

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

Kanaus, for the most part, is a frightening word. It refers either to someone who is a great *tzaddik*, whose love for Hashem is so intense that it impels him to act in a manner which some individuals consider extreme; or an extremist, who is always on the lookout for a good fight. There is a fine line which separates the two. This is why it is frightening. Some think that *kanaus* is a rite of passage, a segway for achieving *gadlus baTorah*, distinction in the field of Torah. They feel that, unless they have taken down a few misguided aspiring Torah scholars, they have not yet earned their rightful place of distinction in the world of Torah hierarchy. Most *kanaim*, zealots, are not much more than insecure rabble rousers who attempt to rise to the top by stepping on the backs the wretched souls who have the misfortune of falling into their mouths.

The first rule of successful *kanaus* is: one does not aspire to become a *kanai*. Out of his overwhelming love for Hashem, the *kanai* will respond to a situation that threatens the very underpinnings of our faith. The people had *taanos*, criticism, of Pinchas' act of zealotry – apparently, not because of what he did, but rather, because they felt his lineage was tainted, thus undermining his true objectivity in executing the act of *kanaus*. Who was he to slay a Prince of *Yisrael*? – one who was appointed by Hashem. The commentators say that Zimri was actually Shlumiel *ben* Tzurishadai, one of the original *Nesiiim*. Hashem intervened and underscored that he heralded from Aharon *HaKohen*; he had an impeccable pedigree. This quieted them for the time being. Veritably, one cannot fully satisfy those who live for the objective of impugning others. There are those who do – and there are those who denigrate the doers. Pinchas acted because he felt that he had to carry out the *halachah*. He certainly knew that he would not garner any accolades based on his *kanaus*. When something is right/correct/proper, however, one must act and ignore those who find every excuse for not only not acting themselves, but also, for putting down those who have taken the initiative. When the nation faces religious crisis, when a moral outrage is publicly perpetrated and palpable Divine retribution is imminent, one does not hold back for fear of what “others” might say.

Yet, the question is pressing: Pinchas was certainly not the only virtuous man in *Klal Yisrael*. There were other leaders who saw what was occurring – yet refrained from entering into the fray. They probably felt like most of us: “Why do I need to get involved? Is it my problem? There is a Torah leadership who stand at the helm of the nation. They are guided by the Almighty. Am I the world's policeman? Is it my job to right every wrong?” If we can respect and, quite possibly, even sympathize with this passive approach, we must wonder what it was that compelled Pinchas to come forward and act the manner that he did. Surely he knew what people would say. They would impugn the integrity of his lineage. They would question his motives. They would look for every reason to malign him. Why did he do it? Was he greater than Moshe *Rabbeinu* from whom the *halachah* concerning one who cohabits with a gentile was, for some reason, concealed? The *gadol hador*, preeminent Torah leader of the generation, was standing there witnessing the entire debacle; yet, he was doing nothing. Was it Pinchas' place to step up to the plate at such a time?

The answer goes back to our first sentence: *kanaus* is frightening. The one who is a *kanai* must be spiritually, morally and emotionally pristine before he acts. The true *kanai* manifests all of these traits and more. He is dedicated to Hashem, to the Jewish People. He is not afraid of the repercussions. He steps up to the quintessential leader of *Klal Yisrael* and points out the *halachah* as he was taught. He is prepared to suffer the consequences which result from his actions. The true leader acquiesced, handing over to him the mantle of *kanaus*. – “Here; you are the messenger; you read the letter; you revealed the sin; you carry out the punishment.”

Pinchas could have easily retracted. “*Rebbe*, I did my part by bringing to your attention the transgression that is taking place. I do not think it is my place to take action. This is a job for Jewish leadership. To take action is above my pay grade.” Pinchas had every reason to desist, to return to the *bais hamedrash*, to open up his *sefer* and continue learning. He did not, because it was not the time for learning. It was the time for *kanaus*.

How do those who are not prepared to carry out the *mitzvah*, to act with *kanaus*, respond to the *kanai*? Do we thank him for stepping up to the plate while we refused even to go to bat? Well, we see how the nation acted, how they slandered Pinchas, in whose merit the plague that was decimating the nation ended. No one seemed to reach out to Pinchas to say, “Thank you,” for being more man than I, for doing what I should have done, but – because of my spiritual deficiency – did not.

How do we place this entire scenario into perspective? How do we view Pinchas, the people, the event, from a rational, intellectual, comprehensive point of view? I recently came across what I think is an excellent presentation by **Horav Yerachmiel Kromm, Shlita**, who places a lucid – yet all-embracing – label on the *kanai*, one which shows him in a completely different – yet vital – light.

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This is the function of the *kanai*. He is the one who sees to it that the “mood” of the moment, the passion of the people for serving Hashem, remains in full force. Without the *kanai*, who “stirs the blood,” complacency sets in, so that the passionate fervor for serving Hashem becomes chilled and forbidding. The excitement and enthusiasm is gone, replaced by apathy and detachment.

Every community requires a *memareis* – not necessarily a *kanai*, but a person who will maintain the mood, retain the passion, keep the embers of enthusiasm burning lest the disease of complacency sets in. Quietly and without fanfare, the community “stirrer” sees to it that our attitude toward *Yiddishkeit* does not become stilled. If the “blood” congeals – we can forget about atonement.

The position of *memareis* is a thankless one, often relegated to the *Rav, Rosh Yeshivah*, Torah leader who has the moral courage and spiritual stamina to withstand the criticism that is heaped on him often by his own people. There are well-meaning – but small – people with pinhead minds, who are frightened by their own shadows, for whom public opinion is of greater import than Heavenly approval. During one of his visits to Yerushalayim, the **Satmar Rav, zl**, was visited by *Horav Amram Blau, zl*, leader of the *Neturei Karta* in the Holy Land. *Rav Blau* was a fierce fighter for the sanctity of the Holy city, he viewed every secular infraction as an incursion against Judaism’s jugular. He protested valiantly, often being physically pummeled by secular activists, whose

venomous hatred of Torah and its adherents was unabashed. *Rav Blau* complained that, while he could live with the pain and abuse, he was troubled by the lack of support from his own Torah camp. The *Satmar Rav* replied, “Be happy that your own people do not castigate you for your public protestation.” While not everyone has the fortitude to undertake upon himself the mantle of *kanaus*, the least others can do is not degrade nor prevent those who act sincerely to uphold the Torah’s honor.