

When he zealously avenged Me among them. (25:11)

Obviously, it was “among them.” Pinchas did not go into a backroom to negotiate a settlement between the sinners. He acted decisively within sight of the entire nation. **Horav Yehudah Tzedakah, zl**, explains that the Torah places emphasis on the *b’socham*, among them, to teach us that Pinchas did not fear repercussion. His sincerity and love were apparent as he placed Hashem and His Glory above his personal life and welfare. He epitomizes the true *kanai*, zealot. Indeed, in his commentary to *Bereishis* 18:26, “If I find fifty righteous (persons) within (*b’soch*) the city,” *Ibn Ezra* writes, “Those who fear G-d publicly.” Regrettably, there are many G-d-fearing, righteous, wonderful people who, despite their credible virtue, shy away from taking a public stand against spiritual aggression. They fear for their jobs, their standing in the community, their children – all spineless reasons for reneging one’s responsibility.

The **Ponevezer Rav, zl**, was an individual who was loved by many and revered by all. He never shied away from assuming responsibility, from taking a stand, from telling it like it was. Like many cities in Europe prior to World War II, Ponevez was beset with Jewish secularists whose primary goal in life was to destroy the relationship which the observant Jew had with the Torah. Whenever the opportunity arose to denigrate Torah, defame the Orthodox community, slander Hashem and His adherents, they were there, fully committed to doing the damage. As citizens of Ponevez and proponents of the *Haskalah*, Jewish Enlightenment, they fought the *Rav* at every juncture, since he was usually the only one who had the courage to stand up to them.

The secularists were determined to provide the community with an evening of entertainment. They wanted the entertainment to reflect their own allegiance to the base society that prevailed in Europe. Nothing was too ribald. Debauchery and flagrant degradation of morality were what they felt would not only allow the people to have a pleasure-filled evening, but also ensure the breakdown of the hold that religion had on them.

That *Shabbos*, prior to *Tefillas Mussaf*, the *Ponevezer Rav* ascended to the lectern to deliver his *drashah*, lecture. Instead, he made the following appeal to their sensibilities. “My brethren! [He always prefaced his speeches with *achai*, my brethren]. *Yehudim*, Jews! We are descendants of Mordechai and Esther and not descendants of the foolish King Achashveirosh, who sought to display his Queen Vashti for all the land to gaze upon her beauty.”

That was all he said. No more. He did not have to say more. The *mispallelim*, worshippers, knew to what he was referring. They understood his subtle message: “We are not fools. We are not animals. We are Jews, descendants of a noble and illustrious lineage. Why would we descend to the nadir of depravity, to act like the base *goyim* whose culture we should eschew?”

The cracks were appearing in the spiritual fiber of Lithuanian Jewry. Every city had its issues. Every community had its breaks with traditions, its secularists, its avowed apostates. *Shabbos* became the first *korban*, sacrifice, to the god of secularism. Once the sanctity of *Shabbos* was

impugned, the rest of the *mitzvos* were sure to follow. The protective spiritual gate which watched over the Jew – *Shabbos Kodesh* – was breached. Now, anything goes; anything could worm its way into the community. One city was spared. In Ponevez, the *kedushas Shabbos*, the sanctity of the holiest day of the week, the day which Hashem ordained as His day of rest, was upheld. Why? The *Ponevezer Rav* – of course.

The *Rav* spoke from the podium, addressing the overwhelming significance of *Shabbos* observance. There was no room for excuses. *Shabbos* was *Shabbos*. There was no wiggle room in its observance. One either observed every aspect of *Shabbos*, or he was a *mechallel Shabbos*, desecrator of *Shabbos*. There was no allowance for negotiation of any kind. Noted for his oratory skills, the *Rav* spoke sharply, passionately, with abounding love – but emphatically stating that he would not condone any *chillul Shabbos*.

The people listened – well, most of them: “*Rebbe*, I have no recourse but to end *Shabbos* prematurely. I cannot wait until after sundown,” the town’s baker declared, “or I will lose my livelihood.” People had been talking about his entering his bakery an hour before the end of *Shabbos* to fire up the ovens and prepare the dough. Bread was a staple; it was his source of income. “*Rebbe*, what should I do?” the baker cried out.

The *Rav* looked at the man and countered, “What do you want from me? Is *Shabbos* my personal possession that I can forego part of it? *Shabbos* belongs to Hashem. It is concerning *Shabbos* that Hashem writes in the Torah, *Mechalilehah mos yumas*, “Those who desecrate it will surely die.” The *Rav* was not holding back. These people had to hear him tell it like it was – without embellishment or compromise.

Nonetheless, there were those who had the *chutzpah*, audacity, to desecrate *Shabbos*, continuing to work on Friday night as if *Shabbos* did not exist. Concerning them, the *Rav* acted with diplomacy. He neither reproved them, nor did he deride them publicly from the podium; he did not go out against them to protest their flagrant desecration of *Shabbos*. He believed in silent protest. Every Friday night, on his way to *shul*, he would stop by the barbershop which remained open, stick his head into the store, and, with his huge signature smile say, “A *gutten Shabbos*!” He immediately continued on to *shul*.

This subtle form of protest went on week after week. The *Rav* did not tire. Regrettably, the barber kept up his desecration of *Shabbos*. The man was a barber, and *Shabbos* was a busy day. Finally, one Friday night, when the *Rav* made his rounds, the barber came over to him and said, “*Rebbe*, I cannot continue like this. You are causing me to renege on my Judaism and apostatize myself!”

The *Ponevezer Rav* was not fazed by this remark. He replied, “Do not worry. Do not concern yourself. If you must – you must. In fact, I will give you the necessary funds to pay the priest for your baptism! One thing is for certain: No Jew in this city will keep his store open on *Shabbos*!”

Sadly, even this latest admonishment did not succeed in bringing the barber to his knees. He refused to close his doors on *Shabbos*. It was nothing personal. He just had to earn a living, and people were willing to take haircuts on *Shabbos*. The *Rav* tried another tactic, one which he hoped he would not have to employ, but it was crunch time: *Shabbos* was being desecrated in his city. He could not stand idly by and allow this tragedy to continue unabated.

One Friday night, the worshippers in the city's main *shul* noticed that the *Rav* was late in arriving. This was unusual, since the *Rav* was always one of the first men in the *shul*. After a half hour went by, the people began to worry. Something must have happened. The *Rav* was never late. After an hour had elapsed, the members dispatched one of the *yeshivah* students to search for the *Rav*. After combing the town, the student discovered the *Rav* sitting in the Jewish-owned barbershop. He was certainly not taking a haircut. He just sat there learning from a *sefer*. Apparently, after weeks of trying to get the barber to close his business for *Shabbos*, the *Rav* had come up with a new idea – one that was working. Anyone who entered the barbershop and noticed the *Rav* sitting there immediately found reason to leave. It was one thing to be *mechallel Shabbos*; it was totally another to do so in the presence of the *Ponevezer Rav*. Finally, after the barber literally threw in the towel and promised to no longer remain open on *Shabbos*, the *Rav* left the establishment and went to *shul*. Now, he could *daven* with a restful mind. This is the meaning of quiet protest – *kanaus*, with diplomacy. It may not work with everyone – nor does it work for everyone, but it does work. Perhaps it should be the first response to a spiritual incursion.