



# JewishTimes

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**THE PSYCHE**

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Reveal God's Brilliant  
Balancing Act

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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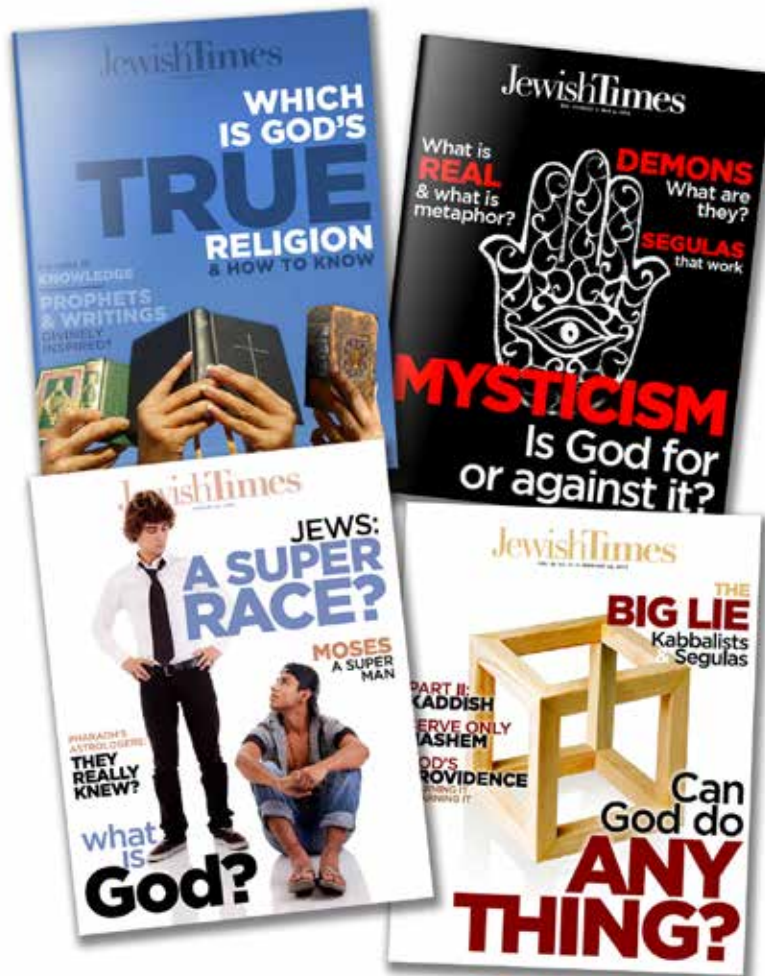
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### LETTERS

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

## Superstition?

**Reader:** I have a query. The Shulchan Aruch (O.C. 260:1) says it is a mitzvah to trim one's nails on erev Shabbos. The Rema (ibid) adds that one should not trim them consecutively. Although the Taz (260:2) says one need not be concerned about this. Magen Avraham (260:1) says that nevertheless one should be careful. This is echoed by the Shulchan Aruch HaRav (260:3) and Mishneh Berurah (260:8).

The Mishneh Berurah (260:6) mentions that it is the practice not to trim one's nails on Thursday. It is also mentioned there that there are authorities who say one should not trim one's finger nails on the same day as they trim their toenails.

The Mishneh Berurah also cites the Gemara (Niddah 17a, Moed Katan 18a) which says one who burns their nail trimmings is a Chasid (pious person), one who buries them is a Tzaddik (righteous person), and one who throws them out (haphazardly)

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is a Rasha (wicked person). It proceeds to explain that it is sufficient if one sweeps from their original location, there is no need for concern, but cites the Elya Rabba that only when they have been removed from the original room is it considered a change of location (ibid 5).

There is no mention that one should refrain from trimming one's nails at night, but I have seen one should not do so on Rosh Chodesh (Be'er Heitev 260:2 citing the Will of R. Yehuda haChasid) and that one should only trim one's fingernails on erev Shabbos or erev Yom Tov (Be'er Heitev ad loc).

There is a practice to trim ones fingernails and toenails on Erev Shavuot, since this is the practice of women prior to ritual immersion and on Shavuot Am Yisrael is, as it were, the kallah (bride) of Hashem.

Is this all a minhag, halacha or superstition? There is also a manner in cutting the hand nails. Why?

Finally, why is it dangerous for a pregnant woman to walk on cut nails? Please explain.

**Rabbi:** Let us review the Talmudic source and jump to the portion of which you question:

*"R. Simeon b. Yohai stated, There are five things which (cause the man) who does them to forfeit his life and his blood is upon his own head: Eating peeled garlic, a peeled onion or a peeled egg, or drinking diluted liquids that were kept over night; spending a night in a graveyard; and blood-letting followed immediately by intercourse."*  
*"Removing one's nails and throwing them away in a public thoroughfare."*  
*[This is dangerous] because a pregnant woman passing over them would miscarry. This, however, has been said only of a case where one removes them with a pair of scissors. Furthermore, this has been said only of a case*



*where one removes the nails of both hands and feet. Furthermore, this has been said only in the case where one did not cut anything immediately after cutting them but if something was cut immediately after they were cut there can be no danger. This, however, is not (to be relied upon). One should be on his guard in all the cases mentioned. Our Rabbis taught: Three things have been said about the disposal of nails: He who burns them is a pious man, he who buries them is a righteous man, and he who throws them away is a wicked man (Tal. Niddah 17a)."*

What's the significance of pregnant women: why don't cut nails affect everyone?

What's the difference if cut by scissors, one's teeth or tearing them off?

Why not trim one's fingernails and toenails the same day?

Torah is not superstitious. In fact, Torah prohibits superstitions which are the ways of the idolatrous nations. "All her [the Torah's] ways are pleasant... (Proverbs 3:17)" This means we will find sensibility in all Torah laws and ideas.

The clues direct us towards the answer. Pregnant women are most sensitive. Sight emotional jolts can cause miscarriage. What is disturbing about cut nails? Nails are part of the body. Cut nails are now essentially a part of the body that has been removed, and psychologically, they are akin to lost limbs, to a degree. This is even more apparent when cut nails are from more of the body; i.e., hands and feet. And even more apparent is when the nails are trimmed by a scissor that retain the nail's form, in contrast to if one bit his nails or tore them.

Causing the public to come in contact with one's disposed nail trimmings can be disturbing to delicate personality types, even more so to women, and even more so to pregnant women. Thus, burning them destroys their character fully and fully shields others from encountering their form. Burying them is a lesser but adequate manner of disposal, but placing them in a thoroughfare is a careless act. We must be sensitive to even the most delicate of personalities.

Regarding a custom or law of not trimming one's fingernails on the same day as trimming toenails, this might be the flip side of the pregnant woman. Meaning, as one views nails as part of the body, the very act of cutting one's nails smack of bodily mutilation. To preserve the correct emotion of bodily care, the Rabbis suggested one not cut "all" nails in one day. This might give rise to the emotion of bodily mutilation, and the Rabbis at all costs, create enactments to shield man from engaging any destructive emotion. ■

# Death & Immortality

## The Bible's Clues Reveal God's Brilliant Balancing Act

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Understand that a person who speaks evil (Lashon Hara — degrading others) has committed a crime. Thus, remedial action is required to correct the sinner. But what about fulfilling a mitzvah (command) of burying the dead: why is there a response of sprinkling the ashes of a Red Heifer on one who was in contact with the deceased? Additionally, why were the Jews in Egypt who fulfilled the command of the Paschal Lamb required to paint their doorposts and lintels with the lamb's blood? In these two cases, the Jews fulfilled God's command! Again, Torah has no remedial action for one who prays, makes a blessing, or performs any other mitzvah: the mitzvah has no follow-up activity. Yet, one who buries the dead or sacrificed the Paschal Lamb required some additional act. It's difficult to grasp a "remedial" response to a mitzvah. As always, God's generous clues are found in all mitzvahs...

When burning the Red Heifer into ashes, Torah commands us to throw into its flames a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. Very unusual.

Ibn Ezra writes:

"This [the cedar, hyssop and red string] is just like the leper, and there I hinted to a principle (Ibn Ezra, Num. 19:6)."

Ibn Ezra is referring to his commentary on Leviticus 14:4:

"Behold, the leper, the leprous house, and the defilement by contact with the dead are related...and behold, they too are similar to the form of the Egyptian Exodus."

Just as these three items, the cedar branch, hyssop plant, and the red string are used in the Red Heifer rite, Leviticus 14:4 commands that the leper's remedial practice also include these three items. Nowhere else in Torah is this found. What's the connection? Regarding the leper (the speaker of Lashon Hara), two birds are taken; one is killed, and the live bird together with the cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string are dipped in the dead bird's blood and the live bird is let loose over a field. Regarding the Exodus, Ibn Ezra refers to the practice of

dipping the hyssop in the lamb's blood and painting the doorposts and lintel. Here too the hyssop is used, but we note the omission of the cedar branch and red string.

Ibn Ezra points us to three seemingly unrelated institutions that share identical elements, a cedar branch, a hyssop plant, and a red string. These three are burnt with the Red Heifer, they are bloodied in connection with the leper, but the hyssop alone is used in connection with the Passover Exodus during the plague of the firstborns, as the Torah says:

"And you shall take a bunch of hyssop, and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and strike the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin; and none of you shall go out of the door of his house until the morning. For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood upon the lintel, and on the two side-posts, the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come in unto your houses to smite you. [Exod. 2:22,23]."

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What initial step can we take towards understanding Ibn Ezra's "principle" to which he clues us by linking these three areas to the cedar, hyssop and red string? The Rabbis also note that the hyssop is the smallest plant, and the cedar is the largest. What is that clue?

My friend Jessie Fischbein said, "Death creates distortions." I thought about her words and immediately realized she was keying in to the common denominator. All three cases deal with death. The Red Heifer removes ritual impurity from one who was in contact with the dead; the leper's speech was a crime of character assassination (the Rabbis teach evil speech equates to murder), and the lamb's blood saved our firstborns from the Plague of Firstborns. In all three cases, a person was somehow related to death. The fact that all three cases require some rite, indicate that without that rite, man is left in unacceptable conditions. What are those conditions?

Interesting is that once Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, God feared he would eat of the Tree of Life and live forever. Therefore God placed cherubs (childlike figures) and a flaming spinning sword to guard the path to the Tree of Life (Gen. 4:24). Meaning, as soon as man sinned and he received the punishment or

death, he immediately desired immortality. But God did not allow man to attain immortality through the Tree of Life. Instead, God struck a balance in man's imagination: he would perceive his youth (cherubs) while also facing the unapproachable spinning sword which represented his death. God deemed it proper that in place of the extreme which Adam desired — immortality through the Tree of Life — an equilibrium be achieved.

"He hath made every thing beautiful in its time; also He hath set the world in their heart, so that man cannot find out the work that God hath done from the beginning even to the end (Koheles 3:11)."

Ibn Ezra comments, "every thing beautiful in its time" refers to death in old age, while "He hath set the world in their heart" refers to the feeling of immortality. While death is a reality, and man cannot lie to himself that he is immortal, he also cannot face his death daily. It is too morbid. Man requires a sense of permanence if he is to live happily. A balance is again detected in this verse. How does this apply to our three cases?

## DEATH: THE DISTORTION

Why does a person who performs a mitzvah of burying the dead require the ashes of the Red Heifer be sprinkled on him? He did nothing wrong, and in fact, he had no choice but to follow God's command of burial. Furthermore, what is this strange practice?

We must first recognize that it is not only errors or sins that require religious remedial practices, but even positive actions can negatively affect us. Jessie is correct: when one is in contact with the dead, we notice a denial. People find eulogies difficult, and will laugh hard at the smallest drop of humor. The tension at funerals evoked by facing one's own death generates powerful denial. Like Adam, we "rush for the door" seeking immortality. But that extreme is as equally unhealthy as is harping on our day of death, however true it is. Contact with the dead creates a denial that must be corrected. We are not allowed to deny our mortality. The ashes of the Red Heifer signify that a body — human or animal — is but dust. The body is not the definition of a human being. We must immediately correct our denial of our mortality by embracing the ashes sprinkled on us to remind us through proxy, that just as the heifer, we too ultimately pass on.

The one who speaks evil destroys others through character assassination.

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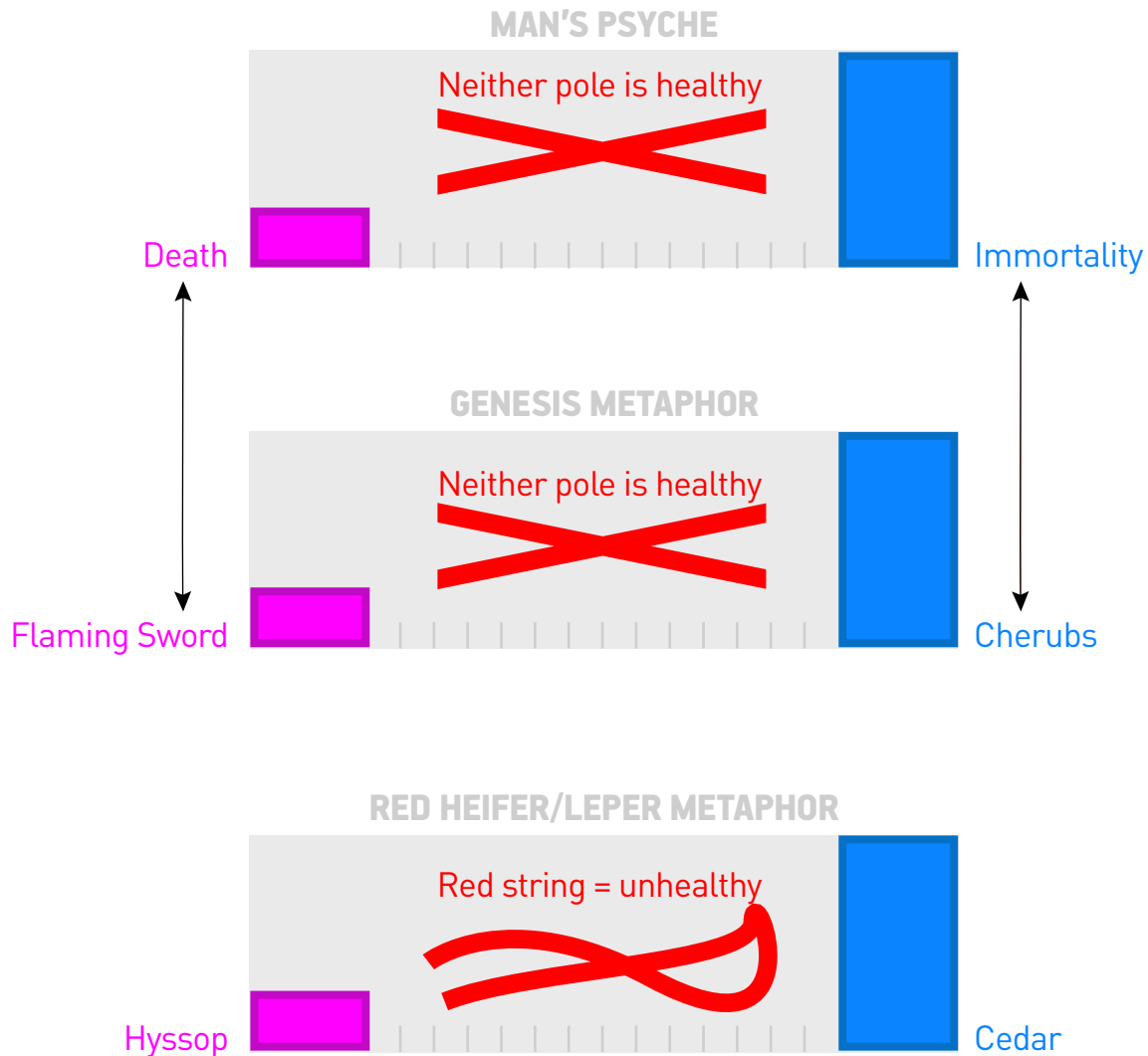
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# RUNNING FROM DEATH TO IMMORTALITY

Once punished with mortality for eating the forbidden fruit, Adam sought the Tree of Life to regain immortality, which God deemed harmful. The immortality fantasy is required for man to live happily, so God would not destroy that tree. Immortality (cherubs) was balanced by the flaming, spinning sword, (mortality). The poles, or the extremes in any emotional spectrum

are harmful, indicated by the red thread (sin) that is associated with the hyssop and cedar.

When confronting the dead, man flees from the thought of his own mortality. The Red Heifer ashes remind man that any being is ultimately dust, helping man balance himself between his mortality and his immortality fantasy.



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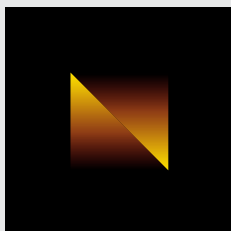
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## THE PSYCHE

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He did not treasure life, similar to one who murders. In his mind alone, he has "set things aright." God does not approve of a person venting his aggression. This extreme requires a fix. The evil talker is smitten with leprosy, which Aaron said is like death (Num. 12:12). He must also shave all his head, eyebrows and all hair. Why? One's identity is very much tied to how he wears his hair, and his unique personality expressed with his eyebrows. One would have difficulty distinguishing two people who were both hairless. It is safe to say that God created different hair colors and different hairstyles — straight, curly, frizzy — in order that people are distinguished. Now, when the leper is shaven and has no more hair just like infants at birth, his identity is lost to a great degree. The remedy to his disregarding another person, is cured by his experiencing a loss of his own identity. This is compounded by the law that he must move outside of society.

In Egypt the Jews sinned through idolatry. Through the Plague of the Firstborns of those Egyptians and Jews who worshipped the lamb (and did not slaughter it) a direct relationship was seen between sin and death, and mitzvah and life. The blood on the doorpost, through which the Destroyer might enter, focussed the dwellers on the truth that worshipping the deity of Egypt caused death, and our mitzvah of the destruction of the deity secured our salvation. The doorpost of the home, through which the Destroyer might enter was the optimal location for all to ponder the absolute truth that the lamb — idolatry — is absolutely false.

### EXTREMES ARE SINFUL

Death is too morbid a thought to face daily. But immortality is false. The Rabbis teach the hyssop and the cedar represent two extreme poles of a spectrum, the small and the large in plant life. Sforno teaches the harm of living at the extremes of any attitudinal spectrum is expressed through these two species and the red string that represents sin[1]. (It could have been a large and small rock, but something had to be used.) If one is too courageous or

too cowardly, he cannot act properly at the appropriate time. A miser and spendthrift; a sad or an elated person...any extreme is improper. King Solomon teaches that there is a time for every attitude (Koheles 3), meaning there are times not to follow that attitude. Thus, remaining at the pole of any spectrum is harmful.

God wished to include in the Red Heifer the additional lesson that denial of death or embracing death — either extreme — is sinful.

The evil talker's carelessness for another person is countered by his reduction of identity. But just as the Red Heifer's ashes are remedial, and not to be focused on as a permanent ends, the evil talker too must regrow his hair. A remedial rite is temporary by nature, just enough medicine to cure the disease and redirect the person back to an equilibrium[2]. We now appreciate how these seemingly out-of-place plants point to a fundamental lesson and remedy.

But why is the hyssop alone used in connection with the Paschal Lamb? This is because there is no extreme in this case from which we must bounce back. Here, the death of the Egyptian deity is an absolute truth: idolatry is a permanently true fallacy. Thus, there is no lesson of two harmful extremes, as is so regarding the Red Heifer and the leper. And our fear of death has been calmed by the lesson that sin brings death, whereas mitzvah secures life. The purpose of painting the doorposts with blood has been explained.

Ibn Ezra teaches us that death affects man uniquely, it requires a unique address, and there are a few related Torah cases that share a bond, indicated by the use of the same three species. Proximity to death frightens man, causing him to flee to the opposite pole of immortality, but this extreme is false. Death is also used regarding the leper where he initially had disregard for life; he must be bent back to the other extreme where "he" loses his identity. But why did God choose the phenomenon of death per se to teach the harm of extremes? I feel this is due to the nature of the immortality fantasy...

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## IMMORTALITY: THE MOST PRIMARY DRIVE

Many decades ago Rabbi Israel Chait taught that King Solomon's work Koheles is based on this fantasy. Meaning, all of man's drives depend on the immortality fantasy. Man would not fantasize about any pleasure, or plan, or sense any ambition, if he truly felt he was going to die. Under every emotion, lies the feeling of immortality. He wrote as follows:

"One generation passes, and another generation comes; but the Earth abides for ever (Koheles 1:4). The Rabbis teach, "A person does not die with half of his desires in hand. For he who has a hundred, desires to make of it two hundred." [3] This means that the fantasy exceeds reality. King Solomon addresses one of the two fantasies that drive people. One fantasy is regarding objects or possessions. The second fantasy deals with man's feeling of permanence. Man's fantasies make sense, but only if he's going to live forever. An idea has two parts: 1) the idea itself, and 2) the emotional effect of the idea. Every person knows the idea that he or she will die. But the emotional effect of death is usually denied. This enables man to believe his fantasy is achievable. It is impossible to live without the fantasy of immortality. It expresses itself one way or another.

The meaning behind this verse is that the average person looks at life as the only reality. He cannot perceive himself as a single speck in a chain of billions of people and events, where he plays but a minuscule role, and passes on. Any feeling man has of greatness comes from the feeling of immortality. Immortality never reaches into lusts; only ego. Here, the king places the correct perspective before us. We look at the world as starting with our birth, and as dying with our death. As soon as one sees that his life is nearing its end, he cannot enjoy things anymore. The enjoyment of things is tied to the belief of an endless lifetime in which to enjoy them. Man's attention is directed primarily toward his well-being. If a life-threatening situation faces man, this

is the most devastating experience; everything else doesn't make that much difference to him. Once a person faces death, all fantasies of pleasures don't carry much weight. Rashi says on this verse, "Who are those that exist forever? They are the humble ones that bow down to the ground." Rashi means there is in fact an eternity: this is for righteous people – Tzaddikim – expressed as those who humble themselves, "bowing to the ground." The soul of the Tzaddik will endure forever."

As man is most excited about his mortality, and is driven primarily by the immortality fantasy, it is most appropriate that God teaches man not to follow his extreme tendencies in this area.

### SUMMARY

Death is bothersome, but we cannot deny it. The Red Heifer's ashes remind us that our physical life is not permanent: we all return to dust. We need this reminder when we come in contact with the dead, as we most likely have reacted with denial about our own mortality. We also cannot disregard the life of another through evil speech. If we do, we have gone to another harmful extreme, and shaving our hair reduces our identity, temporarily, to help us bounce back to a correct equilibrium. God signaled the sinful nature of extremes using plants of extreme size differences, and including the red thread that signifies their sin.

We are again awed by the perfection and structure of the Torah, God's Bible, where religious practice is designed to perfect man's flaws. Whether we sin by evil speech, or are negatively affected by a mitzvah of burial or the Paschal Lamb, God includes remedial acts that guide us on a life of truth.

Thank you again Jessie for directing me to this fundamental. ■

[1] On Yom Kippur, the red string represented the Jews' unforgiven state. And when it turned white, it indicated God's forgiveness. Torah verses too refer to sin as red: "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool (Isaiah 1:18)."

[2] Maimonides Laws of Character Traits addresses this topic.

[3] Koheles Rabbah 1:13



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# THE RIGHTEOUS ZEALOT

The  
Character  
of Pinchas

RABBI REUVEN MANN



This week's parsha, Pinchas, describes the enormous reward Hashem granted this man for his great deed. A plague had broken out among the Jews because of the terrible sin into which they had been ensnared.

The Midianites, with the collusion of Bilaam, had come up with a diabolical plan to wreak havoc on the Jewish people. Rather than confronting the Jews in open warfare, they sought to destroy them from within.

What is amazing is that their strategy presupposed belief in the truth of Torah, particularly its teaching that G-d holds the Jews to account for their sins.

There are no greater transgressions than idolatry and sexual licentiousness. The Midianites reasoned that, if Jews could be lured into these behaviors, they would place themselves at serious risk for Divine

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retribution. The plan was to use the Torah as a weapon with which to slay the Jews.

This is truly an astounding phenomenon that is contrary to ordinary human psychology. Generally, if a person becomes convinced of the truth of a religion, his desire is to observe it. But these sinners acknowledged Hashem and His Torah and still sought to subvert His will by instigating His people to rebel against Him.

This attitude reflects a unique type of evil never seen again in history. It reinforces the warning that we must guard the secrets of Torah, lest they fall into the wrong hands. Many oppressors have arisen with the intention of forcing us to abandon Judaism and to eliminate our religion from the world.

These enemies never imagined that, by causing us to sin, they could arouse G-d's wrath against us. That would have required that they acknowledge the veracity of Torah, something they could never bring themselves to do.

As a result of their sin the Jews were smitten with a severe plague. Hashem told Moshe to appoint judges and execute justice against all who had

engaged in the idolatry of Baal Peor. Only in this manner would the plague be halted.

But suddenly, the disaster took on a new dimension. The Prince of the tribe of Shimon joined in the sin when he openly flaunted his affair with a beautiful Midianite princess named Kazbi. It's one thing when ordinary people transgress, but quite another when great leaders shamelessly violate the most sacred tenets of Judaism.

Pinchas did not hesitate. He

sprang into action, remembering the teaching that, in public desecrations of this kind, "zealots may deal with him." He entered the tent of cohabitation and put a spear through both of them. As a result of this great deed, the plague, which had consumed 24,000 people, was ended.

Pinchas was a righteous zealot. However, at first sight, his action requires further elucidation. In our time, the label "religious zealot" has gotten a bad reputation. Today, Islamic Jihadists react with murderous anger at any perceived insult to their "prophet" or religion. Anyone who publishes an article or cartoon that can be seen as disrespectful to Islam puts his life in grave jeopardy.

We roundly condemn that attitude and view it as depraved. Thus, it behooves us to ask, what is so noble and different about the action of Pinchas?

The answer is that the average person identifies with his

religion and its icons. If it is insulted, he takes it as a severe personal affront. He may not admit it, but it is his own anger which motivates his need for revenge. This person is generally a hateful and disgruntled character, totally lacking in human compassion. He is not acting for the sake of noble ideals, but hides behind them so he can unleash his great subjective frustrations and resentments.

Not so, the truly righteous zealot. He must be a person on the highest level of wisdom, love, and compassion. The deed does not emanate from his selfish, emotional disposition. He acts only because of his great love of Hashem and with complete absence of rancor towards anyone, because he recognizes the great harm caused by a blatant desecration of G-d.

He seeks the peace and wellbeing of mankind and, like Pinchas, deserves to be a Kohen and initiated into Hashem's "Covenant of Peace." Let us strive for that ideal.

Shabbat shalom. ■



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