
Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series

Portion of Pinchas

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkafa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

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Portion of Pinchas

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita
Dean

1. *Zimri's Extreme Breach of Morality*

The Torah tells us that Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, publicly desecrated G'd's Name by cohabiting with Cozbi, a Midianite Princess. Pinchas through his act of zealotry, avenged the vengeance of G'd by killing Zimri and Cozbi. The Midrash states, "The Torah is taken aback by the behavior of Zimri, the son of Salu. King Solomon writes, 'One who breaches a fence deserves to be bitten by a snake.' The forefather of Zimri (Shimon) had avenged promiscuous behavior. The Torah tells us that after Dinah had been defiled by Shechem, the Prince of Canaan, his community had entered into a covenant with her family and agreed to have all their males to be circumcised. On the third day of their recovery, Shimon and Levy, taking advantage of their infirmity, through an act of zealotry killed all the males of the community (including Shechem and his father Chamor) to avenge the defilement of their sister. Zimri, the Prince of the tribe of Shimon had breached the fence that his forefather had established, when he openly cohabited with Cozbi."

The Torah is taken aback and is in wonderment by the detestable behavior of Zimri, because he was a descendant of Shimon who acted zealously to establish the safeguards for morality. Since every person has the power of choice to behave as he chooses (to be evil or righteous), why is the Torah taken aback by Zimri's behavior, regardless of the person from whom he descends?

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Kama tells us the story of *Chananya Chofeir Gumos* (Chananya the water cistern digger). Chananya dug water cisterns throughout the Land of Israel to provide water for the Jewish people when they journeyed from Babylon and other locations to Jerusalem to celebrate the Festivals three times a year. It occurred that his daughter had fallen into a well and it was uncertain if she had drowned. They went to consult with Reb Chanina Ben Dosa, who was the tzaddik of the generation. The first hour after she had fallen into the well, he said that she was still alive. After the second hour,

he said that she was still alive. After the third hour, she emerged from the well unharmed. They returned to Reb Chanina Ben Dosa and asked him, "How did you know that she was still alive, despite the likelihood of surviving such a mishap?" He responded, "It is not possible that the water that her father provided for the Jewish people, (who had performed a great mitzvah) should be the cause of the death of his daughter." The Gemara continues, "And the son of *Chananya Chofeir Gumos* died of thirst." Tosafos asks, "If he had performed a mitzvah by providing water for the Jewish people how is it possible that his son should die as a result of being denied water? G'd should have provided him with water, as Chananya provided water for the Jewish people when they had ascended to the Temple Mount. Regarding the child of Chananya it is not possible that his daughter should die through drowning because the water was provided by him for the Jewish people. The water was the object of the mitzvah. However, regarding his son dying of thirst, where the cause of his death was unrelated to the object of the mitzvah, it is possible that the mitzvah will not protect that individual."

Shimon, the son of Yaakov the forefather of Zimri, through an act of zealotry, destroyed the city of Shechem to establish morality for the world. His action should have availed Divine Protection for his descendants so that they should not succumb to the temptations of sexual impropriety, as cohabiting with a gentile woman. The Torah is therefore taken aback, that although Shimon had expressed his zealotry in this area, despite the danger that he had entered into in order to sanctify G'd's Name, his descendant failed in this area. Zimri failed on the most extreme level. Shimon's merit did not protect his grandchild. Why did the merit of Shimon not protect Zimri his descendant?

Chazal state, "One should not believe in himself until the moment he is no longer alive." The Midrash tells us that G'd does not associate His Name with a person, regardless of his dimension of holiness, during his lifetime. This is demonstrated through Avraham and Yaakov our Patriarchs. G'd did not associate His Name with Avraham and Yaakov during their lifetimes, despite their

exceptional level of sanctity and unique levels of spiritual accomplishment. This is because it is always possible for one to regress spiritually and follow the path of evil, regardless of one's merits. Within the context of free choice one can fail until the last moment of his life; however, regarding being harmed by something through which a mitzvah was performed, that is different. Thus, Zimri had choice to succumb to temptation, which he did.

In addition, the zealous act of Shimon and Levy, although it was to eradicate the breach of immorality, was not a simple matter. Factually, they destroyed Shechem without consulting their father Yaakov. If their act of zealotry was purely for the sake of G'd, they should have consulted with their father Yaakov. The fact that they chose not consult with him, caused their selfless act of zealotry to be spiritually deficient. Therefore, even if such a zealous act could have potentially protected Zimri from succumbing and failing so seriously in this area, the merit of his forefather was deficient to do so.

2. Pinchas' Qualification as Priest

The Torah states, **"Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged Me among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel with My vengeance."** Rashi explains, "G'd said, 'He (Pinchas) avenged My vengeance.' He was enraged with My rage." The basis for Pinchas' zealotry was that he experienced G'd's pain as a result of Zimri's desecration of G'd's Name by openly cohabiting with Cozbi the Midianite princess. The sole motivating factor for Pinchas' zealotry was that he fully internalized G'd's pain and thus expressed His rage. Pinchas thus killed them through his act of zealotry without considering the consequences or the threat to his own safety. Chazal tell us that had G'd not performed numerous miracles on his behalf, Pinchas would not have lived.

The Torah continues, **"Therefore, Behold! I give him My covenant of peace (completeness). And it shall be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal priesthood, because he took vengeance of his G'd, and he atoned for the Children of Israel."** Had it not been for Pinchas' act of zealotry, the Jewish people would have been destroyed. If that were to happen, existence would have ceased to be. As the Torah states, **"Bereishis bara Elokeem...- In the beginning G'd created..."** Rashi cites Chazal who explain, "The word '*Bereishis*' should be interpreted to mean 'It is for the sake

of 'reishis (the choicest)' G'd created existence, for the sake of the Torah itself that is referred to as 'reishis.' The Jewish people are also referred to and are classified as 'reishis'..." Meaning, the objective and sole purpose of Creation is to be the setting for the fulfillment of the Torah, by the Jewish people, who are the only nation qualified to actualize It. Therefore, existence only continues to be because of Pinchas' act of zealotry that caused the Wrath of G'd to be quelled and retracted from the Jewish people. Thus the continuation of existence is attributed to Pinchas.

In addition, the Torah states, **"...and he atoned for the Children of Israel."** Meaning, due to Pinchas' act of zealotry he brought about atonement for the Jewish people. The function of the Kohen (Priest) is to facilitate the atonement process on behalf of the Jewish people. Only the Kohen is qualified to do this, through his service in the Temple. Since Pinchas brought about the greatest level of atonement on behalf of the Jewish people, to make them worthy to continue to exist, although he was born a Levite and not anointed to be a Kohen, he ascended to a level to be qualified to be the priest. Aaron and his sons were initiated and installed to be the priests by being anointed with the anointing oil. The one who was truly qualified was Aaron, the brother of Moshe. His four sons, only were chosen to be the Kohen by G'd because they were the sons of Aaron. Pinchas' ascent to be the priesthood is unrelated to the fact that he was the grandson of Aaron and the son of Elazar who were priests. He was qualified to be the Kohen in his own right, as Aaron his grandfather was. Pinchas' children will thus be priests because of him. Pinchas was thus the equivalent of his grandfather Aaron, regarding the status of his children.

Aaron merited the priesthood because Moshe had forfeited it as a result of his dialogue with G'd at the burning bush. Moshe initially attempted to extricate himself from the position of redeemer of Israel because he felt that if he were chosen it would offend his older brother Aaron, who had acted as G'd's prophet for the Jewish people. Although Moshe's intent was pure and admirable, demonstrating an unusual level of humility by rejecting the position of "redeemer"; nevertheless due to his obstinacy to G'd's wish, it was considered to be a disrespect. He thus forfeited the priesthood. G'd said to Moshe, "Although Aaron is your older brother, he will come out into the desert and greet you with joy in his heart when he will hear that you are the redeemer of Israel." Although Aaron was Moshe's older brother and the prophet of G'd for the Jewish people, he experienced joy in his heart because his

brother Moshe was chosen by G'd. Not only was there no trace of envy, Aaron rejoiced upon hearing that his brother Moshe was chosen to be the redeemer.

The Midrash states, "Reb Shimon Bar Yochai says, 'G'd said, 'The heart that rejoiced over the greatness of his brother, will merit the precious stones (of the breastplate) to be placed upon it. As it states, **'Aaron should carry the names of the Children of Israel on the breastplate of judgment on his heart...'**" The Torah identifies the location of the breastplate to be upon the heart of Aaron, which indicates the unique status and dimension of purity of Aaron. It was only because Aaron was fully negated to G'd's Will, that was not envious of Moshe and he was able to experience joy in his heart regarding Moshe's appointment as redeemer. He was thus chosen to be G'd's officiant as the priest. Similarly, Pinchas was able to internalize G'd's rage and pain and thus act as a zealot because he was totally negated to G'd. Pinchas thus qualified to be the Kohen in his own right, as Aaron was qualified to be the Kohen.

3. The Enablement of Pinchas

The Torah states, **"Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My (G'd) wrath from upon the Children of Israel..."** The Torah traces Pinchas' lineage back to his grandfather, Aaron the Kohen, which is unusual (the Torah usually identifies a person only by his immediate forbearer). Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the reason the Torah traces Pinchas's lineage to his grandfather Aaron, is to address the claim that the Jewish people had against Aaron.

When the rabble began to encourage the Jewish people to form a deity at Sinai (because they had believed that Moshe had died), Aaron's nephew Chur attempted to stop this initiative and prevent the Jewish people from participating in idolatry. Because of his attempt, the rabble reacted to Chur's opposition and killed him. The Gemara tells us that after Aaron witnessed that his nephew was murdered (slaughtered) by the rabble, he decided to participate in the process of the building of the golden calf, only to be a delay tactic, until Moshe would return. After seeing what the rabble had done to Chur, he understood that if he were to oppose them, he too would be murdered. Ultimately, through his participation in the gathering of the gold, the golden calf was formed quickly through the sorcery of the rabble. Due to Aaron's participation in the building of the golden calf, he had a

degree of culpability. As a punishment, two of his most special sons, Nadav and Avihu were taken by G'd. Their death was an atonement for his participation.

After Moshe descended from the mountain and saw the Jewish people engaged in the sin of the golden calf he broke the Tablets and gave the order to kill all those who had participated in the idolatry. As a result of the participation in the golden calf, there was a substantial loss of life. Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains, that since Aaron participated in the golden calf, there was a segment of the Jewish people that had a claim against him saying, "Because of what you have done, the Jewish people incurred many casualties!" Thus, there was negative perception of Aaron because of the tragedy that he had wrought upon them. When the Torah traces the lineage of Pinchas back to Aaron the Kohen, regarding his act of zealotry, which quelled the Wrath of G'd against the Jewish people, it was a vindication of Aaron. Pinchas, being a grandchild of Aaron, was the cause of the entire Jewish people being saved from the Wrath of G'd and continue to thrive until the end time. Pinchas's act of zealotry thus redeemed his grandfather Aaron from any claim.

Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron had many unique and special qualifications that allowed him to act as a true zealot. Firstly, he was willing to die to bring about a sanctification of G'd's Name. As Chazal tell us, had it not been for numerous miracles that G'd had performed on his behalf, Pinchas would not have survived. How was Pinchas able to overcome the concern for his own life, despite the fact that he would be killed due to his act of zealotry? Rashi cites the Jerusalem Talmud which explains that regarding the families of the Levites, although initially there were many more families, after the passing of Aaron, we find that five of the original families that were part of the tribe of Levy are no longer mentioned. The Jerusalem Talmud explains that after the passing of Aaron, the clouds of glory dispersed, thus leaving the Jewish people vulnerable. As a result of this, the Jewish people chose to return to Egypt. Elazar, the father of Pinchas, being the prince of the Levites, gave the order that at all cost the Jewish people must be prevented from returning to Egypt. As a result of this, a battle ensued and five of the Levite families were killed in battle. Although the tribe of Levy was the smallest of the tribes of Israel, they were willing to put their lives in jeopardy, for the sake of G'd. Pinchas, the son of Elazar inherited this characteristic of bringing sanctity to G'd's Name, despite the cost factor of forfeiting one's life.

The Torah tells us that there were 24,000 Jewish casualties due to the incident of Baal Peor, when the Jewish people engaged with the Moabite women. Initially a plague ensued that would have destroyed the entire Jewish people. After Pinchas killed Zimri and Cozbi by impaling them with his spear, he “brought G’d to judgment.” He claimed that the plague must cease when he presented Zimri and Cozbi upon his spear before G’d. Although by making such a claim against G’d, Pinchas jeopardized his spiritual accomplishments and relevance to the world to come, he was willing to forfeit his own eternity for the sake of the Jewish people. This characteristic of zealotry and self-sacrifice in the spiritual realm was a characteristic that he inherited from Aaron, his grandfather.

Aaron only participated in the sin of the golden calf because he wanted to save the Jewish people from eternal spiritual destruction. After he had seen how the rabble had killed Chur, he understood that if he were to interfere with their wishes, he too would be killed. Since Aaron was a priest and a prophet, there is a law that if one kills a priest and a prophet, there is no atonement for such a sin. Thus, Aaron was willing to put his own share in the world to come and relevance to eternity in jeopardy for the sake of the spiritual survival of the Jewish people. This characteristic was reflected by Pinchas.

Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the Kohen was able to act as he had regarding his physicality and spirituality only due to the characteristics that he inherited from his father and grandfather. Thus, the blotch on Aaron’s record was removed because had it not been for Aaron’s characteristics that were transmitted to Pinchas, the Jewish people would not exist. Thus, the claim against Aaron was resolved.

4. The Unfathomable Ramifications of a Mitzvah

The Torah states, **“G’d spoke to Moshe saying, ‘Harass the Midianites and smite them...’** G’d commanded Moshe to destroy the Midianites because they had plotted to destroy the Jewish people. However, the Moabites were not to be attacked and destroyed. Rashi cites Chazal who ask, “Why were the Moabites not equally deserving to be destroyed? They instructed their daughters to seduce the Jewish people to lead them to the idolatry of Baal Peor. Their intent was to bring about the ultimate destruction of the Jewish people. Nevertheless, the Moabite nation was left unharmed. Why was this so? It

was because Ruth, the Moabite (the granddaughter of Balak) needed to come into existence, as is stated in the Gemara in Tractate Bava Kama.”

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin states, "Reb Yehudah said in the name of Rav, ‘It is worthwhile to engage in Torah and mitzvos even if it is not with a pure intent (*shelo l'shma*). Because when one engages in a mitzvah *shelo l'shma* it will lead to the performance of a mitzvah with a pure intent (*l'shma*). Where do we find an example of this? It was Balak who had brought forty-two offerings to G’d (when he built the altars) that he merited to have Ruth the Moabite as his descendant. From here we see the great value of a mitzvah, even if it was performed not with a proper intent.” The offerings that were brought by Balak were with the specific intent to supplicate G’d to allow Bilaam, the evil one, to be able to curse the Jewish people. Despite Balak’s negative intent, the mitzvah generated and established a worthiness and merit that allowed Ruth to be his descendant. She ultimately became the grandmother of King David and the progenitor of Moshiach.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos cites a verse which states, “You should bring desolation upon the land...” The Gemara tells us that one should not read the word in the verse as “shamos- desolation” but rather it should be read as “*sheimos-* names.” From here, we learn “*shma k'gorim*” that the name that one possesses determines one’s destiny. The Gemara continues, “The reason Ruth was given her name “Ruth” because she was destined to have a grandson who would sate G’d with song and praise (*yeraveh HaKadosh Baruchu b'shiros v'tishbachos*).” Within the name “Ruth” lies the spiritual potential of King David who would author of Psalms.

It is interesting to note that all evil will come to an end, at the time of Moshiach, who is the direct descendant of King David. Bilaam and Balak both wanted to destroy the Jewish people, each for his own reason. If they would have succeeded in their evil intent, existence would have come to an end. Balak built altars with the intent to bring about the end of the Jewish people; rather than facilitating the intent of Balak, the effect of these altars, he merited to be the forbearer of Moshiach. Although the Moabites were instrumental in wanting to destroy the Jewish people, G’d spared them because Ruth needed to be brought into existence. Why G’d spare the Moabite people if He could have simply cause Ruth to descend from another nation, other than Moav?

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh in the portion of Ki Seitzei writes that at the time of the sin of Adam, satan had captured some of the most special souls. Ruth, the Moabite was one of them. However, because Balak had performed a mitzvah, his reward for his action of the sacrifices allowed him to be the beneficiary of that special soul. It was thus released into the Moabite people.

The entire Moabite people were spared, despite the fact that they had participated in the same evil as the Midianites. It is because Balak needed to be rewarded for the mitzvah that he performed. We see that although Balak's intent was evil, the building of the altars will bring about the ultimate good, which is the coming of Moshiach. A Jew should understand and appreciate that any mitzvah that he performs, despite its deficiency in intent, has unlimited value which cannot be fathomed. As we see regarding the mitzvah of Balak, the king of Moav.

5. The Importance of Pedigree

The Torah tells us that Zimri, the Prince of the Tribe of Shimon, publicly desecrated G'd's Name by cohabiting with Cozbi, a Midianite Princess. Pinchas acted zealously to avenge G'd's Honor by killing Zimri and Cozbi. He pierced them both with a spear while they were engaged in their disgraceful sexual act. When the Torah identifies Pinchas it traces his lineage back to Aaron, his grandfather, as the Torah states, **"Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged Me among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel with My vengeance."** Had Pinchas not acted as he did, the Attribute of Justice would have destroyed the entire Jewish people. As the Torah states, **"...He (Pinchas) pierced them both...and the plague was halted from the Children of Israel. Those who died in the plague were twenty-four thousand."**

Rashi cites Chazal who ask, "Why does the Torah need to trace Pinchas' lineage back to Aaron, his grandfather? It is because after Pinchas had killed Zimri, he was ridiculed and disgraced by the Tribes of Israel for killing a Prince. They had said, 'How can a person who descends from a grandfather (maternal grandfather was Yisro) who stuffed calves for idolatry have the audacity to kill a Prince of Israel?'" Therefore, the Torah needs to trace his lineage to Aaron the High Priest in order to communicate his prestigious pedigree. How could the Jewish people ridiculed Pinchas when his act of zealotry

had saved them from G'd's destruction? One would think that the Jewish people would have extolled and praised him for his selfless heroic act. In fact Chazal tell us that in order for Pinchas to have succeeded he had to have merited multiple miracles in order for him not to be killed. Despite all that had transpired, the Jewish people perceived Pinchas in a negative light and therefore ridiculed him.

It is true that Pinchas' act of zealotry had saved the Jewish people from G'd's destruction; however, their criticism of Pinchas was directed at him as a person. They claimed that if Pinchas, who was a commoner, could kill a prince of Israel it was an indication that he was a person who does not esteem or revere anyone of stature. Because if Pinchas in fact did, he could not have been able to kill Zimri, despite the heinousness of his behavior. He was thus categorized as a person who possesses an uncouth character. Therefore the Torah needed to trace his pedigree to Aaron, the High Priest in order to establish him as someone of prestigious pedigree so that he should be perceived for what he truly was.

Chazal tell us that many miracles were performed on Pinchas' behalf. Why did he merit such miracles? It is often that one merits miracles because of the special merit of his forbearers. When Pinchas set out to avenge G'd's honor, he understood that unless he would merit Divine Protection, he would be killed. He succeeded in his mission because G'd had protected him. In order for us to understand and appreciate the source of his merit, the Torah needed to trace Pinchas' lineage back to Aaron, the High Priest. Thus, Pinchas was not only unique because of what he had brought about, but also because of his special quality of pedigree.