

PARSHAS PINCHAS

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Parshas Pinchos, 5631

It helps to see this ma'amar in its historical context. Pinchos had stopped the outburst of aveira (sin), and the ensuing plague. Accordingly, HaShem had promoted Pinchos to the status of full-fledged kohein. The parsha's first Medrash Rabba -- which is the Sfas Emes's starting point -- elaborates on this account.

The Medrash tells us of HaShem's statement that Pinchos was receiving his reward "be'din" -- with "din". What is "din"? Din is strict justice, in contrast to the opposite attribute of chessed (loving kindness, compassion, a willingness to forgo strict justice.) In the present context, the word "be'din" is open to two possible interpretations. One possibility is: Pinchos earned, and therefore, deserved this reward as a matter of justice. Another possible interpretation is that Pinchos earned his reward by exercising the attribute of din -- by meting out well-deserved, just punishment to the sinning couple.

Applied to Pinchos -- who was biologically a kohein -- use of the word "be'din" in either sense comes as a surprise. Aharon was the prototype of the kohein's persona. And Aharon was known for his outstanding quality of chessed, not for din.

(Parenthetically, the Sfas Emes notes that the chessed-din dichotomy may also express itself in one's relationship with HaShem. A person with a proclivity toward chessed is likely to relate to HaShem via ahava (love). By contrast, a person who goes through life with a perspective of din is more likely to relate to HaShem with yir'ah (awe and/or fear).)

The notion that Pinchas earned the status and role of kohein also comes as a surprise. For, quoting the Sefer Tanya (!), the Sfas Emes observes that HaShem gave the kehuna -- the priesthood -- to Aharon as a mahtahna (a gift). Thus, HaShem tells Aharon (Bemidbar, 8:7) that his kehuna is "avodas mahtahna" (ArtScroll: "a service that is a gift"). And by definition, a gift is conveyed gratuitously, not as a quid pro quo. A mahtana is not "earned".

The Sfas Emes has brought to our attention two questions that lurk behind the seemingly innocuous word: "be'din". He now leaves us with these unanswered questions, and moves to a new line of thought.

When the Torah tells us of Pinchos's act of kana'us (zealotry), it states (Bemidbar, 25:7): "Va'yakam mi'toch ha'eda," Pinchos "arose from amidst the people." Likewise, when HaShem recounts Pinchos's

deed (Bemidbar 25:11), He specifies "bekan'o es kina'asi be'socham." That is, Pinchos did what he did "in the midst of Bnei Yisroel." We may not understand initially why this feature of Pinchos's action was important. B'H', the Sfas Emes now explains.

A person who does an act of zealotry may do so as a loner, an outsider, a marginal person. Similarly, a zealot may be trying to fill a well-defined social role -- the role of zealot -- and thus to stand out from the hamon am (the masses). Or, he may act zealously in an effort to "steig" -- to grow in his avoda (service of HaShem).

The Sfas Emes tells us that such self-regarding behavior is not genuine kana'us for HaShem. That is why the Torah emphasizes that Pinchos did what he did "be'socham" -- in the midst of Bnei Yisroel. The Torah -- and the Sfas Emes -- are trying to help us recognize the nature of true zealotry. In this particular act of kana'us, it was especially important that "one of the people" -- a regular, ordinary person -- rather than a "designated zealot" (either self-designated or socially designated) perform the kana'us.

When the Mishkan was inaugurated, Aharon and his sons were appointed kohanim, the priests who, together with their progeny for all generations, were to perform the avoda, the Divine service. However, Aharon's then-living grandchildren -- e.g., Pinchos -- were not included in the kehuna. It was only 39 years later, after Pinchos did what he did, that he was named a full-fledged kohein.

Why was Pinchos excluded for so long? The Sfas Emes proposes an answer. He suggests that this exclusion-inclusion feature was mandated so that when Pinchos "arose" to perform his act of kana'us, he do so "be'socham" -- in their midst -- as a regular, ordinary citizen (rather than one of the self-regarding "zealots" mentioned above). Imagine Pinchos's puzzlement and self-doubt during those 39 years! Eventually, Pinchos learned the reason for his exclusion. But during this excruciatingly long period, he had no clue for his exclusion; nor did he have any assurance that ultimately he would ascend to the kehuna.

At this point, the Sfas Emes circles back to the two unanswered questions that he brought to our attention earlier. As you may recall, one question involved the apparent inconsistency between statements that speak of the kehuna as being earned or as being awarded as a gift. The second question focused on the apparent inconsistency concerning the attributes that a kohein should strive to personify. Should it be chessed/ahava or din-yir'ah?

How does the Sfas Emes deal with these issues? He notes that, in point of fact, the kehuna could be conferred either as an unmerited gift or earned. He cites No'ach's son, Shem, as an illustration of the kehuna's having been granted as a gift. Thus, we find Shem -- a person not noted for his exemplary acts of chessed -- being named a kohein. (Note: Chazal -- and the Sfas Emes -- are working with the tradition that the person named Malki -Tzedek -- mentioned in Bereishis 14, 18 as a kohein -- was Shem, the son of No'ach.) Continuing, the Sfas Emes cites Avraham Avinu as a case in which the kehuna was earned. Viewed in broader terms, the Sfas Emes is telling us that the kehuna could be

awarded either as an unmerited gift or it could be earned. In other words, in ancient times HaShem did not run (this aspect of) the world in an "either or" framework.

More generally, the Sfas Emes tells us that at a higher level of abstraction, the dichotomy between ahava/ chessed and yir'ah/din is a false dichotomy. Thus, Pinchos was motivated by ahava for HaShem; and that love enabled him to mete out din to the people who deserved it. Likewise, the Sfas Emes tells us that Avraham Avinu -- who is usually viewed as the prototype of ahava -- reached that attribute by starting with yir'ah.

The name of our holiest city, Yerushalayim, shows the fusion of chessed/ahava and din/yir'ah fusion in its full glory. Avraham Avinu gave that city a name derived from the word yir'ah (Bereishis, 22, 4). And to complete the role reversal, Shem gave the city (Bereishis, 14, 18) a name, Shalem, that evokes HaShem's chessed in making the world whole, without blemish.

A take-home lesson? The Sfas Emes is telling us something that we knew already: that we live in a complex, confusing world. What he is adding is a focus on the paradoxes and apparent inconsistencies that litter this world. Apparently, he feels that we should be aware of unanswered (and perhaps unanswerable) questions; and, nevertheless, continue living Torah and learning Torah. After all, that is how he -- the Sfas Emes -- handled the situation.

Text Copyright © 2005 by Rabbi Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff and **Torah.org**.