

# THE SPECIAL POTENTIAL OF EACH JEW

*by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky*

## 1. G-d 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 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 Shimone 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 had to transpired 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 that when Pinchas avenged G-d's Honor to bring about this Kiddush Hashem, the Jewish people remained silent and allowed this Kiddush Hashem to take place, thus not interfering. This silence was an atonement for their initial non-intervention when they stood silent and 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 a non-Jew in a public setting, if one is zealous he is permitted to kill those who are involved in the desecrating 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 to reap such unlimited reward?

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that during the time of the evil king Achov, he ordered that 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 to the beginning of the Second Temple period. The Gemara tells us that Ovadia is esteemed to a greater degree than Avraham Aveinu. 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 and if not it would have come to an end. The question is- How does one merit to have the opportunity and clarity to do as Ovadia had done in the face of great danger?

Pinchas and Ovadia both merited an opportunity of Kiddush Hashem, Sanctification of G-d's Name. The Gemara in Tractate Makkos states a principle in life, "Whatever path that one chooses to walk in life he will be lead 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 that choice. If a person chooses to lead a life of righteousness then Hashem will give opportunities to act upon that choice. 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 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 only yearns for spiritual growth, Hashem will provide for him every opportunity to bring this to fruition. Pinchas and Ovadia were people who lived their lives only to sanctify Hashem's name; therefore, the opportunities in each of their contexts 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, "Yitzchak went out into the field l'suach (to speak)" which means to 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 the forgiveness and enlightenment of their generation. The tzaddik prays that his generation should recognize their spiritual shortcomings and thus take the proper initiative 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 live their lives for the sake of G-d and the Jewish people, are focused on the needs of the Jewish people and therefore pray on behalf of their well being. If we look beyond ourselves we will recognize the spiritual failings of the community and Klal Yisroel and thus address them. If we do this then Hashem will not need to react because the problems are already being attended to. Just as Hashem refrained from punishing the Jewish people because of Pinchas' intervention, so too will Hashem refrain from punishing the Jewish people because of our own intervention whether it is 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 were 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 the shortcomings 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 if the Jewish people were first commanded to destroy the Midianite people in the Portion of Mattos (a later portion) as it states, "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 thus allow the Jew to 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 explains that the reason why one is not permitted to esteem a non-Jew for the sake of admiration is because a human being is made up of many facets, which range from his abilities, values and beliefs. Although he may be the "best doctor" or the most "brilliant lawyer" he also possesses an ethical, moral and belief system. Therefore if one esteems the non-Jew for the sake of admiration, 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 have a disdain for anything that is contrary to the Will of Hashem. At the end of the Book of Devorim, Moshe refers to the idols of the nations as "their dung and their putrid rodents." Rashi in his commentary cites the Midrash which explains that the idolatry is as detestable and despicable as "dung and putrid rodents". The Torah nevertheless follows by saying, "if you were affected by this idolatrous exposure." The question is if idolatry is perceived as "dung and putrid rodents" how could one be affected by it? The answer is - if one did not in truth experience the revolution for idolatry as if it were "dung and putrid rodents" then there is a possibility that one can be affected by it.

The wrong is something that needs to be seen in the most extreme negative light not simply because Hashem said that we should not engage in it, but rather since 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 that after the plague Hashem told Moshe that he and Elazer (the son of Aaron) 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 the men's lives were dominated by the Egyptians - is there a question that the Jewish women's bodies were not in the possession of the Egyptians?" Meaning, that the Jewish women were surely defiled by the Egyptian men. Therefore the nations of the world claimed that the Jews' priding themselves in their pedigree was absurd. 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 Tehilim (Psalms), "Shivtay K'AH aidus l'yisroel (the tribes of G-d, who attests to Israel.)" Meaning that the Hashem personally attests that the Jewish people the tribes of Israel. The question to ask is - why should we be concerned about what the nations of the world claim regarding about our pedigree? Another question to ask is- how do we know ourselves that we are descendents of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs?

The reason why Hashem must attest to our pedigree, that we descend from the Patriarchs, 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, Yitzchak, 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 descents 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 would treat our prayers differently. We would understand, 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 sating 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 of our Patriarch Yitzchak which he gave to his son Yaakov. The blessing that was given to Yaakov was-, "The voice is the voice of Yaakov." Meaning 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 Yitzchak. If we would truly internalize and believed 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 the Jew should understand and appreciate that he possesses great spiritual potential that we 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, Yitzchak, 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 the Chazal which explains 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 Korach's sons saw Moshe Rabbeinu enter the tent of their father, they were in a quandary. Should they stand for Moshe to 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 for one to have the ability to do teshuvah, understanding the wrong in one's behavior, only comes about if one has special merit. The sons of Korach were only 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 Mishnah Berurah (the Laws of Tesha B'Av) explains that the reason why the four fasts of the year were enacted (17th of Tammuz, the 9th of Av, Fast of Gedalya, and the 10th 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 Yonah, which says that when the community of Ninvey fasted and did teshvah, "Hashem saw their ways." Meaning, Hashem did not see (it was not primary) their sackcloth and fasting 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 ever again. If so -how does one merit to be 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. Because 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 we all Jews must fast together to commemorate the tragedy of that particular day. We fast as a Jewish people, we do Veedoiy (confession) as a Jewish people. It may be that 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 do teshuvah 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 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." Implying that Hashem is the cause of his failing. The reason why Hashem provided Adam with a wife was so that she should be his helpmate to assist him in achieving purpose. In his response to Hashem, Adam turned an 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 should be sustained and nourished with this miracle food, which prepared them for their rise to a new spiritual dimension upon entering the Land of Israel. In addition to its spiritual benefits, it sustained them in every possible way. Eating the Mann miraculously was absorbed in their innards so as not to inconvenience them to leave the camp to their bodily functions. The Torah states that the camp of the Jew must remain "Holy (Clean)"; therefore, if one would need to do his bodily functions he would have to go outside of the camp. The gift of the Mann was a true blessing from Hashem. Despite this, the Jews (like Adam their forefather) not only did not recognize the blessing they complained with, "...our soul is disgusted with this insubstantial food." This is why Hashem called the Jews "...ingrates who descend from an ingrate."

The way one normally understands an "ingrate" is a person who had great benefit from a benefactor and when that benefactor asks for some degree of reciprocation, he behaves as if he was never a beneficiary. We may say that this is because the one who benefited 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 level of "ingrate" is much more serious.

Hashem performed a great act of kindness to the Jewish people by providing them the Mann. The failing of the Jews (regarding the Mann) was not that they did not appreciate the value and the 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 both were the recipients of the greatest gifts of Hashem and they nevertheless both perceived the blessing as a curse. This is a more serious offense of a normal "ingrate" who forgets the past, because this is turning the blessing into a curse - good into evil.

This is similar to what the Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuva, 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 infringes 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 their needs, yet people behave as if they were ordinary and not Princes.

The Mishna in Tractate Berachos states, "Just as 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 "Shehechiyano" and 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 one being 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".

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