

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Chukas/Balak 5769

And Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon Hakohein saw, and he rose up from the midst of the congregation, and he took a spear in his hand. (25:7)

Rashi says, “He saw the event and remembered the law. He said to Moshe, ‘I have learned from you that if a Jewish man takes a gentile woman, zealots may kill him in the act.’ Moshe said, ‘He who reads the verdict should be the one to carry it out!’ Immediately, he took a spear in his hand.”

The source for this Rashi is Rav’s opinion in Sanhedrin 82a. However, there is another opinion there, that of Shmuel. According to Shmuel, Pinchas did not ask Moshe’s permission before he took action. “And Pinchas saw” means that Pinchas remembered the principle that “wherever there is a desecration of Hashem’s name, one need not give honor to his teacher” by asking his permission. Had he asked Moshe’s permission, he would have wasted precious seconds, during which someone might have seen Zimri’s sin and followed his example.

According to this, the word “saw” is not literal; it really means “remembered.” But we could add that Pinchas, with his powers of prophecy, saw that there would come a time when others would need to use this same principle, and take it to a new level. At least Pinchas knew that Moshe would certainly have given him permission to do what he did, and all he would have lost would have been time. Furthermore, in his quest to save time he was violating only the principle that one may not rule halacha in front of one’s teacher, even when the teacher himself would have ruled the same way. But Pinchas saw that there would one day come a generation in which rabbis do not speak out against the pervasive heresy of their time, due in part to their fear of the people. Then it would be up to smaller individuals to be the zealots and speak out, even if they know that some of rabbis would not officially put their stamp of approval on what they are doing.

One should not think it strange that rabbis would refrain from speaking out due to fear of the people. Even one of the greatest tzaddikim in history, Shaul Hamelech, failed in this aspect. When Shaul let the people take from the sheep of Amalek for offerings, Shmuel took him to task. At first, Shaul didn’t understand what he had done wrong, and he said, “I have listened to the voice of Hashem, and walked in the path on which Hashem sent me” (Shmuel I 15:20). But when Shmuel finally made him understand that Hashem desired obedience more than all the offerings in the world, Shaul said, “I have sinned, for I have transgressed the mouth of Hashem and your words, because I feared the people, and I listened to their voice” (v. 24).

We see here that Shaul, at first, did not consciously see himself as acting out of fear of the people. He had his reasons, based on Torah, for what he did. It was only after Shmuel showed him the flaws in his reasoning that he thought to himself, “How could I have made such a mistake? How could I have mistaken an aveirah for a mitzvah?” And he realized the answer: that he had been influenced by his fear of the people. He said, “I sinned - and mistook an aveirah for a mitzvah - because I feared the people.”

The Shulchan Aruch recognizes that rabbis on a beis din may be influenced by their fear of the people. In Choshen Mishpat 14:1 at the end, the Rema writes, “If the man on trial is wealthy and influential in his city, he must be tried before a beis din in a different city, even if the beis din of his own city is greater.” The Rema thus treats the fear of this influential man like a bribe, which can influence a rabbi to rule the wrong way. It should therefore come as no surprise that many rabbis today feel the pressure of their wealthy and influential congregants and do not speak out against the heresy of our time. (Al Hageulah V'al Hatemurah 117-118)

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