Jew can be fully atoned through teshuvah. As Dovid HaMelech (King David) states, “I shall hate those who hate You (Hashem).” Meaning, if we do not despise those who are contrary to G-d then we are susceptible to the influences of those people. There is no “middle of the road” or neutral position regarding not being influenced by something which is not in accordance with the Will of Hashem.

The Gemara in *Tractate Avodah Zarah* states that there is a Negative Commandment “Lo seichaneim” which it explains to mean “Do not speak graciously about a non-Jew (for the sake of admiration.)” The Rambam points out that the reason one is not permitted to esteem a non-Jew for this sake is because one might come to regard that person’s values and beliefs as also “carrying weight.” Although the non-Jew might be the “best doctor” or the most “brilliant lawyer” he also possesses an ethical, moral and belief system by which we cannot be swayed. If one esteems the non-Jew, he becomes susceptible to the subtle influences of that person.

The only way we can prevent ourselves from being negatively influenced and affected by things that are contrary to Hashem’s Will is to consciously disdain them. At the end of the Book of Devarim, Moshe refers to the idols of the nations as *“their dung and their putrid rodents.”* Citing the Midrash, Rashi’s commentary says that idolatry is as detestable and despicable as “dung and putrid rodents.” The question is if idolatry is perceived this way how could one be affected by it? The answer is – if one did not experience idolatry as if it were “dung and putrid rodents” then there is a possibility that one can be affected by it.

We need to see “wrong” in the most extreme negative light. The reason for this is not simply because Hashem said that we should not engage in it, but rather, it is because Hashem commanded us not to engage in it that it is intrinsically detestable. It is only if our internalization is at this level that we can have relevance to holiness.

### ***4. The Importance of Appreciating Who You Are.***

The Torah tells us after the plague, Hashem tells Moshe and Elazar, (the son of Aaron), they should conduct a census of the Jews. When enumerating the paternal family names of the Jewish people, the Torah adds to each name the letters “hay” and “yud.” Rashi cites the Midrash, which explains that the nations of the world came to disgrace the Jewish people by claiming, “why are the Jews tracing their pedigree to prove their purity? One would think that when the Jews were slaves in Egypt and the men’s lives were dominated by the Egyptians – is there a question that the Jewish women’s bodies were also in the possession of the Egyptians?” Meaning, it was thought that the Jewish women were surely defiled by the Egyptian men. Therefore the nations of the world claimed that it was absurd for the Jews to pride themselves on their pedigree. In order to counter this false claim Hashem added His holy Name of “yud” and “hay” to the names of each of the families to personally attest to the purity of the Jewish people.

Rashi continues by quoting the words of Dovid HaMelech (King David) who states in *Tehillim*

(Psalms), “*Shivtay K’AH aidus l’Yisroel* (the tribes of G-d - who attests to Israel).” Meaning that Hashem personally attests that the Jewish people are the tribes of Israel. The question to ask is – why should we be concerned about the claim of the nations of the world regarding our pedigree? Another question to ask is - how do we ourselves know that we are descendents of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs?

The reason why Hashem must attest to our pedigree that we descend from the Patriarchs is in order for **us** to fully appreciate and comprehend our special potential. Because the B’nai Yisroel (the Jewish people) descend from the Patriarchs (Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov), who were the equivalent of living angels, we have unlimited spiritual potential. Hashem wants us to know with absolute certainty that we are the direct descendents of the Patriarchs so that we do not view ourselves as the other nations of the world but rather as the “tribes of Hashem.”

Many difficulties stem from the fact that a person does not know how special he truly is. If we would understand and appreciate our own specialness then we would treat our prayers differently. We would understand that it is because of who we are that Hashem is attentive to our prayers. For example, when the Jews approached the territory of Edom in the fortieth year in the desert, Moshe sent a message to Edom stating that when the Jews were in Egypt they cried out to Hashem and He heard their plea. Rashi cites the Midrash which explains that Moshe was communicating to the Edomites that the reason why Hashem listened to the outcry of the Jewish people was because of the blessing our Patriarch Yitzchok gave to his son Yaakov. The blessing was - “The voice is the voice of Yaakov.” This means that the power of the Jew lies in his mouth – which is through prayer. Therefore when we pray we must believe that Hashem will listen because of the blessing of Yitzchok. If we would truly internalize and believe in the power of our prayers we would all pray differently.

Hashem associated His name with the names of the families of the Jewish people so that we should understand and appreciate that we possess great spiritual potential inherited from our holy Patriarchs. The only reason why the entire world is continuously focused on the Jew, despite our inconsequential number, is because we descend from Avraham, Yitzchok, and Yaakov. If we were to channel the energy that emanates from our spirituality in a proper manner we would affect the world in a profoundly positive way and ultimately bring about redemption.

## ***5. How can one Merit Teshuvah***

The Torah states, “**The sons of Korach did not die.**” Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason they did not perish along with Korach and his community was because “They had contemplations of atonement (*teshuvah*) in their heart.” The Yalkut (Midrash) in the Portion of Korach asks, “Why did the sons of Korach merit to be saved?” The Midrash answers - when Moshe entered into Korach’s tent, Korach’s sons were sitting along side their father. When they saw Moshe Rabbeinu enter the tent they were in a quandary. Should they acknowledge his presence and disgrace their father or should they remain seated and violate the law of acknowledging a Torah sage? They decided to stand for Moshe despite their father’s disgrace. The Midrash states, “Because they stood for Moshe they immediately had stirrings of teshuvah in their hearts.” We learn from this that having the ability to do teshuvah comes from understanding one’s wrong behavior, which only comes about if one has special merit. The sons of Korach were able to have that level of clarity and inner strength only in the merit of their acknowledgment of Moshe’s presence.

The Chofetz Chaim z’tl in the *Mishna Berurah* (*the Laws of Tisha B’Av*) explains that the reason why the four fasts of the year were enacted (17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz, the 9<sup>th</sup> of Av, Fast of Gedalya, and the 10<sup>th</sup> of Teves), was to commemorate the tragedies which came upon the Jewish people on those days. The reason we put ourselves in a deprived state is to introspect and arouse ourselves to do teshuvah. By remembering the days of tragedy in this manner, we become sensitized to be able to recognize the wrongs of our ancestors and ourselves. The Chofetz Chaim continues to explain, “The most important aspect of these fast days is not the fast itself, but rather the introspection which leads to teshuvah.” He cites a verse from the book of Yona, which says that when the

community of Nineveh fasted and did teshuvah, “Hashem saw their ways.” Meaning, Hashem did not see their sackcloth and fasting (it was not primary) but rather their change in behavior as a result of doing teshuvah. Fasting is only the context in which introspection and teshuvah take place. If one is occupied with activities other than introspection and self-analysis, he is taking hold of what is secondary (regarding the fasting) and is missing what is primary.

We see from Chazal that one does not come to teshuvah easily. One needs special merit. The Rambam writes in the Laws of Teshuvah that in order for one to do proper teshuvah one needs to have deep remorse for doing the wrong and a commitment to never repeat that wrong again. If so, how does one merit being able to do a proper teshuvah?

Pirkei Avos (Ethics of our Fathers 2:2) teaches us that if a person is engaged with the needs of the community he should be involved for the sake of Hashem. If one does this for the sake of Hashem not only will his own merit contribute to the success of his endeavor but the merit of the entire community will contribute to his success. Chazal established communal fast days during which all of us must fast together to commemorate the tragedy that fell on that particular day. We fast as a Jewish people; we do Vidui (confession) as a Jewish people. It may be that it is these days of communal praying and fasting for the sake of the Klal Yisroel that give each of us the merit of the entire community to do teshuvah. If one wants to repent as an individual it is very difficult however, if one has the merit of the community then it becomes much more attainable.

## ***6. Acknowledging the Good (from Parshas Chukas)***

The Torah tells us that the Jews complained to Moshe about the Mann (Manna) saying, “**...our soul is disgusted with this insubstantial food.**” In response to their complaints, Hashem sent venomous serpents to bite them and there were many casualties. The Gemara in Tractate *Avodah Zarah* tells us that when the Jews complained about the Mann, Hashem said, “**You are ingrates who descend from an ingrate.**” The Gemara explains that this is referring to the fact that the Jews are decedents of Adam, who transgressed Hashem’s Will and ate from the tree of knowledge.

When Hashem confronted Adam and asked him, “Why did you eat from the tree of knowledge?” Adam responded by saying, “I ate because of the wife **you** have given me.” This implied that Hashem is the cause of his failing. The reason why Hashem provided Adam with a wife was so she could be his helpmate and assist him in achieving purpose. However, in his response to Hashem Adam turned around this act of kindness which Hashem had done for him and portrayed it as a curse. Because of this, Hashem called Adam an “ingrate.” The same is true regarding the Jews in the desert who complained about the Mann.

Hashem gave the Jews the gift of the Mann so that they would be sustained in the desert. This miracle food nourished them and prepared them for their rise to a new spiritual dimension upon entering the Land of Israel. There were other benefits besides the spiritual ones. After eating the Mann, it was miraculously absorbed in their innards. This meant that they would not be inconvenienced by leaving the camp to their bodily functions. The Torah states that the camp of the Jew must remain “Holy (Clean),” therefore, if one needed to do his bodily functions he would have had to go outside of the camp. The gift of the Mann was a true blessing from Hashem. However, the Jews (like Adam, their forefather) not only did not recognize the blessing but they complained and said, “**...our soul is disgusted with this insubstantial food.**” This is why Hashem called the Jews “**...ingrates who descend from an ingrate.**”

Usually it is understood that an “ingrate” is a person who received a great deal from a benefactor and when asked for some degree of reciprocity, he behaves as if he never received anything. It might be said that this is because he has a “short memory” and he does not want to recall all the good that was done for him. However, in the case of Adam and the Jews in the desert (regarding the Mann), the lack of their gratitude was much more serious.

Hashem performed a great act of kindness for the Jewish people by providing them with the Mann. The failing of the Jews was not that they did not appreciate its value and blessing, but

rather, they characterized it as a detriment and something of a destructive nature. This situation is the equivalent of a patient who is in need of a life-saving blood transfusion and accuses the doctor when piercing his skin with the transfusion needle that he is there to kill him. Adam, and the Jewish people in the desert, were the recipients of the greatest gifts of Hashem and nevertheless they both perceived their blessings as a curse. This is a more serious offense than the “ingrate” who forgets the past, because this is turning the blessing into a curse – turning good into evil.

This is similar to what the Rambam writes in *Hilchos Teshuvah*, that a person’s perception can become so distorted that he will say, “night is day and day is night - good is evil and evil is good.”

Hashem has given us invaluable gifts in the form of Mitzvos. Hashem knows our every need from a physical and spiritual perspective. He has provided us with parameters that are in our best interest. Nevertheless people view Mitzvos as a burden that infringe on their lives. Shabbos, which is “a semblance of the World to Come,” is perceived as an inconvenience. A Jew is a Prince who requires special and delicate treatment in every respect to ensure his proper spiritual development. Hashem provides the Jew with every aspect of his needs, yet people behave as if they were ordinary.

The Mishna in *Tractate Berachos* states, “Just as a person blesses Hashem for the good, he must bless Hashem for the bad.” Meaning that when a person experiences good fortune he must say the blessing of “Shehecheyonu.” If he experiences misfortune or tragedy he must say the blessing of “Dayan HaEmes” (Hashem is the true Judge).” Why did Chazal legislate the blessing of “Dayan HaEmes”? The answer is - if G-d forbid, a person experiences misfortune and does not identify and recognize that this misfortune is truly in his best interest, then his reaction and response would be classified as an “ingrate.” One would be saying that Hashem’s blessing is in fact a curse. It is analogous to a person who has a gangrenous limb that must be removed to save the person’s life. In fact the removal of the limb is the greatest kindness that one could do for this individual. It is a life –giving procedure. However, if the patient would see the removal as causing him tremendous pain and loss, then this is the statement of a true “ingrate.” He is calling the ultimate blessing the ultimate curse. Therefore, this promulgation of the blessing “Dayan HaEmes” was of the utmost importance to us as a Jewish people - so that we should not be classified as “ingrates.”