

Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen. (25:11)

The Torah traces Pinchas' lineage to Aharon *HaKohen*. What about his maternal grandfather, Yisro? The Torah appears to gloss over his connection to Pinchas. *Rashi* explains that, as usual, people must find fault with the hero who saves the day. Otherwise, they might look bad, since, after all, why did they not take action? As usual, we put down the individual who acted decisively because it bothers us that he did – and we did not. They brought to our attention that Pinchas descended from Yisro, the Midyanite Priest, who fattened calves for *avodah zarah*, idol-worship. How could such a man, who descended from a pagan priest, have the audacity to kill a Jewish prince? Thus, the Torah mentions only the aspect of his *yichus*, pedigree, which descends from Aharon *HaKohen*.

As an aside, Yisro's search for the truth was indeed his greatest virtue. He refused to settle into believing that G-d could be found in mortar and stone. Thus, he served them all until he was firmly rooted in his belief that there is only one G-d: Hashem. People, however, due to their limited ability to think outside the box, view everyone who does not conform to convention as being a heretic, a usurper; in fact, Yisro was a gentile who was seeking his way to the truth.

Nonetheless, the Torah praises Pinchas for being the son of Elazar, the son-in-law of Yisro, who fattened calves for idol-worship. This was a reason for Pinchas to stand down. What would people say? He would be condemned as an out of control extremist who came from a dysfunctional lineage. What right does he have to involve himself in "Jewish" areas? Who is he to rise up and speak against a Jewish prince? Let him go to his grandfather's home in Midyan and help fatten some cows. Despite the abuse, Pinchas jumped into the fray to save the day.

The fact that Pinchas was willing to risk his life to suffer abuse in order to act *l'shem Shomayim*, for Heaven's sake, seems insufficient reason for him to garner such praise. He did what any committed Jew who witnesses a flagrant desecration of Hashem's Name should do. That people will demean his lineage or slander his true intentions is not a reason to shy away from what is the true course of action. So Pinchas risked his life; so Pinchas was willing to suffer shame; so what? This is what being a committed Jew is all about. Is this reason for a pat on the back?

Horav Henach Leibowitz, zl, explains that *kavod*, honor, esteem (what others think of you), has a compelling effect on a person's actions. One will sooner endanger his life than risk the opinion others have of him. Thus, if Pinchas were to be prepared to be disgraced for Hashem's Name, this is compelling reason for accolade.

Honor means more to some than it does to others. In some cultures respectability and virtue have overriding significance. Thus, if an individual is willing to suffer disgrace in order to save the life of another person – especially someone whom he does not know, a member of another culture, a religion alien to his own – it indicates that this person is of an exalted nature. Such a person is a hero. To be a hero demands both risk and sacrifice. At times, heroes sacrifice their career, future,

family – even their lives. According to the *Rosh Yeshivah*, to be willing to sacrifice one's reputation, to accept disgrace in order to help others, takes a very special person.

Chione Sugihara was such a person. He was a Japanese consul who risked his career and his future to save six thousand Jews at the beginning of World War II. Sugihara gave Jews entry visas, which was against the orders of the Japanese government. As a result of his actions, he lost his job and respectability in much of Japanese society. He was neither Jewish, nor was he beholden to the Jews. He was simply a good person (Heaven-sent) who was prepared to throw everything away because he felt the Jews were being mercilessly persecuted for no reason other than that they were Jewish.

One has to understand Japanese/Samurai culture to appreciate his sacrifice. Sugihara was raised in the strict Japanese code of ethics which included: love for the family; living for the sake of the children; accepting duty and respectability; and never bringing shame upon the family. His undertaking brought terrible shame upon himself. He did not care. He was saving lives. His story is one of the great miracles of World War II. Much of the European Torah that was transplanted from the Lithuanian *yeshivos* was due to his heroic efforts.

The German invasion of Poland filled Lithuania with Jewish refugees seeking an avenue of escape. There was one problem: travel between countries was restricted unless one had a transit visa. The second problem was that very few countries were willing to issue these visas. One summer morning in late July, 1940, Consul Sugihara was overwhelmed with the multitude of Jewish refugees waiting by the door of the consulate. These men and women were acutely aware that their only hope for salvation was in the east, and the only person who could help them was Sugihara. In order to issue a visa, Sugihara required permission from the Japanese Foreign Ministry – a permission which had been denied three times. He now confronted the major decision of his life: Does he save Jews? This choice would likely result in extreme financial hardship for him. He would probably be fired and worse – disgraced, never able to work for the Japanese government again.

One look into the eyes of the desperate Jews who stood before him, and his decision was made. His wife helped and, together, they wrote 300 visas per day. They did not stop to eat, as long as people stood before them, day and night. The visas took the refugees through Moscow, and then by Trans-Siberian rail to Vladivostok and then on to Japan, where many remained until the end of the war.

In 1945, the Japanese government formally shut down Sugihara. He was banned from ever serving in the diplomatic service. His career and his honor were shattered in Japan. (His heroism, however, will be forever etched in the annals of Jewish history as a righteous of the gentiles who risked everything to help the Jews.) He and his family were forced to leave Lithuania, and, as punishment for his illegal actions, he spent two years imprisoned in Romania. Upon finally returning to Japan, he was a disgraced person. He worked at odd jobs to support his family. Although he never called

attention to his wartime efforts on behalf of the Jews, he took deep pride in having responded positively to the call of his conscience. He never gave up helping. Indeed, as the train took him from Lithuania to be imprisoned in Romania, he was still signing visas and throwing them out the window. Sugihara was willing to suffer a lifetime of disgrace for the opportunity to be the medium for granting a “lifetime” to 6,000 Jewish refugees. Disgrace? He said he would rather suffer the disgrace of man than stand in disgrace before G-d.