

## **“When he zealously avenged Me among them.” (25:11)**

*Kanaus*, zealotry, is truly a noble trait – albeit a dangerous one. Quite often, the well-meaning zealot gets caught up in his enthusiasm, forgetting his original goals and objectives. He forgets that while his adversary is wrong, he is still a human being with feelings and emotions. To say one does not care about the person is to defeat the objective of his actions. The *kanai*, zealot, is guided by considerations of *avodas Hashem*, service to the Almighty, and not by any negative spiritual flaw that his adversary might possess. This is most often indicated by the manner in which he seeks to achieve his goal, by his reaction if things do not go his way; and his attitude to those with whom he is in dispute.

*Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, z.l.*, was such a person. Although he was a zealot who was uncompromising in his devotion to raising the banner of Torah, he nevertheless, went out of his way to provide humanitarian assistance – even to his adversary. He never responded in a manner unbecoming a person who was the epitome of Torah refinement as evidenced by the following episode.

*Rav Yosef Chaim* sustained many personal tragedies that would have destroyed a lesser person. When his son *Rav Shmuel Binyamin* was stricken with typhus, *Rav Yosef Chaim* sat by his bed day and night, reciting *Tehillim*. The pain was overwhelming. To stand by, helpless, watching his beloved son's terrible convulsions was too much to handle. He remarked that he was no longer able to bear the sight of his son's terrible suffering. He closed his *Tehillim* and rose from his seat. At that moment, *Rav Shmuel Binyamin* returned his holy soul to its Maker, as his father recited *Shema Yisrael* in a heartrending voice. This loss was especially painful to *Rav Yosef Chaim*, because it followed by just eleven weeks the death of a younger son, *Rav Moshe Yehudah*, and just a few short years after the passing of his brilliant son, *Rav Avraham Aharon*, at the age of thirty-four.

It was *Erev Shabbos*, and there was no time to arrange a funeral. They arranged for people to sit with the body for *Shabbos*. *Rav Yosef Chaim* braced himself to keep the tragic news from his family in order not to destroy the sanctity of *Shabbos*. In reply to their anxious inquiries, he only responded, “May Hashem have mercy.” He then dressed for *Shabbos* and, with a radiant face, he wished his family “*Gut Shabbos*,” and left for *shul*.

Throughout *Shabbos* he greeted his congregants with a smile, reflecting the love and good cheer that was his hallmark. Indeed, no one suspected the terrible tragedy that had just taken place. After the conclusion of *Maariv* on *Motzoei Shabbos*, however, *Rav Yosef Chaim* was no longer able to hold back the pain over his beloved son, and he fainted. This was the seventh child that he had offered up as a sacrifice to the Almighty.

Word spread quickly throughout a stunned *Yerushalayim*. The sudden death of their beloved *rebbe's* son in the midst of a very active life, left people trembling. At the height of these troubled

times, the Angel of Death had struck down one of their great and dear.

Bereaved and brokenhearted, a small party of mourners wound their way down the narrow streets of the Old City to the home of the deceased. Suddenly, at the entrance to one of the alleys, stood the arrogant figure of one of *Yerushalayim's* "enlightened" Jews. One of the lost souls who had long ago rebelled against the religion of his ancestors, his hatred of religious Jews sizzled within him like a viper's poison. With a mocking smile he stopped squarely in front of *Rav Yosef Chaim* and wished him a cheerful, "*Shavua Tov.*" He waited a moment, then added, "Well, *Rav Yosef Chaim*, I guess Heaven has punished you for your vehement opposition to us."

How low can a person descend? This was the nadir of callousness! The entire group was aghast at the vulgar joy of the rebel. Unwavering in his faith in Hashem, *Rav Yosef Chaim* straightened himself up and responded in a steady and controlled voice, "You are correct. Heaven punished me for my laxity in battling those who would violate the Covenant and destroy the faith, and especially for my tardiness in entering the battle against those who undermine the Torah. From now on, I will strengthen my resolve and devote all of my strength to this sacred war."

I have prolonged this story in order to emphasize the frame of mind that *Rav Yosef Chaim* might have manifested. Yet, throughout his overwhelming travail, he maintained the clarity of vision and the presence of mind to respond as a *gadol baTorah*, Torah leader, whose commitment to the ideals of Torah were uncompromising and unwavering. He saw himself on a mission for Hashem, a mission which overrides all else – even personal pain and grief.