

See, Hashem has called by name Betzalel, son of Uri, son of Chur. (35:30)

The Torah mentions Chur twice (other than the three places that he is listed as Betzalel's grandfather). Who was Chur, and how important was he as a member of *Klal Yisrael's* spiritual leadership? The first time that Chur is mentioned concerns the war against Amalek. This despicable nation ignored *Klal Yisrael's* special status as Hashem's chosen people and attacked them shortly after their liberation from Egyptian slavery. Moshe *Rabbeinu* sent Yehoshua to lead the Jewish men in battle against Amalek. Our leader stood and prayed with his hands spread out. As long as Moshe's hands remained straight (out), Yehoshua prevailed. When they began to descend, Aharon *HaKohen* and Chur brought a large rock for Moshe to sit upon, while they held his hands up. We see from here, observes *Horav Aryeh Leib Heyman, zl*, that Chur was a member of the nation's spiritual elite – on a level similar to his uncle, Aharon *HaKohen*. Bearing this in mind, *Rav Heyman* posits that the egregious nature of the sin of the Golden Calf notwithstanding – it was not the worse sin committed that day. It was the brutal murder of Chur, who was one of the *gedolei hador*, for which they have remained unforgiven.

We should take into consideration that Chur was not only saintly and virtuous in his own right, he was also the son of Miriam *HaNeviah* and Calev ben Yefuneh. Miriam endangered her life to save the Jewish infants whom Pharaoh wanted murdered. Only a miserable few, the lowest of the low, had the audacity and moral repugnance to blatantly murder Chur, only because he had the “temerity” to stand up for Hashem. It was, however, still a violent act of murder.

Interestingly, the Torah glosses over Chur's murder, making no mention of it. One would think that such a heinous incursion which precipitated an unforgiving Heavenly response would somehow be alluded to in the Torah's narrative. It is not – why? *Rav Heyman* suggests that this act was excluded in order to protect the esteem of the Jewish people. Such an unspeakable murder committed by a few unwelcome guests (*erev rav*, mixed multitude) casts a pall of shame over the entire nation. Best not to write about it. Indeed, *Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh* (commentary to 32:1) writes: “Chur's murder is not mentioned in the Torah, so that a record of this shameful act should not remain in the Torah for posterity, for Hashem preserves the honor of His people.”

I write this entire preface to underscore the extraordinary *mesiras nefesh*, self-sacrifice, the consummate ability to vanquish whatever feelings – including demand for revenge – that may have entered Betzalel's mind, knowing that the *Mishkan* he would create would atone in part for his grandfather's murder. Chur was following a family tradition of standing up for what is right, regardless of the possible ramifications of taking such a position. His mother, Miriam, stood up and pointed out to her father, Amram, that he was wrong when he divorced her mother, Yocheved, in order to halt the propagation of Jewish children. When the *gadol hador* acts, the rest of the men followed. Miriam was a young girl (six-years-old); yet, she told her father that his decree was (in a way) worse than Pharaoh's. The Egyptian sought to rid the country of Jewish males (who could

become the potential Jewish leader). By encouraging them to divorce their wives, Amram's actions were affecting both males and females. In his attempt to support Moshe, Chur's father, Calev ben Yefuneh, stood up to the *meraglim*, spies, exposing their lies. With such parents, it is no wonder that Chur became the person he was. Betzalel followed in his noble heritage, building the *Mishkan* with complete equanimity. This, perhaps, is what gives/adds to the *Mishkan's* power to facilitate atonement.

Mesiras nefesh for *mitzvos*, self-sacrifice in order to maintain or elevate one's spiritual standing, is part of the Jewish DNA. One does not have to be an observant Jew to give up his life for Judaism and the Jewish People. To achieve the level of self-sacrifice, to be able to carry out *mitzvos*, is in a league all of its own. It takes a special person, with unique values and a penetrating understanding of *mitzvos*, to live on such a spiritual plane. The following two stories are connected by the answer to the question that every reader will raise. The answer will illuminate the underlying dominating factor for *mesiras nefesh*. These stories were related by *Horav Bentzion Felman, zl*.

Horav Avraham, zl, brother of the *Gaon, zl, m'Vilna*, was an outstanding *talmid chacham* and *yarei Shomayim*, G-d-fearing Torah scholar (author of *Maalos HaTorah*). He lived some distance from Vilna, which was home to the *Gaon*. The *Gaon* asked his brother to join him in Vilna, so that they could study together. [We have no idea the meaning of studying *b'chavrusa* with the *Gaon*.] *Rav Avraham* replied that, indeed, he would love to join him. His wife, however, was not willing to move. He gave the following reason for her deterrence.

Esrogim were normally very hard to obtain. When a town was able to obtain a few, the price was usually very high. One year, due to an early frost, the *esrogim* were even less available than usual, and the prices were beyond the ability of most people's wallets. The community in which *Rav Avraham* lived had an option of purchasing one beautiful *esrog*. The problem was: the price was through the roof. No one could possibly afford it. *Rav Avraham's* wife had an idea. She said, "We live in a nice house which is presently too big for us. We could sell the house and move into the type of hut used by so many of our community's poor, and the profit would be used for the *esrog*." She was not suggesting or asking; she was stating what, in her mind, was a *fait accompli*. They sold the house, fulfilled the *mitzvah* of *esrog* and moved into a small ramshackle hut. She explained that, when she passed by their old house every day, she experienced extraordinary pleasure and satisfaction from the realization that she had given all this up for the sake of a *mitzvah*. An incredible story, an awesome lesson in *mesiras nefesh*, but what about the *z'chus*, unimaginable merit, of studying with the *Gaon*? Does her pleasure override this unparalleled experience?

Next story. The *Shaagas Aryeh* attempted to conceal his brilliance and erudition. He would dress in the simple, tattered clothes of a beggar and sleep on the bench of a *shul*, as he went from city to city on a self-imposed exile. This went on for a number of years, as he worked on elevating himself spiritually by rejecting all forms of worldly pleasure. For him, life consisted of Torah and *tefillah*. Thus, the *shul* was his home. When he arrived in Vilna, he was able to beguile everyone but the

Gaon, who was immediately able to see through his camouflage. He invited him to discuss some *Talmudic* concepts. After a few hours, it was evident that the *Shaagas Aryeh* was an outstanding scholar, sufficient to impress even the *Gaon*. The *Gaon* invited him to continue their Torah discussion at his *Shabbos* table.

Surprisingly, the *Shaagas Aryeh* politely declined. He said, "Since I left my wife alone when I began my exile, I accepted upon myself not to sit at a table with another woman." (Apparently, the *Gaon's Rebbetzin* would be seated with them. Understandably, his conversation would be only with the *Gaon*, but still...) The *Gaon* understood, but countered that he would speak with his wife. The *Rebbetzin*, however, rejected the opportunity to eat alone in the kitchen. She said, "I spend one meal with you a week. I do not see you the entire week, as you are deep in study in your room. I am not willing to be *mevater*, forgo, this pleasure." [We must understand that the *Gaon's* wife was no ordinary woman. When she died, the *Gaon* had etched on her *matzeivah*, monument: *Lo hinichah acharah k'mosah*, "She left no other (woman) like her." In other words, in the eyes of the *Gaon*, she was the greatest woman of her generation. Yet, she felt that the pleasure she derived from sitting with her husband at the meal once a week superseded his learning with the *Shaagas Aryeh*.] How are we to understand her actions?

Two stories – two questions – one answer.

Rav Felman explains that the *oneg* and *nachas ruach*, pleasure and satisfaction that the *Gaon's* sister-in-law experienced from seeing the house that she had given up for a *mitzvah*, and the pleasure the *Gaon's Rebbetzin* had from sitting with him and certainly speaking words of Torah and *mussar* were otherworldly. In other words: This was her *Olam Habba*, World to Come. When they experienced the *mesiras nefesh* for a *mitzvah*, they were in *Gan Eden*!