ZEALOTRY IS LIKE RADIATION - IT CAN BE USEFUL BUT IT IS VERY DANGEROUS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 513, Leining on Fast Days and Other Ta'aneisim Issues. Good Shabbos!

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This week's parsha begins as a continuation of the incident at the end of last week's. Pinchas performed a bold and zealous act on behalf of the Almighty, killing a couple involved in public promiscuity between a Jewish Tribal leader and a Moabite Princess, a desecration of G-d's Name. Pinchas was rewarded for his act of Sanctifying the Name of G-d and was granted the Covenant of Eternal Priesthood.

Rashi points out that although Pinchas was a grandson of Aaron, prior to this incident he had not been a Kohain. The original appointment of the Priesthood involved Aaron and his then currently living sons, and any future descendants that would be born afterwards to those sons. Since Pinchas, son of Elazar, was already alive at the time of the initial appointment, he did not meet the original criteria for priesthood.

In addition to now being granted the priesthood, Pinchas was also blessed with the Covenant of Peace [Bamidbar 25:12]. There is a very important Netziv on this pasuk [verse]. The Netziv says that under normal circumstances, when a person kills another human being, that makes an indelible impression upon him. He is changed forever. The blessing granted to Pinchas as a reward for his exercise of violent zealotry to protect the honor of G-d, was that he did not incur any spiritual damage from this violent act. Since he acted for the sake of Heaven, his act did not have the normal effect it would otherwise have had.

The Netziv is saying that zealotry is very, very dangerous. It is like radiation. It can be used to heal and to treat cancers. But, if a person is exposed to radiation in the wrong way, it can kill him. Zealotry is like radiation. It has an effect on the person who uses it. Pinchas needed a special blessing to immunize himself, as it were, from the negative effects of the zealotry he had engaged in.

Golda Meir once said that she could forgive the Arabs for killing the Jews, but she could not forgive the Arabs for forcing the Jews to kill Arabs. Killing, even in a justified defensive war, ultimately has an effect on the national soul. I do not frequently quote Golda Meir, but her point here is well taken.

The Netziv comments similarly in Parshas Re'eh regarding the Ir HaNidachas [a city that was destroyed because the majority of its inhabitants became idol worshippers]. [Devorim 13:13-19] The necessity to take arms against a whole city of Jewish brethren is fraught with all kinds of spiritual danger. It was therefore necessary for the Torah to state at the conclusion of that section: "and He will give you mercy and be merciful to you and multiply you, as He swore to your forefathers." In spite of the fact that you will wipe out a city of fellow Jews, this act will not have the corrosive spiritual affect that it would have under other circumstances. If you do it for the sake of Heaven, there is a built-in guarantee from G-d for spiritual protection. This is the same guarantee that Hashem provided to Pinchas.

We find a very interesting comment of the Medrash by the incident of Eliyahu at Mount Carmel [Melachim I Chapter 18]. Eliyahu challenged the prophets of Baal to bring down a fire from Heaven to accept their offerings. They were unable to do this. Eliyahu succeeded in bringing down a fire from Heaven to accept his own offering. All the people fell on their faces, prostrated themselves, and declared "Hashem, He is G-d." This is the famous proclamation that reverberates throughout our synagogues at the conclusion of Yom Kippur.

This story is told in the Haftorah of Parshas Ki Sisa. The Haftorah ends with those words: "Hashem hu haElokim." However, that is not how the story ends in Tanach. The narration in the book of Melachim continues "Eliyahu said to them, 'Seize the prophets of Baal! Let none of them escape!' So they seized them. Eliyahu took them down to the Kishon Brook and slaughtered them there." [Melachim 1 18:40] The wicked Queen Izevel heard what Eliyahu did to her prophets and sent a message pledging to do the exact same thing to him that he did to the prophets of Baal.

Eliyahu fled and went into hiding. He was hiding in a cave when the word of G-d came to him and asked him "Why are you here, Eliyahu?" [Melachim I 19:9] Eliyahu responded, "I have acted with great zeal for Hashem, G-d of Legions, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your Covenant; they have razed Your altars and have killed Your prophets by the sword, so that I alone have remained, and they now seek to take my life." [Pasuk 10]

G-d then told Eliyahu: "Go out of the cave and stand on the mountain before Hashem." "And behold, Hashem was passing and a great powerful wind, smashing mountains and breaking rocks, went before Hashem. 'Hashem is not in the wind!' [Eliyahu was told]. After the wind came an earthquake. 'Hashem is not in the earthquake.' After the earthquake came a fire. 'Hashem is not in the fire.' After the fire came a still, thin sound." [Pasukim 11-12].

Eliyahu heard all of this. He then wrapped his face in his mantle and went and stood by the cave's entrance. Again a voice [spoke] to him: "Why are you here, Eliyahu?" [Pasuk 13]

Eliyahu gives virtually the same answer that he gave before. [Pasuk 14].

What is happening here? If not for the Medrash, we could never suggest such a thing, but the Medrash comments that G-d's question to Eliyahu implied some measure of criticism. G-d chastised Eliyahu for not talking properly about His people. "Do not say about My People 'they have not kept Your Covenant!' Do not talk that way about Jews! You should have said, "They are Your children, descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov."

Eliyahu did not take this approach. His approach was one of "I have acted zealously." It is as if G-d said, "Okay let's try this again." He gave Eliyahu several hours to try to muster up a different approach, but Eliyahu came back to the same attack of "Kanoh Kineisee L'Hashem" [I was zealous in Your behalf]. At that point G-d told him "You are always acting the role of the zealot." Pinchas and Eliyahu are one and the same. G-d told Eliyahu "You were zealous at Shittim (during the incident mentioned in last week's parsha). Here you are zealous and there you are zealous -- always acting with zealotry!"

Rav Mordechai Katz, of Blessed Memory, interprets the Medrash. In spite of the fact that the acts of zealotry of Pinchas / Eliyahu were noble acts and in spite of the fact that Pinchas received the priesthood for it, the acts were not perfect acts. Pinchas / Eliyahu was too indicting and condemning of the Jewish people.

There was never a more 'for the sake of Heaven' zealot in the history of the world than Eliyahu the prophet. He is the paragon of the proper form of zealotry. G-d rewarded him for it. But even that zealot was less than perfect because at the same time that he defended the Honor of G-d, he was too harsh in his attitude toward the Jewish people. The Jews had to be admonished, true, but he was just a little too strong. He should not have said "They have forsaken Your Covenant (Bris)."

We are told that Eliyahu the prophet attends every circumcision (Bris) of Jewish babies. Part of the ritual is to reserve a chair for Eliyahu. The reason why he must attend every Bris is a decree from G-d. Eliyahu must attend every Bris in order to recognize that he was wrong. Klal Yisrael does keep the

Covenant (Bris).

Zealotry is such a dangerous trait that even the noble Pinchas-Eliyahu can overdo it, by uttering just a single word that is too strong. This demonstrates how delicate and careful one must be when wielding the sword of zealotry.

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