

Parashat Pinchas 5780 - Rabbi James Proops

It was at the end of last week's *parasha*, that we read about the daring act of Pinchas, who zealously acted and killed Zimri, a prince of shevet Shimon, for his illicit interactions with the Midyanite woman, Kozbi. One might be left wondering whether this extreme course of action was appropriate or motivated by pure intentions, until we read at the beginning of this week's *parasha* Pinchas receives from Hashem a glorious endorsement - *הָשִׁיב אֶת-הַחֲמָתִי מֵעַל בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, בְּקִנְאוֹ אֶת-קִנְאָתִי*, בְּתוֹכְכֶם “He has turned back My wrath from the Israelites by displaying among them his passion for Me”.

We can see, from the fact that Hashem ‘needed’ to publicly show His approval for Pinchas’s actions, testifies to the problematic nature of the episode. The *midrash* offers the halachic framework and justification for Pinchas’s actions, yet the *Talmud Yerushalmi* (Sanhedrin 48b) however, seems not to accept this approach. Instead it raises the possibility that Pinchas acted without the approval of the Sages and points out that had God not endorsed his action himself, then Pinchas would have been held liable for his actions.

As well as an endorsement, we also see that God rewarded Pinchas with the incredible *bracha* of the *Brit Shalom*, the Covenant of Peace, as well as the everlasting *kehuna*. Hashem Himself insured that Pinchas would forever excel in the trait of peace and serenity. Why was it specifically this reward that was given to Pinchas ? The reward of peace seems like a strange honor to give in recognition for having just killed someone!

This reminded me of the story of Alfred Nobel, of the famed Nobel Prizes, told by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. In 1888 it is told that he sat down to breakfast and opened the morning papers and found himself reading his own obituary. It turned out that a journalist had made a mistake confusing Alfred with his brother Ludvig who had recently died. However what he read shocked him to the core. The headline of the obituary read: “*Le marchand de la mort est mort*”—The merchant of death is dead”. Nobel had made his vast wealth, through his discovery of the substance used to make dynamite and became one of the world’s leading arms traders. As he read the obituary he was struck by the realisation that dynamite, weapons and furthering the destructive nature of war was all he was going to be remembered for. Following this, he changed his Will so that when he died a foundation would be established to reward those who excel in academics, invention and of course furthering peace. And so Alfred Nobel was able to completely change his so-called

destiny that rather than have his name associated with war by 2018 it is most certainly associated with peace.

From a Torah perspective it is not just what we are remembered for that counts, but what we actually stand for and act upon while we are alive. We see clearly from the *Mesillat Yesharim* that a person's character is shaped by his actions. Someone who is generally pleasant to others but occasionally treats people with arrogance will eventually become arrogant. Someone who is miserly but begins giving small amounts of *tzedaka* will eventually develop the trait of generosity.

Pinchas, as a descendant of Aharon HaKohen who lived his life by the principle of *Ohev Shalom v'rodef Shalom*, loving and pursuing peace, was an inherently peaceful person, yet he chose to engage in an act of extreme violence. Despite, that given the circumstances, his act was unavoidable and commendable, it was nevertheless fraught with danger. By killing, one becomes a killer. Pinchas now stood at the top of the slippery slope to becoming a man of violence.

הַגְּנִי נִתֵּן לּוֹ אֶת-בְּרִיתִי, שְׁלוֹם "Behold, I give him My covenant of peace..." Hashem intervened in the natural course of character development and overrode any possible tendency to violence that might linger within Pinchas. Hashem's gift of peace was not only because Pinchas stood up for Hashem, but by doing so he was jeopardizing his own character and therefore was rewarded handsomely.

This principle is manifest every day of our lives. What type of people do we want to be is an easy question to answer. The difficult question is, what are we doing to become the people we want to be?! We have to back up our words and intentions, with action in the here and now. More than "You are what you eat", we need to internalise the principle of "You are how you act" this works for both the positive and the negative.

If we occasionally lose our temper with others, we are on the road to becoming an intrinsically angry person who loses control. If we constantly look for everything that is wrong and immediately criticize without pausing to find the good in a situation, then we are only going to become more critical and harder to satisfy.

In contrast, the *Mesillat Yesharim* teaches us that there is only one way to overcome the trait of laziness: Don't be lazy! If you lack the "get up and go"? Then get up and go!

If we sometimes find it hard to be positive and compliment others but force ourselves to do so occasionally, then in time we will become more upbeat and gracious. If we are always too busy to spend time with family and friends, then we just need to start carving out a little bit of time and eventually making time for them will just become part of who we are and what we do.

How we act is not always a product of who we are naturally, but rather who we are is often dictated by how we act. We have the opportunity to retrain ourselves and reset certain *middot*, character traits and behaviour. Let's not just accept the way we are now but continually strive for improvement so that we ensure that we can be proud of the actions which ultimately define us.