

WHO IS WORTHY OF A MIRACLE?

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. Who Is Worthy of A Miracle?

The Torah tells us that Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, publicly desecrated G'd's Name by cohabiting with Cozbi, a Midianite Princess. Pinchas acted zealously to avenge G'd's Honor by killing Zimri and Cozbi. He pierced them both with a spear while they were engaged in their disgraceful sexual act. The Torah states, "Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My (G'd) wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged Me among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel with My vengeance." Rashi explains that since Pinchas had expended his wrath upon the desecrators of G'd through his zealotry, G'd did not need to expend His Wrath to destroy the Jewish people. It was only because Pinchas had acted zealously as a result of internalizing the unconscionable desecration of G'd's Name that He spared the Jewish people. Because of his selfless dedication for G'd he acted as he had done. The Midrash tells us that Pinchas was only able to succeed in his zealotry because of the many miracles that G'd had performed on his behalf.

The Torah states when Bilaam went to curse the Jewish people, "Bilaam arose in the morning and saddled his donkey..." Rashi cites Chazal who state, "From here we learn, hate disrupts protocol." Although Bilaam was a self-centered and egotistical person with an insatiable desire for material and honor, he nevertheless saddled his own donkey. One would think that a man of Bilaam's demeanor and temperament would not allow himself to act so disgracefully to saddle his own donkey, which was an act that was befitting for one of his servants. However, because he was driven by rabid hatred for the Jewish people, he chose to demean himself without hesitation.

The Torah states regarding Avraham, our Patriarch, "Avraham arose in the morning and saddled his donkey..." Despite the fact that Avraham was world-renowned (father of all nations) and possessed great wealth, he personally saddled his own donkey to take his most beloved only son to be brought as a sacrifice. Avraham, although he was 137 years old and could have had one of his servants saddle his donkey for his journey, he chose to do it himself based on the principle, "Love disrupts protocol."

When one loves or hates on an all-consuming level, all that exists at that moment for that individual is to achieve the objective of his love or hate. When Avraham was told by G'd to bring his son Yitzchak as a sacrifice, despite his special love for his son who was born to him in his old age of 100 years, he acted with zeal to selflessly carry out the Will of G'd. Because of Avraham's all-consuming

love for G'd, he as an individual was negated. All that existed for Avraham was the execution of G'd's Will. Therefore, the inappropriateness of Avraham saddling his own donkey was not an issue. Identically, Bilaam, because of his all-consuming hatred for the Jewish people, was negated as a person despite his pompous and self-absorbed personality. At that moment, all that existed was the objective to annihilate the Jewish people through his curse. There was no Bilaam at that moment.

Pinchas at that moment possessed an unequaled level of love for G'd. He was thus driven to act as a zealot to avenge G'd's honor. If he would have considered for a moment the impossibility of his task to succeed, he would have not attempted to take the initiative. It was only because he was all-consuming with his love for G'd that he could not tolerate the desecration of His Name. Thus, he acted as a zealot without thinking of the consequences of his behavior. Because of his all-consuming love for G'd, He performed on his behalf multiple miracles so that he should succeed in his objective to reinstate G'd's Glory.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that there was a time when it had not rained over an extended period of time. The Rabbis had instituted all the measures (fasting and supplicating G'd) to evoke G'd's Mercy to bring about rain and it did not happen. The Gemara asks why in the time of Reb Yehudah, although they were not proficient in all six sections of the Talmud, when he would remove only one of his shoes in preparation for prayer, it was a sufficient initiative to cause it to rain? However, in our time, when we are proficient in all six sections of the Talmud, despite taking all of the initiatives it does not rain. What was so special about Reb Yehudah? The Gemara explains that it was because "he was willing to sacrifice himself for the sanctification of G'd's Name." The incident through which Reb Yehudah demonstrated his self-sacrifice for the sake of G'd's Name was regarding a woman, who had dressed in an immodest manner. He had believed that she was a Jewish woman. When Reb Yehudah noticed her, he reacted to her lack of modesty. He had considered her attire to be unacceptable for a Jewish woman. His reaction to her immodesty did not take into account the dire consequences of his behavior because at that moment G'd's Honor was at stake. He had totally negated himself for G'd's Glory. Therefore, when he would take the slightest initiative to bring about rain, G'd would perform a miracle on his behalf. If one negates himself because of his love for G'd and does not consider himself or his needs, G'd will provide for him, despite the fact that the natural order must be superseded.

2. The Unconscionable Behavior of Zimri

The Torah tells us that Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, publicly desecrated G'd's Name by cohabiting with Cozbi, a Midianite Princess. The Midrash states, "The Torah is taken aback by the behavior of Zimri, the son of Salu. King Solomon writes, 'One who breaches a fence deserves to be bitten by a snake.' The forefather of Zimri (Shimon) had avenged promiscuous behavior. The Torah tells us that after Dinah had been raped by Shechem, the Prince of Canaan, his community had entered into a covenant with her family and agreed to have all their males should be circumcised. On the third day of their recovery, Shimon and Levy, taking advantage of their infirmity, killed all the

males of the community (including Shechem and his father Chamor) to avenge the rape of their sister. Zimri, the Prince of the tribe of Shimon had breached the fence that his forefather had established when he publicly cohabited with Cozbi."

The Torah refers to Shimon and Levy when they had destroyed the community of Shechem as "the brothers of Dinah." Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why are only Shimon and Levy referred to as the brothers of Dinah, and not the other sons of Yaakov? It is because they sacrificed on her behalf by avenging the disgrace that had been brought upon their sister and father." Immediately after they had destroyed the community, they were summoned by their father and were reprimanded. Their response to him was, "Should he treat our sister as a harlot?" Shimon and Levy's reaction to Shechem's behavior was not because he had breached society's standard of morality, but rather because he desecrated and defiled their sister. If this is so, then how do we reconcile the Midrash that tells us that Zimri deserved to be killed because he breached a fence that his forefather, Shimon had established and secured?

After the destruction of the world with the Great Flood the world had accepted upon itself a standard of morality because they had understood that what had come upon existence was due to man's immoral behavior. Shechem's rape of Dinah was the first public breach of that standard. Since Dinah, the sister of Shimon and Levy had been the victim through which the standard of behavior of society was breached, they reacted as they had. Their destruction of the community of Shechem reestablished the sacredness of morality. Zimri, who was the Prince of Shimon openly violated the sanctity of proper moral behavior by cohabiting with Cozbi. He therefore deserved severe punishment, unrelated to his desecration of G'd's Name. Rather, his punishment is rooted in the words of King Solomon, "The one who breaches a fence deserves to be bitten by a snake."

3. Why Were the Moabites Spared?

The Torah states, "G'd spoke to Moshe saying, 'Harass the Midianites and smite them...' G'd commanded Moshe to destroy the Midianites because they had plotted to destroy the Jewish people. However, the Moabites were not to be attacked. Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why were the Moabites not equally deserving to be destroyed? They instructed their daughters to seduce the Jewish people to lead them to the idolatry of Baal Peor. Their intent was to bring about the ultimate destruction of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the Moabites were left unharmed. Why was this so? It was because Ruth, the Moabite the granddaughter of Balak needed to come into existence."

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh in the portion of Ki Seitzei writes that at the time of the sin of Adam, satan had captured some of the most special souls. Ruth, the Moabite was one of them and she was subsequently released to become a Jewess. Because Ruth had a unique spiritual dimension she merited to have King David descend from her. Although the Moabites deserved to be destroyed, they were spared for the sake of Ruth. However, from the words of Chazal cited in the Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin, we understand this on a more profound level.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states, "Reb Yehudah had said in the name of Rav, 'It is worthwhile to engage in Torah and mitzvos even if it is not with a pure intent (shelo l'shma). Because when one engages in a mitzvah shelo l'shma it will lead to the performance of a mitzvah with a pure intent (l'shma). Where do we find an example of this? It was Balak who had brought forty-two offerings to G'd that he merited to have Ruth the Moabite as his descendant. From here we see the great value of a mitzvah, even if it was performed not with a proper intent." The offerings that were brought by Balak were done so with the specific intent to supplicate G'd to allow Bilaam, the evil one, to curse the Jewish people. Despite Balak's negative intent, the mitzvah generated a worthiness and merit that allowed Ruth to be his descendant. She ultimately became the grandmother of King David and the progenitor of Moshiach.

The entire Moabite people were spared although they had perpetrated the same evil as the Midianites, because the mitzvah that Balak had performed needed to be rewarded. A Jew should understand and appreciate that any mitzvah that he performs, despite its deficiency in intent, has unlimited value which cannot be fathomed. As we see regarding the Moabite nation.

4. Seeing Pinchas in His True Light

The Torah states, "Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Priest, turned back My wrath from the Children of Israel..." Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why does the Torah need to trace the lineage of Pinchas back to Aaron the High Priest, his grandfather? It is because after Pinchas had killed Zimri, he was ridiculed by the tribes of Israel for killing a Prince. They said, 'How can a person who descends from a grandfather (his maternal grandfather was Yisro) who had fattened calves for idolatry, be so brazen to kill a Prince of Israel?'" Therefore, the Torah needed to trace his lineage to Aaron the High Priest in order to reveal his prestigious pedigree.

The Torah tells us that had it not been for Pinchas' act of zealotry, G'd would have destroyed the entire Jewish people. After Pinchas killed Zimiri, the plague that had taken 24,000 people came to an end. Even if Pinchas did not descend from a prestigious line, how could the Jewish people have ridiculed him for his action, when it in fact it had spared them from total destruction? One would have thought that he would have deserved to be praised for his courageous act, regardless of his lack of pedigree. Despite all that they had witnessed and understood, they had put Pinchas in a negative light, seeing him as an uncouth person.

The Jewish people did in fact acknowledge that Pinchas' act of zealotry had saved them from destruction; however, their criticism of Pinchas was directed at him as a person. They claimed that if Pinchas, who descended from common stock, was able to kill a prince of Israel, it is an indication that he is a person who does not esteem or revere anyone of status. If Pinchas had in fact revered a person of status, he would not have been able to kill Zimri, despite his disgraceful behavior because Zimri's status as a prince should have intimidated him. He was thus perceived as a person who possesses an uncouth character. Therefore, the Torah needed to trace his pedigree to Aaron, the

High Priest in order to establish him as someone of notable pedigree so for the Jewish people to appreciate who he was.

In fact, the impetus for Pinchas' act of zealotry was unrelated to his pedigree, thus seeing Zimri as his equal. Rather, it was because of his degree of reverence and love for G'd that he was not able to tolerate the desecration that was taking place. The issue of one's status has no relevance when G'd's glory is being disgraced, as the verse in Proverbs states, "There is no wisdom, there is no understanding, nor counsel in the face of G'd." The Gemara in Tractate Shevuos explains this verse to mean that if there is a desecration of G'd's Name, one's status has no value and is irrelevant. Pinchas, being the one who was imbued with reverence for G'd, responded despite the prestigious status of Zimri and the woman with whom he had cohabited.

One must be willing to negate himself as well as others in order to do the Will of G'd, regardless of one's personal disgrace. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that if one realizes that he is wearing shatnez (a combination of wool and linen that is forbidden by the Torah) one must immediately remove his garments, even in a public setting. How could one endure such disgrace? Every moment that one wears the garment that contains shatnez, one is in violation of a negative commandment. Therefore, one's personal dignity has no standing in a context where the Word of G'd is being violated. The act of undressing in a public setting is considered to be an act of negation of one's self for the sake of Him.

Rashi cites the Midrash that explains that the reason the Torah identifies those who were killed by Pinchas as Zimri, the prince of the Tribe of Shimon and Cozbi, the Midianite princess, is to convey that one's status and honor has no relevance when the Glory of G'd is at stake. Regardless of their prestigious status, Zimri and Cozbi had no value in the eyes of Pinchas because of the nature of their disgraceful behavior.

Although the entire Jewish people witnessed the same desecration of G'd, as Pinchas had, they did not respond or react. Witnessing, Pinchas' act of zealotry, the Jewish people needed to justify their own silence. They thus concluded that the only reason that Pinchas was able to rise and kill Zimri was because he had an uncouth nature and thus not respecting status. The Torah reveals Pinchas' pedigree only as a response to the Jewish people's negative perception of him. In truth, Pinchas acted as he had only because he saw Zimri as a desecrator of G'd.

5. G'd's Concern for the Individual (From Balak)

The Torah tells us that Bilaam had risen early to hitch his donkey in order to go to curse the Jewish people. As he was riding, G'd allowed the donkey to see an angel that He had sent to discourage Bilaam from cursing the Jewish people. The Torah states, "The donkey saw the angel of Hashem and crouched beneath Bilaam. Bilaam's anger flared and he struck the donkey with the staff. Hashem opened the mouth of the donkey and it said to Bilaam, 'What have I done to you...'" The Mishna in Ethics of Our Fathers tells us that a number of things were created during the twilight period before

the entry of the Shabbos of Creation. One of them was the mouth of Bilaam's donkey. Meaning, his donkey should have the ability to speak. Why was it necessary for G'd to create the ability for an unintelligible creature to speak at a specific moment in history, and never to be repeated again? If G'd's intent was to discourage Bilaam from cursing the Jewish people, He could have done so in many other ways. It is evident that the necessity for the donkey to have the ability to speak was crucial for that particular moment.

Sforno explains, "G'd granting the ability for the donkey to speak is the equivalent of what King David states in Psalms, 'G'd open my lips and allow me to utter Your praises.' G'd brought about the miracle of Bilaam's donkey in order to give him an opportunity to repent. G'd demonstrated to Bilaam that He is able to give the power of speech to a creature that has no relevance to this faculty. How much more so can He withdraw the power of speech from the one who can speak. One must appreciate the value of the endowment of speech. This was to give Bilaam the understanding that he is under G'd's dominion. He should therefore repent and not be destroyed."

Bilaam because he personified evil did not respond to this unique miracle. He did not repent. Rather, Bilaam proceeded to address his own objective which was to destroy the Jewish people by cursing them. When he realized that he could not curse them, he suggested to the Moabites that the Jewish people could be destroyed through promiscuity that was intertwined with idolatry. He said to them that the G'd of the Jewish people does not tolerate sexual impropriety. Had it not been for the Pinchas' act of zealotry, the Jewish people would have been destroyed through the Wrath of G'd. One would think that G'd should have abandoned someone as evil as Bilaam. But to the contrary, we see that G'd created an unusual faculty for the explicit purpose to give Bilaam the opportunity to repent.

Sforno tells us that an aspect of the objective of the Ten Plagues that came upon Egypt was so that the Egyptians should recognize G'd as the Omnipotent One. The initial seven plagues, which were revealed miracles, were to allow the Egyptian people to repent despite the fact that they were pagans and had enslaved the Jewish people for hundreds of years. The ultimate objective of existence is so that all the nations of the world should join together to serve G'd and glorify His Name. Therefore, G'd provides opportunity for every person to repent and follow the proper path.

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