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The Path to Follow

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PINCHAS' ACT OF TOTAL SELF-SACRIFICE: RECTIFYING THE SIN OF THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen, turned away My wrath from the Children of Israel" (Bamidbar 25:11).

Rashi cites the Sages (Sanhedrin 82b) in stating, "Since the tribes were disparaging him, saying, 'Have you seen this son of Puti [i.e., Putiel, one of Jethro's names], whose mother's father pitem [fattened] calves for idols, and who killed a leader of an Israelite tribe,' Scripture traces his lineage to Aaron."

Our Sages affirm that everything Pinchas did was solely for G-d's sake, meaning that he completely devoted himself to Hashem (Yerushalmi, Sanhedrin 5:2). Despite this, the question is raised as to whether his name (Pinchas) should be written with or without a yud. In fact the presence of this letter testifies that all his actions were performed for the sake of the Divine Name, from which we learn that "in a place where there are no men, strive to be a man" (Pirkei Avoth 2:5).

However a difficulty remains: Moshe Rabbeinu, as well as Aaron the kohen and the 70 elders of Israel, were in the camp [when Pinchas took action]! Now we know that "one does not teach the Halachah before his teacher" (Yerushalmi, Gittin 1:2). That said, how could Pinchas have killed a leader of Israel on his own initiative?

Furthermore, in regards to Pinchas we read: "He saw what was happening and remembered the Halachah" (Sanhedrin 82a). That being the case, why did he not simply remind Moshe of this Halachah? Moshe could have then given him complete permission to kill the transgressor, and Pinchas would not have needed to "teach it" himself!

Furthermore, Pinchas could have reprimanded the transgressions as his father Elazar had done. When Moshe, who had been angry with soldiers returning from battle, had forgotten a Halachah (Bamidbar 31:14), Elazar said: "This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded Moshe" (v.21). In other words, he spoke to them in Moshe's name. His son Pinchas could have done the same by mentioning the Halachah in Moshe's name.

Let us try and solve all these difficulties. "He saw what was happening..." What did he really see? He saw the sin of the first man... "and remembered the Halachah." He remembered that Adam had not received permission to eat from the Tree of Knowledge (Bereshith 2:17). Adam took the initiative to eat from it because he was intelligent, believing that it would allow him to serve G-d with even greater vigor.

Hence because of his pride, the first man sought to introduce an "alien fire" that G-d had not com-

manded him. That is where his sin lay. In fact rather than thinking of G-d and His commandments, Adam allowed himself to transgress His order with the hope of gaining even more glory for himself! Of his own free will, Adam introduced the evil inclination into himself so it would constantly fight him, something that G-d absolutely did not want.

All this happened to the first man because he did not possess any "merit of the fathers." He was the direct work of G-d's hands (Devarim Rabba 11:3), and he thought that everything was permissible to him. That is how he ended up sinning. From here we see just how valuable is the merit of the fathers, for Adam could not benefit from such protection, as opposed to Pinchas. This is also why the text points out that Pinchas was a descendant of Aaron, for it was precisely the "merit of the fathers" that helped him to overcome this trial.

Nevertheless, how are we to understand that the first man, fashioned by G-d himself, could have been led into disobeying Him? After all, Hashem warned him by saying: "On the day you eat of it, you will surely die" (Bereshith 2:17). We must say that Adam did not understand the full significance of death, and therefore he could not grasp the severity of this prohibition (eating from the Tree of Knowledge), which is why he sinned. Probably because of his fear of G-d, Adam thought that he was able to defeat the evil inclination, which in turn led to his arrogant behavior. However his sin lay in transgressing G-d's word.

It is now easier to understand the main difference between Pinchas and Adam. In Pirkei Avoth 3:1 we read, "Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an accounting." According to some commentators, "from where you came" did not apply to the first man, since he was the work of G-d's hands. He did not come from a putrid drop, and therefore he was not used to engaging in soul-searching.

Such was not the case with Pinchas, concerning whom the text specifies that he was "the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen," meaning that he did come from a putrid drop. That is what encouraged him to be humble, not to grow proud, for he felt that all three points of the above saying applied to him, including "from where you came." Hence Adam – to whom G-d said, "On the day you eat of it, you will surely die" – acted in the very opposite way as Pinchas, who risked his life (while fully realizing the significance of doing so) solely for the purpose of glorifying G-d.

We can now better understand things. Pinchas felt the great danger which the Children of Israel were in because of the sin committed by the leader



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CHEVRAT PINTO

207 West 78th Street
New York - NY 10024

Tel: 1 212 721 0230

www.hevratpinto.org

hevratpinto@aol.com

Editor-in-Chief:

Hanania Soussan

of the tribe of Shimon. There was no time to speak to Moshe and assure himself of the Halachah, for the plague was spreading and thousands among the Children of Israel were still dying. That is why he took this decision on his own, thereby putting his life in danger and even risking his portion in the World to Come. His only goal was to save the Children of Israel and demonstrate zeal in preventing a desecration of Hashem's Name.

Thus Pinchas immediately rose from the midst of the assembly, took a spear, and went to kill the transgressors in order to end the plague. It was precisely because of this action that he merited long life, for he became

a kohen (Zevachim 101b) and received the blessing: "I give him My covenant of peace" (Bamidbar 25:12).

For the action that he took, G-d conferred great merit upon Pinchas. Which one? "I give him My covenant of peace, and it shall be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal priesthood" (ibid. vv.12-13), for his deeds were done without self-interest. On the other hand, Adam – who did not devote himself to G-d, and who was only concerned with his own glory – received death instead of life, as it is written: "On the day you eat of it, you will surely die."

Real Life Stories

Everyone Prays About their Own Problems

Prayers for the deliverance of the Jewish people, and a longing for the Divine Presence, are more intense in the days between Tammuz 17 and Av 9, a time when every Jew pours out his heart before G-d and begs Him to put an end to the exile. In the book *Barchi Nafshi*, the gaon Rabbi Chizkiyahu Yosef Mishkovsky recounts an extraordinary story about Rebbetzin Steinman, the deceased wife of the gaon Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman, author of *Ayelet Hashachar*.

One day during "Yom Kippur Katan," the Rebbetzin went to synagogue in order to pray. It was a difficult time for the Jewish people, when numerous hardships befell them. The heads of too many households were dying, leaving behind dozens of orphans in misery.

The tears of the women in synagogue were unbearable. Everyone realized that the Jewish people were in need of great mercy, and that people had to beseech Hashem to have pity on us, saving us from the misfortunes that were befalling us.

At the end of the prayer service, the Rebbetzin addressed a few of her close friends and said, "I feel that the tears that we shed could have served a much greater purpose: We could have begged G-d to return us to Him, to make His Presence once again dwell among us, and to send Mashiach. In fact when he arrives, all suffering will end!" She added that we obviously cannot describe or imagine the impact made by one Jewish tear. However the problem is that everyone prays about his own problems, or at the very most about the problems that affect his immediate surroundings, nothing more.

We fail to use these tears in our prayers for the entire people, to end the exile of the Shechinah, or even to participate in the return of G-d to Zion in mercy. Yet if we were to do so, He would obviously hear our prayers and hasten our deliverance. To what can this be compared? It is similar to the Chafetz Chaim's parable about the son of the king who badly misbehaved. His father chased him from the palace and exiled him to a faraway land, sending him to a life of hard work with a simple peasant.

A few months later, the king had a great yearning to see his son. He therefore sent an emissary to the peasant in order to tell the prince that his father, the king, was concerned about him and wanted to know if he needed something. When he arrived in the village, this emissary was shocked to see the lowly condition which the delicate youngster was now in. In the past, he had constantly been spoiled. Yet now, he was forced to work with a peasant and was living a life that was miles apart from what he was used to in the royal court.

When the emissary asked the prince what he needed, the prince begged for the king to make the peasant lighten his work and to give him a little more food to eat.

When the emissary reported this to the king, the latter burst into tears and exclaimed: "Is this what my son has become? Is this the conduct

of a prince? All he cares about is being given more to eat and not being enslaved? He had an opportunity to ask for so much more! He could have begged me to free him, to return him to the palace and prepare him for the day when he will become king and wear the crown!"

The same applies to us, the Chafetz Chaim taught. We beg Hashem to send us a little more food, a little more sustenance, to give us some tranquility – and yet we forget the main thing and fail to ask for deliverance! What a shame. In fact if we were to ask for it, it is certain that with all the benefits that accompany it, all our other problems would disappear as well! Above all, we shouldn't say: "Do I have the power to bring about deliverance? All the great men of Torah and the pillars of the earth have already poured out their hearts before the Creator, beseeching Him for the coming of Mashiach, but received no response. How can I, insignificant as I am, achieve it?"

We shouldn't say such things, but instead we should constantly be inspired by the advice of the *Mesilat Yesharim*:

"If someone comes and says, 'Who am I, and what [merit] do I possess, such that I can pray for the end of the exile and for Jerusalem? Will my prayers gather the exiles and bring about deliverance?' His answer is waiting.

"The Talmud asks, 'Why was man created alone?' So that every man may say, 'It was for my sake that the world was created.' In any case, G-d always takes satisfaction when His children ask Him for help in this regard. Even if He does not answer their request because the time has not yet come, or for any other reason, they have done their duty and G-d rejoices" (*Mesilat Yesharim* Ch. 19: Aspects of Piety).

Hence the author of *Mesilat Yesharim* is explicitly teaching us that even in our generation, everyone should beseech G-d to send us Mashiach, and He will derive satisfaction from our supplications. Likewise, *Targum Yonatan ben Uzziel* states that "every man of Israel, by his prayer, can bring about a complete change for the people and usher in deliverance" (*Devarim* 28:15).

We cannot know from which eye the long-awaited tear will fall, the tear destined to usher in deliverance. We have already noted in previous generations that some people, although not great Torah figures, have done amazing things and brought about incredible revolutions in the history of the Jewish people.

Since no one knows to whom this tear belongs, we are all obligated to pray to Hashem for deliverance. We must all shed a torrent of tears so He may return us to Him in perfect love, and so He may rebuild the Temple and firmly establish it as in times past. This truly depends on every one of us. No one is excluded!

Dead from the Start

It is written, “Pinchas the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen, turned away My wrath from the Children of Israel” (Bamidbar 25:11).

How can we say that Pinchas turned away Hashem’s wrath? Is it not written, “The dead in the plague were 24,000” (v.9)? If none of them died, we could say that Pinchas “turned away My wrath.” Yet since so many people died, how did Pinchas turn His wrath away?

One thing is clear: Woe to those who fail to adequately protect their children. Not a single Jew died outside the tribe of Shimon. When the erev rav (mixed multitude) came to join the Children of Israel, the men converted and married women from the tribe of Shimon, and some of their offspring died in the sin of the golden calf. Others died here, among those who remained.

Hence it is written, “The dead in the plague.” It does not say, “Those who died,” but rather “the dead.” In other words, they were already, in principle, dead from the start. Yet because the Children of Israel had been protected, not a single one among them or their holy descendants died. It is in this regard that we read, “I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance” (v.11). This implies that others were consumed. Furthermore, Pinchas “turned away My wrath from the Children of Israel” – but from the others, those who belonged to the erev rav, he did not turn His wrath away. Hence the verse specifies, “from the Children of Israel.” – Targum HaZohar

The Depths of the Torah

It is written, “The sons of Issachar according to their families: Tola, the Tolaite family” (Bamidbar 26:23).

Why was he called Tola?

It is because he penetrated the depths of the Torah as a worm (tola’at) penetrates a fruit. – Maor HaAfela

The Ba’alei Teshuvah

It is written, “The sons of Benjamin according to their families” (Bamidbar 26:38).

Earlier in the Torah we read, “Benjamin’s sons” (Bereshith 46:21), and it goes on to list ten of them. Yet when they entered Eretz Israel, only five sons are counted.

This teaches us that five families from Benjamin assimilated in Egypt, for they were evildoers and did not repent. Why were half the descendants of Benjamin missing, more than any other tribe? It is because Benjamin’s mother named him Ben Oni – a son who will diminish (mitonen). However his father called him Bin Yamin – literally “son of the right” – meaning a son who is strong and faithful. The words of his mother killed half of his descendants, while the words of his father saved the other half.

Which families remained? Bela and Ashbel, Ehi, Muppim, and Huppim. Bela and Ashbel were righteous, while Ehi, Muppim, and Huppim were ba’alei teshuvah. Hence when the verse counts their families, it changes their names: Ehi is called Ahiram, for he reconnected himself (iha) to the Most High (ram), meaning that he did teshuvah. He was torn away, and then he was reunited. Muppim is called Shefufam, for his heart broke in repentance (the root of Shefufam evokes suffering). Finally Huppim is called Hufam, for he cleansed himself of sin, as it is written: “I am haf [blameless], and there is no iniquity in me” (Job 33:9). Although it is from the same root, Scripture was modified slightly in order to teach us that he was a ba’al teshuvah.

– Midrash Aggadah

Numerous Grievances

It is written, “Why should the name of our father be taken away from among his family?” (Bamidbar 27:4).

The five daughters of Zelephodad said five things:

The first said, “Our father died in the desert.”

The second said, “He was not among the assembly that was gathering against Hashem in the assembly of Korach.”

The third said, “But he died of his own sin” – he being the one who gathered wood on Shabbat.

The fourth said, “And he had no son.”

Finally the fifth said, “Why should the name of our father be taken away from among his family?” – Midrash Yilamdeinu

In the Light of the Parsha

Pinchas Acted for the Sake of Heaven

The Sages say that Pinchas the son of Elazar “saw what was happening and remembered the Halachah” (Sanhedrin 82b). This means that Pinchas saw the act of the first man and remembered the Halachah. He remembered that the Holy One, blessed be He, had told Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. However Adam believed that he should eat from it because he was intelligent and knew that if he did so, he would be able to serve, so to speak, Hashem with even greater intensity. Yet instead of Hashem and His commandments, Adam thought only of himself, of how to increase his own glory by transgressing G-d’s command.

To examine the nature of the difference between Pinchas and Adam, let us begin by citing the Mishnah: “Reflect upon three things and you will not come to sin: Know from where you came, where you are going, and before Whom you are destined to give an accounting” (Pirkei Avoth 3:1). The commentators explain that the first point, “from where you came,” was lacking with Adam, since he was the direct work of Hashem’s hands.

Such was not the case for Pinchas, who is described as “the son of Elazar, the son of Aaron the kohen.” This proved that he was born from a woman, and that he originated from a “putrid drop,” as the Mishnah phrases it. That is what led him to humility. He did not grow proud, for these three things applied to him, including “from where you came.” That is why the first man – to whom the Holy One, blessed be He, said: “For on the day you eat of it, you will surely die” (Bereshith 2:17) – could have thought that on the contrary, it was good for him to eat from it, to overcome the trials of this world, and to conquer them and receive a great reward. As for Pinchas, he knew that he was in a very dangerous and life-threatening situation, and yet he risked his life to increase the glory of Heaven.

Thus when Pinchas sensed the great danger that hovered over the Jewish people due to the sin by the leader of the tribe of Shimon, he did not have enough time to obtain Moshe’s advice and receive a halachic decision from him. If he had addressed Moshe to learn the Halachah, thousands among the Children of Israel would have died in the meantime. Hence he decided on his own, risking his own life – even if he were liable to lose it – in order to save the Children of Israel and demonstrate zeal for G-d’s Name, which had been profaned.

Hence Pinchas immediately arose from amid the community, took a spear in his hand, and proceeded to kill the transgressors so as to stop the epidemic. Because Pinchas did this, he was rewarded with long life, and from then on he received the crown of the priesthood and the blessing: “I give him My covenant of peace” (Bamidbar 25:12).

Hence the Holy One, blessed be He, gave Pinchas this great reward: “I give him My covenant of peace, and it shall be for him and his offspring after him a covenant of eternal priesthood.” This happened because all of Pinchas’ deeds were solely for the sake of Heaven. As for Adam, because he did not devote himself to fulfilling Hashem’s command, but was instead concerned with fulfilling his own interests, he received death rather than life from G-d, as it is written: “For on the day you eat of it, you will surely die.” How did he reach that point? It was because he possessed pride and did not benefit from the merit of his fathers.

In a letter written by Rabbi Aharon Leib Steinman, the gaon awakens our sensitivities to prayer and the concentration that we must put into it. Our generation needs great encouragement in this area. This is what he wrote:

“We have heard about a certain slackening among yeshiva students in the area of prayer. They believe that their diligent and prolonged learning into the early morning hours allows them to do this. They find it difficult to get up in the morning, and therefore they do not pray with the community. Even when they do, their prayer is rushed. Know that in Orchot Chaim, the Rosh declares that we must ask for Divine forgiveness for having uttered the blessing *Selach na* [‘Forgive please’] without concentration, and the same applies to the rest of prayer. In the chapter on the morning prayer, the Mishnah teaches: ‘Whoever makes his prayer into a routine, it is not a supplication.’ Likewise in their adages, our Sages warn us: ‘When you pray, do not make your prayer a routine act, but [an appeal for] mercy and an entreaty’ [Pirkei Avot 2:13].

“As with all mitzvot from the Torah or our Sages, there are numerous aspects to prayer, most notably the time that it must be observed. If these are respected, our requests may be favorably received. The simple fulfillment of this mitzvah, however, is not enough to guarantee that our requests will be answered, something that depends solely on the King of the universe. On the other hand, a prayer that is only recited to fulfill the obligation of prayer has obviously no chance of being answered. Furthermore, it is the worst possible form of contempt.

“Everyone knows that even with a great deal of effort, it is still difficult to concentrate throughout prayer, even if it just means understanding each word. How much more difficult is it to involve one’s entire heart in prayer! Nevertheless, it is unforgivable to come and pray, in principle, with a careless attitude.

“The book *Shaarei Teshuvah* compares someone who pays little regard to a mitzvah, and who fails to be meticulous in its fulfillment, to a servant who tells his master: ‘I refuse to fulfill such and such an order from you.’ By saying this, he is breaking off his master’s yoke. How can we not fear that such an attitude will place us in the category of rebels?

“Save yourselves, dear friends, and save the entire house of Israel, because the sin of an individual has an effect on the entire Jewish people. Be careful: Make an effort not to think of prayer as something of little value, something that concerns only simple men.”

Rav Steinman concluded his letter with the following blessing: “May it please G-d that our efforts to pray correctly will give us the merit of growing and being delivered in both the spiritual and material realms. May it please G-d to grant merit to us in this world and in the World to Come.”

The Rav is not an Expert in Hebrew

In the book *Reb Yaakov*, a biography of the gaon Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetsky, one of the great Torah figures of America, his remarkable behavior in prayer is abundantly described. When people would hear Reb Yaakov reading the Shema or reciting a blessing, they had the impression of witnessing an intimate conversation with Hashem. Just his Birkat Hamazon, said Rav Dishon, was enough to instill a fear of G-d in the heart of anyone who heard him. Whether he was alone or with a group, whether he was busy or not, his Birkat Hamazon did not last one minute more or one minute less.

When he recited a blessing, he said it with such precision and clarity that one of his students was prompted to say: “It’s as if every word was followed by a ‘Stop’ sign.”

One day Rabbi Dovid Zucker, the director of the Chicago kollel, was waiting for Reb Yaakov as he was reciting Birkat Hamazon after a meal.

Immediately after finishing, he told Rabbi Zucker that he was very much in a hurry. Rabbi Zucker underlined that his way of praying had not been influenced by that fact at all.

On another occasion time, the Rosh Yeshiva of a renowned yeshiva telephoned Reb Yaakov’s home in Monsey. The Rebbetzin picked up the receiver and asked the Rosh Yeshiva to call back later, since the Rav was reciting Birkat Hamazon.

The Rosh Yeshiva preferred to hold, thinking that he wouldn’t have to wait too long. However the Rebbetzin continued to suggest that he call back later, saying lightheartedly: “It seems that the Rav’s Hebrew isn’t as good as yours, since it takes him longer to pray.”

During the nearly 20 years in which they prayed together, Rav David Frankel could not remember Reb Yaakov being late for prayer more than once or twice. One night, when he had missed the call for Barechu to start Arvit, Reb Yaakov confided to Rav Frankel: “Today my soul didn’t merit receiving all of its sustenance” (in that particular congregation, people did not recite Barechu after the prayer service). Reb Yaakov taught the students of his Sunday morning class in Monsey that when we recite Barechu for Shacharit, our soul returns to us, even if we fail to notice it.

The Faithful Ones - Accounts from the Tzaddikim of the Pinto Family

Never a Locust Swarm as Large

The city of Mogador experienced years of famine and suffering, a time when many of its residents were financially ruined, and some even perished in great suffering from hunger and thirst. From time to time, the city was struck by a plague of locusts – millions of them would invade fields and farms. When they “decided” to leave the city, they left behind devastated areas as a reminder, places completely devoid of vegetation. This shortage led to a rise in prices for basic foods, as well as serious economic problems for the residents of the city.

One year, locusts appeared in large numbers over the city of Mogador. The residents of the city were frightened, for the Mishnah (tractate Ta’anith) teaches: “Whoever sees locusts should say, ‘Blessed be the True Judge.’” The established decision in regards to grasshoppers and locusts is the following: Even if they are not present, but someone else in the world, a fast should be established, for it is a moving plague. Likewise, we are warned about a plague of locusts even if we do not see the wing of a single locust. That being the case, when multitudes of locusts cover the earth, fear and terror are at their peak.

Under such difficult circumstances, all that the Jews of Mogador could do was to continue their ancient tradition: They proclaimed a day of fasting and prayer throughout the cities of Morocco. Yet to their great disappointment, their prayers were not answered, and the locusts did not depart. In fact the distress of the Jews of Mogador only increased!

It was then that deliverance finally arrived. A few days later, while Rabbi Haim Pinto Hagadol was learning with his disciples, darkness filled the house. The darkness was caused by a “cloud” of locusts flying overhead and darkening the entire neighborhood. A few of them fell on the books of his disciples, who were forced to interrupt their learning.

Rabbi Haim also stopped learning. Without waiting, he grabbed hold of a shofar and sounded it to annul the evil decree.

He then began to pray. He recited the thirteen attributes of mercy and transformed that day into a true “Yom Kippur Katan.” Rabbi Haim continued to implore his Creator, not stopping until an east wind blew all the locusts out to sea.