

ONCE A KOHEN, ALWAYS A KOHEN

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Man to rabbi, "Rabbi, can you make me a kohen?"

The rabbi answered, "No. You're either a kohen or you aren't."

Man more insistently, "Please rabbi, you just have to make me a kohen. **I have to be a Kohen!**"

"Ok, ok, ok ..." the rabbi said, humoring the man. "I'll make you a kohen, but it'll cost you."

The man answered, "No problem rabbi, I'm ready to pay. Tell me the price."

"First let me pronounce you a kohen. Anyhow, why do you want to be a kohen so badly in the first place?"

"You see," the man began, "My zaidie was a kohen, and my father had been a kohen, so I wanted to be one also ..."

Rashi asks on the verse 19:2 in this week's parsha, "Why does the Torah repeat the fact that the Jewish people traveled from Refidim?" Rashi answers that this is the Torah's way of telling us that, just as the Jewish people arrived in the Sinai Desert in a state of tshuva, so too did they leave Refidim in a state of tshuva for the sin they committed there. What sin was that? They quarreled with Moshe over their lack of water (see 17:2).

In direct contrast to this, the next verse (19:3) describes just the opposite state of the Jewish people, as Rashi points out. After the Jewish people reached the Sinai Desert, they camped there. However, as Rashi points out, the word "camped" is written in the singular, and not the plural. Why is this? Rashi explains: to teach us that the Jewish people reached a state of complete unity that they became as a single individual-"a single person with a single heart" (i.e., 3,000,000 Jews and only ONE opinion!).

Why does the Torah take this opportunity to tell us about the incredible unity of the Jewish people, at such a crucial point in history, just before God is about to reveal Himself and give the Ten Commandments? Better yet, why is the giving of the Ten Commandments in Parashas Yisro? Such a merit has made Yisro, Moshe's father-in-law, famous forever!

"There's nothing like a good fight," some believe. The opportunity to argue, when it presents itself, for some people is too good to turn down. It takes a real diplomat to be able to overlook personal insult and to try instead to diffuse the situation.

I remember the last class of my smicha program, which, the rabbi called "Practical Rabbinics." After spending over one year intensely studying the Shulchan Aruch and parts of the Talmud, we had gathered together for what was to be the last class of the program. He told us, "What I'm going to

tell you is different from what we've been discussing until now, but equally important. One day, when you're the rabbi of a community, some person may storm into your office, call you all kinds of nasty things, and make all kinds of false accusations. Your first impulse will be to defend yourself. Don't! Everything he is saying to you is out of his own frustration, and he knows you're the only one he can do this to without getting a black eye! Instead of feeling anger, feel compassion." The truth is, I never became the rabbi of a community, but the advice has come in handy countless times, not just at the office, or in the Bais Medrash.

This trait of overlooking personal insult for the sake of maintaining peace is one often associated with Aharon HaKohen, the brother of Moshe. The Talmud (Krisos 5b) says that the words, "How good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together ..." sung by many around the world, refer to Aharon and Moshe. Not only was Aharon not jealous of Moshe's exalted position, as Moshe had been worried, but he was even happy about it.

Furthermore, it was Aharon who would spend time patching up relationships between friends and family. Because of this, he earned the appellation, "Pursuer of Peace." Even his involvement in the building of the golden calf, which could have cost him his life in This World, **and** the Next World, was in order to eventually repair the breach in the relationship between the Jewish nation and God.

Was this trait of pursuing peace one particular to Aharon himself, or is it a trait that is associated with kohanim in general? And how central a trait is this?

The parsha starts off, "Yisro, the kohen of Midian heard ..." Why was it important to identify Yisro as a kohen, even before identifying him as the father-in-law of Moshe? Because the Torah, through the use of one word, is answering two questions, two very important questions. The first one we asked above: Why is the account of the giving of the Ten Commandments in Parashas Yisro. The second question is, what merit did Yisro have to be the father-in-law of Moshe in the first place?

The answer is the same for both questions: he was a kohen. He was someone who spotted breaches in relationships, and tried to repair them. He was anti-argument. This is why, according to the midrash, he advised Paroah not to persecute the Jewish people (as opposed to Bilaam who voted to kill them, and Job, who had advised Paroah to take away their property and impose physical suffering). This is also why it is Yisro who advises Moshe how to make his system for dealing with arguments amongst his people more efficient.

How important is this trait? It is the basis of being able to receive Torah, of being able to not just listen, but to **hear** and take truth to heart. It was because Yisro possessed this trait that he was able to "hear" the message within the message of all that happened for the Jewish people. **This** is why only **he** came out to the desert to join the Jewish people, and no one else.

Later, the Torah tells us (with Rashi's help), that this is the basis for being able to **hear** God, and receive His Torah. And not just receive Torah, but to ward off the Amaleks of history ... Why is that? Because the underlying premise of being a pursuer of peace is caring as much about others as you

do for yourself. This is the basis of objectivity (the moment you care for yourself more, you are subjective), the key ingredient necessary for **hearing** God's Torah the way it was given over, not the way you might want to hear it to suit your subjective needs.

This is what kohen Midian means, i.e., that he was a pursuer of peace, and therefore, objective. This is why Moshe could live with him, and even marry his daughter. And this is why the Ten Commandments are related to him, because he illustrates what every Jew must possess to truly accept God's Torah, not his own version of God's Torah.

"But you're not a kohen ..." you say. "It's not applicable to you, as a Levi, or as a Yisroel," you argue. The Torah anticipated such objectives. God tells Moshe, "Go and tell them that they will be a Kingdom of Priests, a mamleches kohanim ..." That's right, though only descendents of Aharon can ever officiate in the Temple as a priest, when it comes to pursuing peace amongst your fellow man, and achieving an equal love for them, on the way to objectivity ... consider yourself a kohen, for it is **that** that makes us eligible to receive Torah, and to live by it.

It also helps to keep Amalek in check, for Amalek in gematria is equal to 240, the same numerical value as the word sufek, which means doubt. Arguments represent a loss of objectivity, and diffusing them becomes an impossibility when one is in a subjective mode. It is subjectivity that clouds our minds, and paves the way for doubt and confusion. This is the type of spiritual environment Amalek thrives in. So, if you're the argumentative type, think again. There are far greater things than a good fight, like closeness to God and an objective approach to Torah.

Have a Great, Objective Shabbos.

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