

# NATURAL ACT OR MASTER OF EMOTIONS?

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*"And Pinchas arose and executed judgement, and the plague was halted. It was ascribed to him as charity for all generations forever." (Tehillim/Psalms 106:30-31)*

Why does scripture describe Pinchas' vengeful act as one of "tzedakah," usually translated as charity?

Although Pinchas' killing of the sinners eventually receives Heavenly approval, it seems that in the period immediately following he was the subject of substantial criticism. "Have you seen this man - grandson of one who fattened calves for pagan worship - who all of a sudden has the audacity to kill a Jewish tribal prince?! (see Rashi)" Pinchas was, on his mother's side, a grandson of Yisro, who at one point in his life (before becoming Moshe's father-in-law and converting to Judaism) had "tried every single type of pagan worship that existed." There were those, it seems, who attributed Pinchas' violent vengeance to his "crass" background. The implication: A pure frum-from-birth Jew, descended from Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov, could never commit such an act!

The Torah's answer to this criticism, says Rashi, is: "Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Cohen (the first verse in this week's parsha)." By attributing his lineage to Aaron, the Torah is reminding us that although he was indeed a grandson of Yisro, he was also a grandson of Aaron, lover of peace, for whom such an act would not come naturally (Rashi). It would appear, however, that their criticism has not been fully addressed. They knew all along that Aaron was also his grandfather, yet claimed that only one with some "dirty blood" - and not a pure Jew - could be capable of such an act?

Let's take a closer look at the above verse from Tehillim: "And Pinchas arose and executed judgement (va-ye'fallel)." The Hebrew root for executing judgement is peh-lamed-lamed. The word tefilah, prayer, stems from the same root. What is the relationship between prayer and judgement, and why is Pinchas' act described in these terms?

The root peh-lamed-lamed, to judge, also means to differentiate, to clarify, to decide. In life, we constantly sort out evidence from rumour, valid opinions from wild speculation, fact from fancy. The exercise of such judgement is called pe'lila. Indeed, pe'lilim - a court of law, derives from the same root (see Shemos/Exodus 21:22). And what is the function of a court if not to sift evidence and render a clear decision? A related root is the word peh-lamed-heh (peleh), meaning to make a clear separation between two things. Thus, prayer is called tefilah because it is the soul's yearning to separate the chafe from the fruit - to define what truly matters, and to separate that from the

trivialities of life that often masquerade as essential. (Siddur Avodas Ha-lev)

This answers a question which has often been asked: What is the need for prayer? Doesn't Hashem know our needs without being reminded? Of course He does - He knows them far better than we do. If prayer's sole function were to inform Hashem of our desires and deficiencies, it would be superfluous. Its true purpose is to elevate the supplicants by giving them time to meditate over their priorities in life, and develop true perceptions, thereby becoming worthy of Heavenly blessing.

This is the function of tefilah - the "decision-making" process of prayer. Prayer is a process of self-evaluation and self-judgement (that's why it's a reflexive verb). A process of removing oneself from the tumult of life - and from one's own, sometimes jaded, perceptions and opinions - to a little corner of truth, and refastening one's bonds with the Almighty, and with life's true purpose. (Based on An Overview/Prayer, a Timeless Need by R' Nosson Scherman shlita)

Ostensibly, what Pinchas did by killing Zimri and Kozbi was an act of judgement. He needed to set aside his natural inclination towards peace and civility, and, for Hashem's sake, commit a most brutal and unmerciful act. Others claimed, however, that this was not the case at all. Pinchas' act, they said, came perfectly naturally to him - from he who stems from such unrefined lineage. Their assertion was that all Pinchas did was to reveal his natural tendency to violence and ferocity, and as such he was deserving of no accolades. Perhaps, indeed, he should be censured for his audacity...

By attributing his lineage to Aaron, the Torah dispels their claims. Pinchas was no zealot. He was a grandson of Aaron, who so loved peace and harmony that he couldn't bear to see two Jews fighting. In killing the sinners, Pinchas was not revealing his violent and untamed nature, but rather committing an act of pe'lila - separating what he might like to do from what must be done, and acting on that knowledge.

Perhaps this is why Psalms uses the term va-ye'fael - and he executed judgement. Like tefilah, where we separate truth from fancy, Pinchas had to remove himself from his own gentle nature in order to perform an act of brutality and vengeance.

Tzedakah, charity, plays a similar role. Man by nature tends to hoard that which he has earned. "What's mine is mine and what's yours is yours." He is attached to his possessions, and it does not come naturally to simply give them away, receiving nothing in exchange. The mitzvah of tzedakah commands us to remove ourselves from our personal attachment to our money and possessions, and separate a portion for those less fortunate than us. Perhaps it is for this reason that the verse declares, "It was ascribed to him as charity," for in removing himself from his peace-loving nature, Pinchas was doing an act akin to tzedakah.

The Gaon of Vilna, R' Eliyahu zt"l, explains the connection to tzedakah as follows: The word "machtzis/half" of the "machtzis ha-shekel/half-shekel" given by every Jew (see parshas Ki Sisa) is spelled in Hebrew as mem-ches-tzaddik-yud-sav. The middle letter is tzaddik, from the same root as tzedakah. Surrounding it are ches-yud, or chai - life! On the outside are mem-sav - or meis/death.

This teaches us, says the Gaon, that by giving the half-shekel, i.e. tzedakah, we are close to life and distant from death.

Pinchas "removed My anger from the Children of Israel." The word "My anger," in Hebrew chamasi, is spelled ches-mem-sav-yud - chai (life) is on the outside, and meis (death) is on the inside. Pinchas "turned around" (heishiv - to revoke, remove, or turn around) the word chamasi so that the Jews, who were dying in a vicious plague, should once again be close to life and distant from death. Thus, says the Gaon, it is readily understood why Psalms likens his deed to that of tzedakah, inasmuch as both have the identical effect - they bring us close to life and distant from death!

Have a good Shabbos.

*This week's publication is sponsored by Mr. George Isaac, in memory of his mother, Pinia bas R' Eliezer ob"m, whose Yortzeit is 27 Tamuz (5762). And in memory of his father, R' Moshe Yehuda ben R' Shlomo Zalman.*

---

Text Copyright &copy 2003 Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Project Genesis, Inc.**