

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

And the name of the Israelite man who was smitten, who was smitten with the Midianitess, was Zimri, son of Salu, a prince of a family of the Shimonites; and the name of the woman who was smitten, the Midianitess, was Kozbi, daughter of Tzur, a head of a family in Midian. (25:14-15)

Rashi says: Just as the Torah gives the lineage of the righteous man (Pinchas) for praise, so it gives the lineage of the wicked man for denigration.

The Kli Yakar asks: We understand how the lineage of Pinchas from Aharon and Elazar is praise. But how is it denigration of Zimri to say that he was the son of Salu? Did we ever hear of Salu being a wicked man? He answers that the names Zimri and Salu themselves contain a hint to the sin of Zimri. Although they were given these names long ago, after the sin people looked into their names and realized their significance.

What was the sin of Zimri? On the surface, he took a Midianite woman. But Chazal imply that there was more to it. In Sotah 22b, it is told that when King Yannai was on his deathbed, his wife was worried about who would inherit the throne. "You became a Sadducee and killed the Sages. Perhaps the people will take revenge on our children and pick a different king." He said to her, "Do not fear the Pharisees, for although they oppose me, they have principles and they would never take it out on my sons. Do not fear the Sadducees because they are my allies. But beware the painted ones, whose outside does not match their inside. They seem to be Pharisees, but are actually not. Their deeds are like those of Zimri, yet they ask for reward like Pinchas."

In other words, Yannai was not worried about people who make their views open and clear. He was more worried about those who pretend to be something they're not, because they might be secretly planning to overthrow his dynasty while hiding behind the disguise of the principled Pharisees.

The Maharsha asks two questions here: 1) Zimri committed his sin in public; in fact, the public nature of the sin was the reason why it was considered so serious. The law that "zealots may kill him in the act" only applies in public. If so, how can the Gemara say that someone could secretly act like Zimri while pretending to be righteous like Pinchas? A sin committed secretly is, by definition, not similar to Zimri's sin. 2) Yannai was obviously not telling his wife to fear those who marry Midianite women. Rather, he was referring generally to sinners who pretend to be righteous, and Zimri and Pinchas are merely examples of wicked and righteous men. If so, why did he pick specifically these examples?

The Kli Yakar answers both of these questions based on the Gemara in Sanhedrin 82a, quoted by Rashi on 25:6. Zimri took Kozbi to Moshe and said, "Son of Amram, is this woman forbidden or permitted? And if you say she is forbidden, who permitted you to marry the daughter of Yisro?" Moshe forgot the halacha, and all the Jews moaned and wept.

We see here that Zimri tried to give himself a righteous image. He publicly asked Moshe whether it was forbidden, and when Moshe did not answer, **he went ahead with the act, claiming that the lack of an answer meant that he had the right to decide on his own.** Thus, Yannai told his wife to fear those who, like Zimri, commit a sin while claiming that they are completely righteous and are doing nothing wrong.

Part of Zimri's sin was that he acted as if he were righteous, and so when people analyzed his name, they found a hint to this trait. Zimri comes from the root "lezamer," meaning to sing praise: thus, he sang his own praises. His father's name, Salu, resembles the word "solu," meaning praise (Tehillim 68:5). Kozbi comes from the root "kazav" meaning falsehood: she represented herself falsely. Her father's name, Tzur (rock), indicates that she elevated herself like a high rock. The Torah makes a point of calling them princes or heads, because that is what arrogant people aspire to be.

This is why the Torah repeats the words “who was smitten”. The first time, it refers to his name: after what Zimri did, people analyzed his name and found it faulty, smitten. The second time, it refers to the actual killing of Zimri.

On the 10th and 11th of Sivan 5673 (1913), a preliminary version of the constitution of Agudath Israel was drafted by the temporary committee. (This document, marked “top secret,” is a collector’s item today.) In Chapter 9, titled "Moetzes Chachmei Hatorah", the following is stated (paragraphs 55-61):

The Moetzes Chachmei Hatorah is composed of at least 23 members of Agudath Israel who are known as Gedolei Torah. In connection with the matters of Agudath Israel, this council will clarify and decide the laws of the holy Torah... The Moetzes is obligated to decide on a matter when the leadership committee, the Central Committee or the Knessia Gedolah present a question to it... When the leadership committee sees a great need to bring some matter whose decision rests with the Moetzes to completion, the committee must limit the time in which the Moetzes must reach a decision. **When the time limit has passed, the Committee has submitted its request again and the answer of the Moetzes is still not forthcoming, this will signify that the Moetzes forfeits its right to decide on this matter.** An explanation of reasons must accompany each Moetzes decision.

At the Second Knessia Gedolah in 1929, a permanent constitution was ratified. The notion that the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah is obligated to answer and give reasons, and that the absence of a decision within a limited time grants license to the activists to decide on their own, was not accepted. (Mikatowitz Ad Hei Beiyar, pp. 18-19)

However, this is precisely what happened in 1946-48 at the time of the founding of the Zionist state. The Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah did not convene from 1937 until the end of 1951. During this crucial period the Agudah activists had to be satisfied with asking various gedolim individually. At a meeting in March 1946 regarding Agudah’s appearance before the Anglo-American Committee, it was reported that they had consulted with the Brisker Rav on the subject of a Jewish state, and he had not given his opinion, only said that it was a very serious issue and we must think about it. The Chazon Ish said that he would not get involved and would not give any answer. Rabbi Eliezer Yehuda Finkel expressed his opinion against it. Rabbi Yosef Cahaneman did not answer, but said that he was willing to attend a gathering, provided that it would take place in the house of the Chazon Ish (ibid. p. 100).

In September 1946, Agudah leaders visited Rabbi Dushinsky, the Brisker Rav, Rabbi Akiva Sofer and Rabbi Yosef Cahaneman to ask what Agudah’s stance should be on partition. All of these gedolim asked that their comments not be publicized, and said that all the rabbis needed to convene at one table in order to reach a joint decision. Despite all efforts, such a convention was never held (ibid. p. 103).

In October 1946, at a meeting to discuss Agudah’s participation in the Palestine Conference in London, Yaakov Senkowitz said, “We have to make every effort to get Daas Torah, but if we don’t get it, we must decide ourselves.” Feldman said, “We need to get Daas Torah, but after all, the Executive Committee was elected by the Knessia Gedolah with the agreement of the rabbis and are also entitled to an opinion. If the gedolim do not make a decision, it means that they are giving over the matter to the Executive Committee.” Rabbi Yitzchok Meir Levin agreed with Feldman. Mordechai Buxbaum said, “We must decide our position on our own, if Daas Torah is not forthcoming.” (ibid. pp. 96-98)

Throughout 1947-48, the Agudah leaders tried to convene the Moetzes, but to no avail. In the end, when Agudah joined the Zionist government, Levin wrote to Yaakov Rosenheim, “In New York the World Executive Committee decided that it had to join the government. After all, the Executive Committee also has a say about these issues... I don’t remember which of the Gedolei Hatorah were against it...” (ibid. p. 89)

And in a speech to Agudah members in September 1951, Levin said, “At the time of the establishment of the state, the World Executive Committee and the National Center in Israel decided to join the temporary government. After the first Knesset elections, the question of Agudah’s participation in the permanent government was brought before the Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah...”

Yet in another speech in that same year, Levin claimed that “we decided in accordance with the decision of Agudath Israel’s supreme institution, Moetzes Gedolei Hatorah, to join the government.” (ibid. p. 118)



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