

ON WHO'S HONOR?

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Pinchas. "And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Pinchas the son of Elazar the son of Aharon the Kohen turned My anger away from the Children of Israel b'kano es kin'asi [in that he was jealous for My sake and avenged my vengeance]. [25:10-11]"

Pinchas acted courageously and zealously to stop an unashamed act of immorality that was being performed publicly. By doing this, he stopped the plague that had been sent against Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel].

People often react strongly when witnessing a wrong being committed. "How dare he do such a thing?! It is wrong! Terrible. Absolutely terrible." But what is really bothering them? Is it the actual wrong that was committed or is it rather the personal loss that they endured and/or the lack of respect that they were shown? Is it Hashem's honor that concerns them so deeply or is it their own honor?

This issue becomes very focused when dealing with our children. They don't always act in the way that we wish they would. They are not always as scrupulous in their observance of mitzvos [commandments] as we would like. When this is done in front of others there is a certain degree of embarrassment and parents often react quickly and strongly. What is the true cause of this reaction? Can we honestly say that it's Hashem's honor that is foremost on our minds?

The reaction of Pinchas was untainted. His concern was purely for the desecration of Hashem's name that was being caused. Even though the action that was being performed was a serious affront to any normal, moral person present, Pinchas did not react on a personal level whatsoever. Hashem--the only One who can truly judge anyone--testified that Pinchas's jealousy and vengeance was based purely on the disgrace that it was causing Him.

I once came across the story of a businessman who was approached by a person who was not a very good candidate for a loan. Others had turned him away based on his poor history when it came to repaying and he had now come in desperation to this well-to-do businessman. Seeing how desperate he was, the businessman hoped that there would be a sense of gratitude that he had helped him in his time of need. He was sure that the loan would be paid back on time and he lent him the money.

Months went by and the loan's due-date arrived. The businessman waited to hear from the borrower but heard nothing. He figured he might need a little more time so he didn't say anything right away.

When the days turned into weeks, his patience began to run thin. He approached the borrower and asked about the money he owed him.

"Money? What money? I never borrowed money from you! I don't know what you are talking about!"

The businessman was stunned. He had expected to hear some excuses and a request for an extension. But an outright denial?! After he had helped him when no one else would?! In a state of angry shock he stormed over to the Beis Din [court based on halachic law]. The halacha is that in a case without written documentation, the alleged borrower must swear while holding a Sefer Torah that he didn't borrow the money. A date was set by the Beis Din.

The businessman, sure that the borrower wouldn't have the audacity to swear falsely while holding a Sefer Torah, looked forward to having the matter settled. The date arrived and, true to form, this borrower got up and, while holding the Sefer Torah, denied that he had ever borrowed the money.

At that point the businessman lost it. "I don't care about the stupid money but how can you lie while holding a Sefer Torah?!" he shouted. And for the next few weeks, whenever the conversation would turn to the court case, he would passionately exclaim, "The money's not the issue--how could he swear falsely while holding a Sefer Torah?"

The months turned to years and the incident was all but forgotten until one day when the businessman got up in synagogue to make a public announcement. "Years ago," he said, "I spoke very harshly about the fellow with whom I had the court case. I would now like to publicly ask his forgiveness."

The place was in shock. Everyone wondered what had happened. Had he made a mistake? Did he really not borrow the money?

After the services, the businessman explained. "I was away traveling on business and I came to a certain town. I had some free time so I decided to sit in on the local Beis Din. Interestingly enough, the same case that had occurred with me had come before this Beis Din. Once again, one person claimed to have lent money and the other denied it. They asked him to swear while holding a Sefer Torah and he did.

"I witnessed him swearing and it didn't really bother me. I then realized that I had been fooling myself all along. I had always maintained that it wasn't the money that bothered me but it was the false oath. Yet, when it wasn't my money, although it was the same oath, I wasn't upset by what had been done...

"I was therefore slandering that person because of my own personal loss--not to defend the honor of Hashem. That is why I needed to ask his forgiveness..."

Hashem gave Pinchas the bris shalom [covenant of peace] because of his purity of actions. The only way our actions can bring peace, be it with friends, spouses or children, is if we are in touch with

what is really moving us.

Good Shabbos,
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