

Pinchas ben Elazar ben Aharon HaKohen, turned back my wrath from upon Bnei Yisrael, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them. (25:11)

Pinchas did not act in a vacuum. The entire nation witnessed his actions. What were they doing? Some were (of course) complaining and disparaging his lineage, claiming that his motives were impure. According to *Targum Yonasan*, the rest cried and recited *Krias Shema*. They cried, explains *Chezkuni*, because Moshe *Rabbeinu* had instructed them to kill the perpetrators who had sinned with the Midyanite women. It was a difficult order to carry out. *Shevet Levi*, who were once again empowered to be the righteous executioners, did not seem to have an issue (earlier) when the order came to kill the offenders who had worshipped the *eigal*, Golden Calf. Yet now, they had cried. Why?

Horav Chaim Zaitchik, zl, distinguishes between the philosophical anathema of idolatry and the moral repugnance of licentiousness. There is no question that the sin of worshipping idols demonstrates a mutinous attitude towards Hashem. Immorality, albeit inappropriate, is an accepted a way of life in some societies. After all, who is to stop two consenting adults? To kill a dear friend, close relative, because he/she acted immorally, demands enormous sensitivity to *mitzvos* and an overwhelming love of Hashem. The average Jew does not understand why a person commits immorality, but he does understand that people have urges, passions, strong desires. Once they play out these urges in their minds, they might later also act them out in reality. Idolatry is abominable. It depicts the worshipper at his lowest point. It is not something that presents itself rationally. Thus, when the order came to kill the perpetrators, it was not as difficult a task to execute as the call to kill those who had liaisons with the Midyanite women.

The only one who understood that both behaviors represent a *chillul Hashem*, profanation of Hashem's Name, was Pinchas. He understood that cohabiting with a gentile/pagan is tantamount to worshipping its idols. Pinchas understood the truth that, once an activity lacks *emes*, truth, there is no difference what it is. Falsehood is falsehood, regardless of the way it is packaged.

Shevet Levi was comprised of holy human beings; albeit holy, they were still human beings. When the *meraglim*, spies, returned with their slanderous report of *Eretz Yisrael*, the nation wept. It was unwarranted, but they still wept. They were worried; they were concerned. They, too, would lose their exalted position of leadership. Someone else would benefit from what they had worked so hard to achieve. So, they wept. When it came to vengeance over the Golden Calf, they came forthright. Concerning the *meraglim*, where their own honor might have been impugned, they took their time. They even wept together with the mutineers. Why? It was a sin to which they too could relate.

We must confront the reality that, in our eyes, not all sins maintain the same level of malevolence. There are sins that we have come to "accept," to "tolerate." This is a sign that the moral

degeneration of society has taken its toll – even on us! We see assimilated Jews and are even good friends with them. Yet, we are not seriously aggrieved by their spiritual behavior – or lack thereof. We have lost our sensitivity to certain *aveiros*, sins. The righteous indignity that should prevail with us is no longer there – or, perhaps, it is no longer “righteous.”