

THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF A JEW

by Rabbi Ben Tzion Shafier

"Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon HaKohain, appeased my anger against the Bnei Yisroel by taking My revenge amongst them, and now I do not have to destroy the Bnei Yisroel in My vengeance."
— Bamidbar 25:11

The death knell of Amon and Moav

The nation of Moav heard about *Bnei Yisroel* coming, and they were seized with fear. For many years, they had known "all that HASHEM had done for the Jewish people while taking them out of Mitzrayim," and they were well aware that the land of Israel was consecrated for the Jews. Now the inevitable was coming to fruition.

Recognizing that there was little hope in waging war against the Jews, Balak, the king of Moav, hired Bilaam to curse the Jews. However, not only didn't Bilaam curse the Jews, he gave them a *bracha*, saying the prophetic words: "*Ma tovu ohalecha Yaakov*." When Balak confronted Bilaam about this, Bilaam's truthful response was, "It is not in my power to curse them. But if you want advice in fighting this nation, you must get HASHEM to be angry with them. Their G-d hates promiscuity. If you can get them to sin, you can conquer them."

With that was launched a fatal attack against the Jews. Balak sent out the *Bnos Moav* to entice the Jewish men. The plot was successful and thousands of Jewish men succumbed. At the height of the debacle, Zimri, the head of *Shevet Shimon*, took a Moabite woman into the very camp of Israel and publicly committed a sin with her.

When Pinchas saw this, he stood up, and at the risk of his life, miraculously killed them both.

After the events, the *posuk* describes HASHEM saying, "Pinchas took my revenge amongst the people, and now I do not have to destroy the Jewish nation." The *Siforno* explains that because the entire nation saw what had transpired and didn't act, they all deserved to die. By acting in public for all to see, Pinchas atoned for their sin, and now HASHEM didn't have to kill out the nation.

Two difficulties with the Siforno

This *Siforno* is difficult to understand on two levels. First, what was the sin of the Jewish people? They weren't accused of doing acts of immorality. Their "crime" was in not protesting an act done in

their midst. Where do we see that the punishment for not giving rebuke is death?

Even more troubling is what seems to be a grave inequity. If Pinchas had not killed Zimri, then HASHEM would have had to wipe out an entire nation. Pinchas's act of killing one man evened out the score so that now the death penalty against the generation didn't have to be carried out. How does killing one man equal the death of millions?

The answer to this question can be best understood with a *moshol*:

In the royal throne room

Imagine that you are in the royal throne room when a commoner enters and requests an audience with the king himself. The monarch in a very generous act grants the request. The peasant then asks for even more. He requests permission to step forward and whisper something highly confidential into the king's ear. The monarch charitably grants even this appeal. The commoner steps forward, leans over, and with a resounding smack, slaps the king squarely in the face. The guards jump forth and grab him. Every person in the throne room is in utter shock and disbelief. The affront to the king is appalling. Such an act in the royal chambers to the king himself is an affront beyond description.

There is little question that this person has lost his lease on life. Likely, he would be killed on the spot.

Let's take this same scenario but instead of a commoner, it is the king's son who hits him. Now the affront is increased dramatically. Not only was such an act committed, but it was done by nobility, by someone respected in the kingdom, by someone who is expected to love and honor the king. The affront would now be outrageous.

To fully appreciate the gravity of what was happening in Zimri's time, we need to add one more dimension. Imagine that at the time of the act, the entire royal family was gathered for an affair of state. All of the sons and daughters of the king together with their spouses, the king's brothers, and their children are there. Included are the dukes and earls, the ministers and advisers — the entire assemblage representing all of those who love and support the king.

The king's son stands up, walks to the throne and sharply smacks the king. Then he sits back down in his seat — and no one says anything. Not a single royal responds. No one protests. No one comes to defend the honor of the king. Now this situation has intensified exponentially. Not only is the affront itself dramatic, the marked silence of the king's friends is even worse. How can you not speak up? How can you not defend the honor of the king?

This seems to be the answer to the question. When Zimri publicly committed this sin, it was a colossal affront to the honor of HASHEM. He was a *nasi*, one of the leaders of the generation. For such a man to commit this crime was horrific, but the silence of *Bnei Yisroel* was even worse. How is

it that no one protested? Wasn't there even one person loyal to HASHEM? Isn't there even one individual who will defend the king's honor? The *chillul HASHEM* was beyond description, and every person standing there was a part of it and made it even worse.

By Pinchas standing up and acting, not only was he defending the honor of HASHEM, he was taking off a powerful claim against the entire nation. Before Pinchas acted, every person there was a part of the silent majority, and by tacit agreement were part of the *chillul HASHEM*. Now that Pinchas stood up to defend the honor of HASHEM in front of them, they became inactive participants in that act as well, and so they were redeemed.

A member of the royal family

This concept is very relevant to us in realizing what it means to be a Jew. By dint of being born Jewish, a child now enters the ranks of HASHEM's people. We represent HASHEM; we are His Chosen Nation and His children. That comes with tremendous rights and responsibilities. When a Jew acts in a manner that is proper, it brings great honor to the King, and that person is rewarded accordingly. However, when a Jew acts in a manner not befitting his station in life, it isn't considered the act of one individual, it is the act of a representative of HASHEM himself, and that single action becomes magnified many times over. When that act is done in public, there are two issues to deal with: the act itself and the reaction of those witnessing, especially if those around are themselves of royal lineage.

One of the most fundamental obligations of a Jew is in *kiddush HASHEM*. By acting as the Torah directs us, we bring more honor to HASHEM. By acting in a manner that is inappropriate, we bring dishonor to HASHEM. Because we are children of HASHEM, what we do reflects onto HASHEM. This greatly magnifies the significance of our every move. When we recognize our royal lineage, we can understand our great potential to accomplish as well as the grave responsibilities we have in life.

For more on this topic please listen to Shmuz #173 - Children of HASHEM

Rabbi Shafier is the founder of the Shmuz.com – The Shmuz is an engaging, motivating shiur that deals with real life issues.

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