

Parashas Pinchas

The Righteousness of Pinchas

פִּינָחָס בֶּן־אֶלְעָזָר בֶּן־אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן

Pinchas, son of Elazar, son of Aharon the Kohen (25:11).

After Pinchas killed Zimri, the people protested: Since Pinchas was (maternally) a descendant of Yisro, who fattened calves to be sacrificed as idols, he should not have had the audacity to kill Zimri, a prince in Israel. In response, the Torah emphasizes that Pinchas was (paternally) a descendant of Aharon, who was known for his pursuit of peace (*Rashi*).

But this is difficult to understand. Didn't everyone realize that in killing Zimri, Pinchas had acted zealously for the sake of Hashem's Glory? Why would the fact that he was descended from an idol-worshiper diminish the significance of his great deed?

To address this, let us analyze the events that led to Pinchas's deed. At the end of previous *parashah*, the Torah describes how the Jews became attracted to the Moavite women and their idols. Moshe set up tribunals to punish the sinners, and then a Jewish man (Zimri) came forward with a Moavite woman (Cozbi), and consorted with her in front of Moshe and the entire assembly. How could Zimri have been so brazen as to publicly engage in sin even while the sinners were being judged? Furthermore, *Rashi* tells us that when Moshe told Zimri that the Moavite woman was forbidden to him, he responded, "If so, who permitted you to marry the daughter of Yisro, a Midianite?" But did Zimri not know that Tziporah had converted to Judaism? How could he use Moshe's precedent as an excuse for sinning with the non-Jewish Cozbi?

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It seems correct to explain that Zimri was aware of the prohibition against having relations with a non-Jewish woman, but he believed that the prohibition applied to the other Jews who sinned with the Moavites, but not to him. The Torah says (above, 25:2) that the Moavite women invited the Jews to join the feasts of their gods, indicating that the Jews who sinned had left the Jewish Camp and joined the Moavites in *their* camp. In that case, Zimri felt, having relations with the Moavite women was surely forbidden, since it would enable the women to entice the men into worshiping their idols. His case was different, though, since Cozbi had entered the Jewish Camp. Zimri therefore argued that she was not seeking to lure him into idolatry. To the contrary, she was apparently seeking to convert to Judaism, so he should be permitted to live with her!

Therefore, even as the other sinners were being sentenced to death, Zimri was unafraid to engage in his act; he felt that their punishment would not apply to him. And he further pointed out that Moshe himself married the daughter of Yisro, meaning to insinuate that just as she had converted, Cozby too could convert! Although Cozby might have an ulterior motive for converting, who could prove that her intentions were not sincere? Perhaps she would become an upstanding Jewess and produce righteous offspring. Claiming that his act was justified, he was unafraid to carry it out in public.

The people were swayed by Zimri's argument and stood by while he sinned. Pinchas, however, understood that it had no merit, for Cozbi had surely entered the Jewish camp with the intent of helping the Moavite cause by seducing Zimri. Knowing that Zimri's act could not be justified, Pinchas killed both him and Cozbi.

We can now understand the people's reaction to Pinchas's act of zealous revenge. Thinking that Zimri had a valid argument, they told Pinchas: You yourself are descended from an idol-worshiper who converted, yet you turned out righteous. How

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could you be so sure that Cozbi would not also have converted and produced righteous offspring, just as your ancestor Yisro did?

Hashem responded and validated Pinchas's act, turning the focus to his paternal lineage from the perfectly righteous Aharon. Furthermore, the Torah stresses below (v. 18) that Cozbi was slain *on the day of the plague for the matter of Pe'or*. With this it clarifies that Pinchas's judgment was correct. Cozbi could not have entered the Jewish camp with good intentions, for she did so on that terrible day when her people were actively luring the Jews into the worship of Pe'or. Clearly, she was part of their plot and both she and Zimri deserved to be put to death (*Chasam Sofer al HaTorah*, p. 131 ד"ה פינחס א).

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