

KASHERING YOUR HOUSE FOR ELUL

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Kashering Your House For Elul¹

Both Zimri and Pinchas seem to get too much credit. While Zimri was no hero, we find it hard to understand why the sin of a single individual came close to compromising the existence of the entire Jewish people. (Hashem Himself wrote that the effect of Pinchas rising to the occasion is that "I did not consume *Bnei Yisrael* in my vengeance."²) And if we should manage to understand the culpability of an entire nation for his offense, we then find it equally difficult to comprehend why the zealous behavior of a single person could atone for it!

We begin our answer with a sobering observation. Incomplete *teshuvah* is a more serious shortcoming than the commission of the *aveirah* in the first place! The explanation is rather simple. Within almost every transgression lies an element of compulsion. Overpowered by our *yetzer hora*, we stop thinking rationally. (As Chazal put it, a person only sins when overcome with a spirit of folly.³) We are driven as if by a demonic force to whose power we submit, but which we regard as foreign to our essential selves. To some degree, we do not sin with all our spiritual tools intact.

We cannot say the same about the process of *teshuvah*. Long after our passion subsides, we can calmly and deliberately survey the damage we have done to ourselves through our sin. Nothing interferes with the exercise of our free will at this point. If at such a time of awareness and focus we cannot own up to the devastation wrought by our *aveirah*, if we do not realize the fullness of its evil, we heap additional culpability upon our original transgression. Observing a sin, whether a sin in progress, or one that we review in our mind's eye, ought to move us. Failing to be moved is a serious shortcoming.

Bnei Yisrael watched as one of its respected leaders brazenly announced his intention of committing an act of immorality. An entire public was aware of his intention. Watching him march off to his tent with Kozbi in tow should have left them shuddering in horror and disgust. It didn't. Their indifference and equanimity endangered their survival. HKBH could have ended the relationship with Klal Yisrael then and there.

You will object that Bnei Yisrael were certainly not indifferent. The Torah reports that Moshe and Bnei Yisrael "were weeping at the entrance of the *Ohel Moed*."⁴ Clearly, they were unhappy with Zimri's behavior. They rejected it, and were pained and saddened to contemplate it. What more

could have been expected of them?

Much more. The Magid of Kozhnitz draws a parallel between the first principle of *kashering* utensils and purging our inner selves of the accumulated poison of our *aveiros*. Chazal tell us that vessels give up their non-kosher absorptions in the same manner that they "swallowed" them in the first place.⁵ If a utensil was used at a cool temperature, it can be made ready for kosher use by washing it in cool water. If it was used at high temperature, it can be koshered only by purging it at high temperature. *Teshuvah* must be done in precisely the same way. Sins committed coolly and relatively dispassionately can be remedied by a cool but firm resolution to not repeat the *aveirah*. Sins committed with zeal and alacrity, however, can only be dealt with in a similar fashion. Their *teshuvah* requires greater affect and emotional charge.

We should add a third level. Halacha dictates that vessels used directly over the fire cannot be koshered save through the direct application of the intensity of a flame. Sometimes we sin with enthusiasm, with fiery passion burning within, bringing our blood to a boil. The *tikkun* of such transgression requires us to fight fire with fire. Our *teshuvah* must come from a fire of *kedushah* that consumes the *tumah* we have brought upon ourselves.

Pinchas was the source of that fire. He sprang into action with fiery devotion, spear in hand, risking his life for the honor of heaven. (Spear is *romach*, whose letters also spell out the acronym *ramach*, or 248, the number of parts of the body. This alludes to his willingness to put the entirety of his being at risk in order to accomplish his task.) While Bnei Yisrael could manage no more than some tepid tears, Pinchas reacted like a man on fire.

Pinchas' action spread like wildfire. It ignited the souls of those who beheld his action. Suddenly, they too were aroused - and were able to see the enormity of the *aveirah* they had witnessed. The purity of his action burnt through their *tumah*-encased vision, and they saw the truth as it was. (The word *besochom*⁶ - in their midst - takes on new meaning. It suggests, according to our approach, that Pinchas succeeded in planting *kinas Hashem* within all their hearts.) What made Pinchas' action so important was not the selflessness of his dedication alone. More important was the effect it had on the rest of the community.

A famous teaching of the Baal Shem Tov leads us to a variation on our theme. If a Jew witnesses an *aveirah*, taught the Besht, he has been shown a sign from Heaven that he is deficient in the very same area. (The Besht once saw a Jew transgress Shabbos. After some soul-searching, he remembered that he had witnessed the belittling of a *talmid chacham* - whose entire existence is on the place of Shabbos - and not lifted his voice in protest.) Zimri's flagrant sin, performed for everyone to know about, indicated that they were all deficient in the same area of *kedushah*. The *tikkun* for such a failing in *kedushah* would come only through a soul ablaze with passion for Hashem. Pinchas' incandescent zealousness provided the remedy that was needed.

Another element of the story may also allow different readings. Above, we were critical of the way Bnei Yisroel initially responded to Zimri's announcement. Crying, we thought, was a limp and listless reaction to watching a spiritual chasm open up in front of you. Perhaps, however, they did not cry out of sadness for the crime and the *chilul Hashem*. Perhaps they cried for themselves, feeling helplessness and self-pity over where they had descended as a community. This would put them in a much better light, would it not?

It would not. The *Sabba Kadisha* of Slonim explained that when the *yetzer hora* succeeds in ensnaring a person in *aveirah*, his chief satisfaction is in making the sinner feel hopeless and despairing. A sinner entertains notions that he has so disrupted the bond between himself and his Creator, that he has distanced himself completely from his holy Source. This leaves him feeling weak and powerless, abandoning his inner strength, losing hope of ever amounting to anything of substance. These negative feelings are antithetical to *avodas Hashem*, and can do more harm than the *aveirah* that spawned them. A Jew must always have utter confidence that, despite failings of the worst kind, he is by nature a *ben Melech*, and a father never abandons his son.

Might Zimri's bold challenge to *kedushas Yisrael* have precipitated similar feelings of despair and impotence? Was their's a cry of weakness and futility? If so, we can appreciate how a singular display of strength by Pinchas could have lifted all of them from perilous spiritual doldrums.

However we interpret the details, our *parshah* teaches us about the emotional charge and strength we must bring to contemplating *aveiros*. In looking upon the failings of our community, or upon our personal indiscretions within the progress of our *teshuvah*, we must be able to react with appropriate emotional vigor and resoluteness.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom, pgs. 148-150

² Bamidbar 25:11

³ Sotah 3A

⁴ Bamidbar 25:6

⁵ Pesachim 30B

⁶ Bamidbar 25:11