

# *Parshas Pinchas*

Presented By Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky Shlita, Dean

## *1. The Jew's Role Vis-à-vis the World*

The Torah tells us that as a result of engaging with the Midianite women and the Baal-Peor (idolatry), a plague befell the Jewish people causing the death of 24,000. The Torah states, **“It was after the plague- Hashem spoke to Moshe and Elazar the son of Aaron the Kohen saying: Take a census of the entire assembly of the Children of Israel, from twenty and above, according to their father’s houses...”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain the reason for the census with an allegory: it is the equivalent of a shepherd who wishes to count his flock after wolves had entered into his flock and killed a number of his sheep.

When the Torah identifies the paternal family names and tribes of the Jewish people, it adds the letters “hay” and “yud.” Rashi cites the Midrash, which explains that, the significance of these letters (which spell the Name of G-d) is to signify that Hashem attested to the purity of each of the families of the tribes of Israel. The nations of the world attempted to disgrace the Jewish people by claiming that their pure pedigree was unfounded. They claimed, “One would think that when the Jews were slaves in Egypt the men’s lives were dominated by the Egyptians – is there a question that the Jewish women’s bodies were not also in the possession of the Egyptians? – Thus bringing into question the purity of the Jewish people.” The nations of the world believed that the Jewish women were surely defiled by the Egyptian men. 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 their purity.

When the first census of the Jewish people was taken (mentioned at the beginning of the Book of Bamidbar) the Torah tells us that each family brought with them a “sefer yechusim (book of their pedigree)” in order to establish their pure status. At that time, the nations of the world did not question the purity of the Jewish people. However, they did question it when the census was taken after the plague. Why did they question the purity of the Jewish people now and not before?

It is important to note that when the Torah was given at Sinai to the Jewish people, the nations of the world asked G-d, “Why did You not offer Your Torah to us as You offered it to the Jewish people?” Hashem responded, “Do you have proof of your pedigree as My children do?” Since nations of the world engaged in incestuous and adulterous relationships, they could not establish their pedigree and purity. Thus, they were not worthy to receive the Torah. However, after the Jewish people engaged in promiscuous relations with the Midianite women it caused the nations of the world to question the purity of the Jewish people. They realized that the Jewish people were as susceptible to sexual temptation as they were and thus their purity must be questioned. In order to dispel this misconception, Hashem Himself attested to their purity by associating His Name “Yud and Hay” with each of the families.

Despite that fact that Hashem attested to the purity of the Jewish people, they nevertheless besmirched their unquestioned state of purity and thus breached their position as a standard for proper behavior. At Sinai Hashem had taken the Jewish people as His “Priestly, kingly, and holy people.” This established the role of the Jewish people vis-à-

vis G-d and existence. The only nation that is obligated to “observe the Shabbos and keep it holy” is the Jewish people. Observing the Shabbos is a testament that G-d is the Creator of existence. Just as G-d created the world in six days and abstained from creative activity on the seventh, so too the Jewish people, who are G-d’s people, must conduct themselves in this manner. This responsibility that was given to the Jewish people is a sign of that special relationship between G-d and His people.

The Gemara in Tractate Yomah tells us that the Hillel (the Elder) holds the needy and impoverished accountable in the study of Torah. Despite the fact that Hillel was initially destitute, he nevertheless found time to engage in Torah study and thus developed into Hillel the Elder. Since Hillel is a representation of that economic class of person, the needy person cannot justify to Hashem that he was not able to study Torah because of his impoverished state. If the needy person would say that he could not find time to study Torah because he was preoccupied with supporting his family, Hashem would respond, “Were you more needy than Hillel?” It is not to say that G-d holds anyone to the same standard as Hillel. However if one cannot find time to study because of his financial situation, it is only an indication that he truly has no desire to study Torah. If he did have a genuine desire, he would have found the time.

Similarly, the Jewish people, living within the prescribed moral and ethical context that is established by Torah, become the archetype for the entire world. When the Jew was chosen to be the “*goy kaddosh* - holy people” of Hashem, his behavior became the paradigm for everyone. However, if the Jewish people breach that standard, then it is diminished for the entire world. When the Jews failed with the Baal-Peor/Midianite women, they breached the standard of purity and proper behavior. Therefore, although Hashem attested to the pedigree of the Jewish people by associating His Name with them, nevertheless that original level was diminished. This was a breach in the standing as G-d’s “holy people.”

The Jew is obligated to maintain a posture that is indicative of being the “holy people” of G-d because the Jew’s responsibility is to maintain that standard. If the Jewish people live within the context of Torah, the world will view them in a reverent manner. The Jew must study and adhere to the Torah and its Statutes because it is “your wisdom and your understanding before the eyes of the nations.” When the Jew lives within the context of the Torah, as he is obligated to, the world will see him in the most positive light and the proper standard will be represented.

## ***2. The Woman’s Special Relationship with the Land of Israel***

The Torah states, **“The daughters of Tzelofchad, son of Chefer, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh son of Yosef drew near...and they stood before Moshe, before Elazar the Kohen...saying, “Our father died in the desert, but he was not among the assembly that was gathering against Hashem in the assembly of Korach, but he died of his own sin; and he has no son... Give us possession among our father’s brothers.”** Since their father Tzelofchad had died in the desert without male heirs, his daughters approached Moshe concerning their right to their father’s inheritance. They wished to receive his portion in the Land of Israel. Moshe posed their question to Hashem and was told that that the daughters of Tzelofchad were the proper heirs and thus had a right to inherit their father’s portion.

Rashi cites Chazal who say that the generation that passed away in the desert (the generation of the *meraglim* -spies) did not include the women. The reason the women were spared was that they rejected the report of the spies who had slandered the Land.

Chazal tell us that the women did not believe the spies because they had a “chibas ha’aretz (special love for the Land).”

Without this explanation of Chazal, one could have said that the basis for the women’s rejection of the report of the spies was because they had an innate intuition of reality. They instinctively felt that the spies’ evaluation of the Land was incorrect. As we find, through the statement of Chazal that the Jewish people were redeemed “in the merit of the righteous women.” The Jewish women in Egypt believed intuitively that the Jewish people would eventually be redeemed. Thus, they did not despair. In fact they encouraged their husbands to procreate to guarantee the future of the Jewish people.

However, Chazal tell us that it was not women’s’ intuition that caused them to reject the report of the spies but rather their “chibas ha’aretz (special love for the Land).” From this, we can learn a profound lesson that when one truly loves something, he cannot be distracted. Since the women had a special love for the Land of Israel, they were not discouraged despite the ominous report of the spies. They remained steadfast in their belief that they were going to enter into the Land and succeed.

It is interesting to note that when the Torah mentions the daughters of Tzelofchad, it traces their pedigree back to Yosef - **“The daughters of Tzelofchad, son of Chefer, son of Gilead, son of Machir, son of Manasseh, of the families of Manasseh son of Yosef...”** Rashi cites Chazal who say, “It is understood that if the Torah states that the daughters descend from the family of Manasseh that they descend from Yosef because he was the son of Yosef. Why is it necessary for the Torah to trace their pedigree back to Yosef? It is to tell us that Yosef also had a special love for the Land of Israel. Where do we find that Yosef had a special love for the Land? It is because he asked that his remains be taken out of Egypt and is buried in the Land of Israel.”

One might think that Yosef would have wished to be buried in Israel because of its kiddusha (sanctity) or to be buried with his family. However by tracing the pedigree of the daughters of Tzelofchad to Yosef, the Torah is revealing to us that the basis for Yosef’s request to be buried in the Land of Israel was because of his special “love of the Land” - as the daughters of Tzelofchad. Just as the Jewish women had a special love for the Land, so too did Yosef. Evidently Yosef must have had many conflicts of interest that would have caused him to want to be buried in Egypt – such as the fact that he was the Viceroy who had saved the land during the years of famine. However, because of his “chibas ha’aretz (special love for the Land)” he asked that his remains should be removed from Egypt at the time of redemption.

The Midrash tells us that one of the names of Yisro was “Chovav (one who loves).” Chazal explain that the reason Yisro was called “Chovav” was his love for Torah. The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that it was a discredit to Moshe and the 600,000 Jews who left Egypt that Yisro said, “Baruch Hashem (Blessed be G-d)” and they did not. Yisro was able to acknowledge G-d’s kindness to the Jewish people in a way that Moshe and the Jews themselves did not. The Gemara therefore explains that Yisro’s ability to acknowledge Hashem’s kindness reflected negatively on the Jewish people. Why was Yisro able to acknowledge G-d with “Baruch Hashem” while the Jewish people did not? The reason was not Yisro’s level of intelligence and wisdom. It was because of Yisro’s special love for the Torah that he was able to overcome the world’s disdain for the Jewish people and thus acknowledged Hashem’s beneficence.

The Torah is teaching to us that if a person has a special level of love- whether it is for the Torah itself, his fellow Jew, or the Land of Israel, he will not be discouraged or

distracted from his objective.

### **3. How Does One Avert Divine Retribution?**

The Torah tells us that due to the zealotry of Pinchas, Hashem did not destroy the Jewish people because, "***B'kino es kinahsee, (when he (Pinchas) zealously avenged My Vengeance...)***" Rashi explains that since Pinchas was angered to the same degree that Hashem was angered, the Klal Yisroel was spared and not destroyed. Because Pinchas experienced Hashem's pain because of the *Chilul Hashem* (desecration of Hashem's Name) 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 annihilated (G-d Forbid).

We learn from the incident of Pinchas, that if a public *Chilul Hashem* takes place and no one is pained sufficiently to respond, then Hashem Himself will react to the desecration of His Name. When Hashem chooses to intervene in order to awaken us, He brings about compelling situations that force us to address the cause of our problem. If a person dismisses these difficulties as mere happenstance, then Hashem will force him to acknowledge the gravity of the problem by intensifying the severity of his misfortunes. However, if we preemptively recognize our shortcomings and failings and are pained by them to the point of intervention and penitence, then Hashem has no need to further intervene.

The Gemara in *Tractate Avodah Zarah* tells us that Yitzchok, our Patriarch, enacted the afternoon prayer service (Mincha). The Gemara explains that the word "*l'suach*" in the verse, "Yitzchok went out into the field *l'suach* (to speak)" means "to pray". 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. In addition they pray that the spiritual shortcomings of the generation will be recognized and proper initiatives will be taken to correct them. Why does the Torah sage pray for others while the ordinary person prays only for himself or those who are associated with him?

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 would definitely pray for them. The tzaddik and Torah sage, who live their lives for the sake of Hashem and the Jewish people, is focused on their needs and therefore prays for their well being (both materially and spiritually). If we look beyond ourselves and recognize the shortcomings of the *Klal Yisroel* we will address them. The importance and value of this acknowledgement is that Hashem will not feel it necessary to react by bringing about whatever correction is needed because the issues are being addressed. Just as Hashem did not annihilate the Jewish people for their serious failing because Pinchas intervened, so too, Hashem would withhold punishment from the Jewish people because of our own intervention. This can be accomplished through *tefillah* (praying on behalf of our fellow Jews), increased Torah study (to give us greater merit), and teshuvah (repentance).

We pray every day that Hashem should give us understanding to comprehend His Will and to serve Him. If during our *tefillah* we internalize what we are saying, we would 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 no longer be a need to pray for what we do not have (such as livelihood, health, success, etc.) because if we address and correct our failings then all of our material needs

will be provided.

#### **4. Recognizing Something for What it Truly Is**

After the incident of Baal Peor, which caused the death of 24,000 Jews (through 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 to tell the Jewish people, **“You should harass the Midianites”?**

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh answers that the Jews who survived the plague needed atonement for the lust that they had in their hearts at the time of the Baal Peor. The Jews who were exposed to the Baal Peor and the seductive behavior of the non-Jewish women were affected negatively to a great degree. Although the event had passed they still had the lust in their hearts for those women. A person is not able to do proper teshuvah and thus be fully forgiven unless he is fully cleansed from that desire. Therefore Hashem commanded the Jewish people, “You should Harass the Midianite” meaning, “you should put them in the most detestable light.” The Jew should despise them for what they represent and what they attempted to bring upon the Jewish people. Due to 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 and hate those who are opposed to G-d then we will be susceptible to their influences. One cannot take a neutral or “middle of the road” position vis-à-vis something which is contrary to the Will of G-d without being influenced. The only way one is not susceptible to that negative influence is by taking on a contrary position.

The Gemara in *Tractate Avodah Zarah* tells us that the Negative Commandment of *“Lo seichaneim”* means “Do not speak graciously about a non-Jew for the sake of admiration..” The Rambam states that the reason one is not permitted to esteem a non-Jew for sake of admiration is because when one values another person he can be influenced by his values and beliefs. Although the non-Jew may in truth be the “best physician” or the most “brilliant lawyer” simultaneously (as a person) he also possesses an ethical, moral and theological position through which we may be influenced. If one esteems the non-Jew, he allows himself to be vulnerable to the influences of that person.

The only way we can protect ourselves from being influenced and affected negatively is to have a conscious disdain for the positions that are not in conformance with the Will of Hashem. Moshe Rabbeinu at the end of the Book of Devarim, refers to the idols of the nations as *“their dung and their putrid rodents.”* Rashi cites the Midrash that explains Moshe identifying the idols as detestable and despicable as “dung and putrid rodents.” If idolatry is perceived as something that is truly revolting as dung and putrid rodents, there is no question that one will not be influenced by idolatry.

We must perceive the “wrong” in the most extreme negative light. The reason for this is since Hashem commanded us not to engage in it, it is intrinsically detestable. When we are able to internalize this reality, then we can have relevance to holiness.

#### **5. The Linkage of Humility to Torah**

The Torah tells us that the daughters of Tzelofchad approached Moshe with a claim to their father’s inheritance- as he had died with no male heirs. They posed the

question of inheritance to Moshe Rabbeinu and he did not know how to respond. He thus presented their case to Hashem and was told that the daughters of Tzelofchad were indeed their father's rightful heirs. If the laws of inheritance had already been communicated to Moshe at Sinai, why was it necessary for him to pose the question to Hashem regarding the daughters of Tzelofchad?

Rashi cites Chazal who say that Moshe had forgotten the law pertaining to inheritance (the *halacha*). Although Moshe was the conduit through which the Torah was transmitted to the Jewish people, he had "forgotten the halacha". How do we understand this? Chazal explain that when Moshe had established the infrastructure of the judicial system consisting of higher and lower courts, he had said, "The most difficult issues you will bring to me (and I will personally adjudicate them.)" Despite the fact that Moshe was the most humble person who ever lived, since he expressed himself in a manner that was slightly lacking in humility he forgot the halacha. Chazal say that it was because "he took a crown for himself which he had no right to." Was the forgetting of the law pertaining to inheritance a punishment from Hashem due to his slight lack of humility or was it a mere consequence of his failure vis-à-vis humility?

The Gemara in Tractate *Taanis* tells us that the Torah is compared to three liquids: water, wine, and milk. Torah is compared to water because its innate characteristic is similar to water. Just as water flows from an elevated location to a lower one where it accumulates, so too does Torah accumulate in one who is truly lowly/humble. The more humble a person is the greater is his capacity to contain and process Torah. Since Moshe had expressed himself in a manner that was unbecoming to him (because of his exceptional level of humility), he had forgotten the law.

It is interesting to note that the Gemara in Tractate *Sanhedrin* tells us, "If the Torah would not have been given through Moshe Rabbeinu, it could have been given through Hillel the Elder." Hillel's level of humility was so exceptional that he could have been the conduit to bring the Torah to the Jewish people. The Gemara in Tractate *Pesachim* tells us that when Hillel came to the Land of Israel from Babylon, where he had been living, the *Benai Bassairah* (who were the Princes of Israel) appreciated his greatness in Torah and thus stepped down from their position to allow him to become the Prince. After Hillel assumed the position of Prince, he criticized the *Benai Bassairah* by saying; "The reason you are less qualified than I am is because I studied Torah under the tutelage of Shmayah and Avtalion who were the leading Sages of Babylon."

Hillel's manner of criticizing the *Benai Bassairah* was slightly lacking in humility. The Gemara tells us that after this incident with the *Benai Bassairah*, he had forgotten the *halacha*. That year, the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan (*Erev Pesach*) was to be on Shabbos. The Pascal Lamb is normally slaughtered on the 14<sup>th</sup> of Nissan. The question posed to Hillel was- since the Pesach is a private offering is one permitted to slaughter it on Shabbos? Hillel had forgotten the *halacha* and thus it was an embarrassment to him. Hashem's retribution immediately came upon Hillel because of his failing in the area of humility. Why is it that when one is lacking in humility (even to the slightest degree) does it result in the forgetting of Torah?

The Gemara tells us that Torah is also compared to wine. Just as wine needs to be stored in an earthenware cask, which allows the wine to retain its purity because the vessel does not have its own properties that could intermingle with the wine, so too the individual who studies Torah must possess the characteristic of humility – not to allow his own ego to intermingle with the Torah. Maharal of Prague explains that when a person who is truly humble processes the Torah, it remains in an unadulterated state because he is

only interested in understanding G-d's Word. The humble person does not intermingle his own ego with the Torah, thus it remains pure and true.

With this understanding, we may be able to explain the basis for Moshe's forgetting of the *halacha* (law). In order to demonstrate to the Jewish people that Moshe was *Emmes* (truth) and the Torah that he transmitted was *Emmes*, the moment that he failed (even slightly) in the area of humility he was unable to communicate the Torah and its laws. In order to indicate that the Torah that Moshe transmitted to the Jewish people was G-d's unaltered Word in its most pure form, Moshe needed to possess the characteristic of the earthenware vessel, which does not have its own properties to intermingle with the wine. The moment Moshe allowed his ego to be expressed, as he had said, "the most difficult issue you shall bring to me", he was unable to retain and transmit the Torah that he had been taught. This was a confirmation that the Torah that Moshe did previously transmit was the Word of G-d and not his own. The only Torah that Moshe was able to express was Hashem's. Thus, if there had been any failure in humility he was unable to disseminate Torah.

Similarly, Hillel the Elder who was the Prince/transmitter of Torah could not retain Torah when he failed in the area of humility. The moment he differentiated between himself and the *Benai Bassairah* (which was considered a lack of humility), he had forgotten the *halacha* regarding slaughtering on Shabbos. This confirmed that the only Torah that Hillel transmitted was the Torah of Hashem.

The only person other than Moshe to be called "Rabbeinu (our teacher)" was Reb Yehudah HaNassi (Judah the Prince). He is referred to by Chazal as Rabbeinu HaKadosh (Our Holy teacher). Reb Yehudah HaNassi was the redactor of the Oral Law (Mishna). The Gemara in Tractate *Bava Metziah* tells us that Reb Yehudah HaNassi suffered from a stone in his urinary tract for thirteen years. (He was punished with this affliction due to a lack of compassion that he had expressed regarding a calf going to its slaughter.) Why did such suffering manifest itself specifically in his urinary tract? He could have been afflicted in any physical manner.

The reason Reb Yehudah HaNassi was referred to as Rabbeinu HaKadosh (our holy teacher) was because he never extended his hand below his belt so as not to come in contact with his male organ. (As the Gemara in Tractate *Nidah* tells us, if one comes in contact with his male organ, he can become aroused and consequently waste seed.) Thus, Reb Yehudah HaNassi (Rabbeinu HaKadosh) never extended his hand below his belt. If he was so meticulous in this area of behavior (to be considered a holy person/*kaddosh*) then why did his affliction manifest itself in the urinary tract?

Reb Yehudah HaNassi's affliction is classified as suffering that is brought upon the special tzaddik because of G-d's love for him. If the punishment had manifested itself in any other part of his body one could have questioned his true purity. One could have thought that that Reb Yehudah HaNassi was being punished because of his lack of purity. Thus causing us to question his spiritual standing and the purity of the Torah that he was transmitting. However, since the punishment manifested itself in a location that was known to all as being an area in which he exemplified *kiddusha* (holiness), his purity would not be questioned. Therefore the Torah that was being communicated by Reb Yehudah HaNassi was beyond reproach regarding its purity and accuracy.

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