

# A SINGLE, ETERNAL MOMENT

*by Rabbi Pinchas Winston*

On one hand, the story of Pinchas is straightforward. There was a crisis in the Jewish people, and Pinchas responded to the call, which, given the solution, was not an easy thing to do. He was not a killer, and certainly not one to seek attention. It is very hard for the average person to spill blood, even that of an enemy, so how much more so that of a fellow Jew who happened to be a leader as well. Pinchas really had to push himself to carry through regarding a very difficult halachah that could have had very dire consequences for him:

Had Zimri separated from his mistress and Pinchas had killed him, Pinchas would have been executed on this account. And, had Zimri turned upon Pinchas and killed him [in self-defense], he would not have been executed, since Pinchas was a pursuer." (Sanhedrin 82a)

On the other hand, there are many details to the entire story that make it less straightforward. For example, where did this crisis come from in the first place? Just after Bilaam was forced to praise the Jewish people for their modesty, how did they go out and act so indecently? After Bilaam was compelled to admit the Jewish nation has only one God, how did they end up worshipping idols?

Furthermore, who is this Pinchas character, and where did he come from, aside from his genealogy which the Torah provides? Why was he the one, out of all the great people around, to save the day and be rewarded so fully? Where was Moshe Rabbeinu all of this time, and why didn't he respond to the crisis on behalf of the Jewish nation?

The answer to this question will come at the end of a short intellectual journey that begins with a story, a true story from the annals of baseball. It is a story about how a single, seemingly innocuous moment can, without much warning, dramatically transform one's life forever.

Thousands of fans turned their frustration and angst into a concentrated beam of hatred. That hate was placed on one man who did what any other fan in his position would. It's time to move on, time to forgive and time for an apology. We all remember the initial reaction that took place as Moises Alou attempted to reel in a foul ball for a pivotal out. The Cubs left fielder maniacally threw his arms down, making the thousands in attendance aware that something tremendous had just occurred.

## *The Moment*

Mark Prior was in the middle of a 3-0 shutout. He had Juan Pierre at second and Luis Castillo in the box. The Cubs were just five outs away from the World Series, a place they had not reached since

1945. Castillo fouled off a pitch down the left field line. Alou gave chase, leaped into the stands and came down with nothing but frustration.

### *The Fallout*

Little by little, decades of baseball frustration began to boil over. Expletives began to fly towards the area that Steve Bartman, a fan that deflected the foul ball, was sitting. The game that started to unravel was being blamed on a fan dressed in nothing but Cubs gear, wearing headphones so that he could hear the home-team play-by-play. On any other day, a passerby might say, now that is a real fan. Once expletives failed to get their point across, beer began raining in on Bartman, a man who would live in infamy after the Cubs' loss.

### *The Sorrow*

Imagine loving something so much, only to see it tear your life to smithereens. Bartman was enjoying something magical that night. His team was on their way to the promised land. Moments later, they were ousted and he was being blamed for the whole thing. You can sense the sorrow he felt reading his statement from 2003: "There are few words to describe how awful I feel and what I have experienced within these last 24 hours. I've been a Cub fan all my life and fully understand the relationship between my actions and the outcome of the game. I had my eyes glued on the approaching ball the entire time and was so caught up in the moment that I did not even see Moises Alou, much less that he may have had a play. Had I thought for one second that the ball was playable or had I seen Alou approaching I would have done whatever I could to get out of the way and give Alou a chance to make the catch. To Moises Alou, the Chicago Cubs organization, Ron Santo, Ernie Banks, and Cub fans everywhere I am so truly sorry from the bottom of this Cubs fan's broken heart. I ask that Cub fans everywhere redirect the negative energy that has been vented towards my family, my friends, and myself into the usual positive support for our beloved team on their way to being National League champs." For Bartman, there is no retribution or apology from fans. The nameless mob that ruined his life will never give him back his anonymity. The 2003 Cubs and Bartman will be inextricably linked, and that is downright unfair. Bartman did what any jubilant fan would have done. I have seen the same exuberant reach for a foul ball hundreds of times since that night. It's time to give Bartman back his life. The man was only guilty of loving his team more than most. (Bleacher Report, Gabe Zaldivar, September 27, 2011)

Until last week, I knew about none of this, and certainly had never heard the name Steve Bartman before. As Divine Providence would have it, I just happened to be waiting for someone in a place (in Toronto) where this story was being told, and I was totally taken aback by the fallout of the event. I don't know how many people viewed it the way I did, but for me, it was such an incredible lesson about life, especially in time for this week's parshah.

I imagine Steve Bartman starting out his day like any other, except that he was probably excited about going to the game that might clinch a spot for his beloved team in the World Series, after so

many tries. His whole day probably revolved around going to the event, which he assumed, win or lose, would have little long-term impact on his life. Why should he have thought otherwise?

Nor did the people he attended the game with ever assume that their friend would become Public Enemy #1 later that day. Why should they have? How many times had they gone to watch a baseball game together, and come home with little to report but the score itself? What are the odds of what happened to Steve Bartman that fateful day happening to anyone? Very, very few, especially given all the nice things people who knew him had to say in his defense.

I do not know why what happened to Steve Bartman actually happened to him. He seemed like a nice enough guy. However, I do know why such things happen to people like Pinchas, and Bilaam for that matter. The single moments that transformed their lives so dramatically, and so eternally, were actually backed-up by trillions of moments that literally shaped their lives and gave them direction. The Midrash says:

"They were crying at the opening of the Appointed Tent" (Bamidbar 25:6): Their hands became weakened at that moment . . . They cried?! Did [Moshe] not stand up against 600,000 [at the time of the golden calf], as it says, "He took the calf which they had made" (Shemos 32:20), [and yet you say that] his hands were weakened?! Rather, [Moshe was made to forget the law] in order for Pinchas to take that which he deserved. (Bamidbar Rabbah 20:24)

What does it mean, "to take that which he deserved"? When? All of his life. Where? Everywhere he performed a mitzvah. How? But zealously fulfilling the will of God like it was his own. Likewise, Bilaam got what he deserved. When? All of his short life. Where? Every time he either cursed or blessed someone. How? By making sure that everything he did was for his own benefit.

I recall how, during the week of my Sheva Brochos at one of the meals, one of my relatives choked on a fish bone and could not breath. As all of us sat there stunned and ready to panic, one gentlemen, sitting on the other side of the table of the choking person, calmly put one foot on a chair, the next foot on the table, before stepping down behind the person and applying the Heimlick Maneuver and dislodging the bone.

Since everyone was well, the festivities continued, but the event left an indelible mark on me. I remember how time seemed to stand still as I watched the hero step over the table and save the person's life. But, more importantly, I remember the tremendous feeling of inadequacy I had felt at the time, not knowing what to do save a person's life in such a situation. I had been totally unprepared for such a crisis.

It is no coincidence that people who know CPR often find themselves in situations that take advantage of their skill. It is no coincidence that people with wisdom find themselves in situations that require it. And, it is no coincidence that people who are zealous for God find themselves in situations that prove their zealousness, or that people with shady pasts end up in scandals. If indirect Divine Providence doesn't arrange it, then God Himself will.

Hence, the rabbis point out that Pirkei Avos, which deals with character refinement, is in the section of technical and dry laws that deal with damages of all types. This is their way of teaching that damages, even accidental ones, are the result of an inappropriate lack of concern for the well-being of others, and if the carelessness itself doesn't result in doing damage, then Divine Providence will create a moment that will allow it to do so.

Hence, though Bilaam saw modesty when he looked down into the Jewish camp, what he could not see was the potential for indecency amongst some of the nation. However, given the right circumstance, as Bilaam advised Balak, that would quickly become exposed and result in both chaos and Divine wrath. When Zimri's moment came around, a lifetime of incorrect thinking made him famous for the wrong reasons.

The same was true for Bilaam. He was handed an incredible moment, one which could have left him with a good name forever. He knew that God intended to bless the Jewish nation, and he had the opportunity to be the mouth through whom God would do it. However, a lifetime of selfish behavior denied him the spiritual fortitude to rise to the occasion, and instead, he went down in infamy.

In contrast to all of this, Pinchas used his single moment to become a hero. A lifetime of self-work and character refinement allowed him to take advantage of his single moment to become a savior of the Jewish people, and a favorite of God. It even earned him the right to become Eliyahu HaNavi, who will herald the Final Redemption. An entire lifetime summed up in a single, eternal moment. It is, perhaps, the most important lesson about life.

---

Text

Copyright © by [Rabbi Pinchas Winston](#) and Project Genesis, Inc.

Rabbi Winston has authored many books on Jewish philosophy (Hashkofa). If you enjoy Rabbi Winston's Perceptions on the Parsha, you may enjoy his books. Visit Rabbi Winston's [online book store](#) for more details! [www.thirtysix.org](http://www.thirtysix.org)