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Relying on Miracles

"God spoke to Moshe, saying: "Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aharon the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the Children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them, so I did not consume the Children of Israel in My vengeance." (*Bamidbar* 25:11)

This week's Torah portion describes how Pinchas merited a covenant of peace with God in reward for being a *kana'i*. The Hebrew term "*kana'i*" is often mistranslated as fanatic or extremist. But the true definition of "*kana'i*" is someone who passionately cares about doing the right thing, regardless of its consequences. His personal well-being takes a back seat to the will of Hashem and the needs of the Jewish people. He firmly believes that if he does what is right, the Almighty will take care of him.

Pinchas was a true *kana'i*, zealot, for the Almighty. He saw the terrible desecration of God's Name wrought by Zimri, who brazenly took a Midianite princess named Kozbi into his tent before the entire nation. Pinchas risked his life to kill the two of them, which ended the

devastating plague that destroyed 24,000 Jews who had been seduced into idolatry by the Midianite women.

The Midrash (*Tanchuma*, Parashas Balak 21) says that for Pinchas to succeed in his mission, twelve miracles had to occur. Among the miracles listed: An angel shut Zimri and Kozbi's mouths so they could not scream; the blade of his sword miraculously extended long enough to pierce both of their bodies simultaneously; Pinchas was given exceptional strength that enabled him to lift their bodies while impaled on his spear; the handle of his spear did not break under the weight of the bodies. The final miracle was that the attempt of Zimri's supporters to kill Pinchas was thwarted by an angel.

What was Pinchas thinking? How could he have undertaken this mission? The Talmud states that you are not allowed to rely on a miracle: "A person should never place himself in danger and expect a miracle to happen, because perhaps the miracle will not take place, and if it does it will diminish his merit" (*Shabbos* 32a). Hashem put us in a world that operates according to certain rules, and we need to act responsibly by making a reasonable *hishtadlus*, effort, based on the circumstances we face. We cannot count on miracles.

Even our patriarchs did not rely on miracles. When Avraham Avinu went to fight the four kings to redeem his nephew Lot, the Midrash says he went with the intent to die *al Kiddush Hashem*, sanctifying God's Name (*Bereishis Rabbah*, 43:2). He figured he was going to die. He had also been prepared to die several years earlier, when placed in Nimrod's fiery furnace, rather than worship idolatry.

Pinchas was different. He did *not* assume that he was going to die *al Kiddush Hashem*; he relied on a miracle. How do we know? The Talmud teaches that Pinchas deceived the tribe of Shimon – the supporters of Zimri, their

prince – by pretending that he wanted to join Zimri and partake in the depravity. They allowed him entry, saying, “Even the *perushim* [ascetics] have permitted this act!” (*Sanhedrin* 82b). If Pinchas had been killed, it would have caused an even greater *chillul Hashem*, a desecration of God’s Name, because the Jewish people would have mistakenly thought that Pinchas had become an active participant in this brazen sin! Therefore, Pinchas must have thought that the Almighty would miraculously save him, in order to avert the potential *chillul Hashem*.

But what about the Talmudic principle of “*Ein somchin al hanes* -- we may not rely on a miracle”? How could Pinchas put himself into danger and assume that a miracle would take place?

Miracles & the Jewish People

There is one exception to the rule of “we may not rely on a miracle” and that is when someone undertakes to save the Jewish people. As the Alshich writes, “One cannot rely on miracle and say, ‘I will learn Torah for the sake of Heaven and God will provide for me.’ That is concerning an individual. But one who tends to the needs of the nation should not be afraid that any obstacle will stop him. Rather, since he is tending to their needs for the sake of Heaven and placing his trust in God, God will act on his behalf.” (Alshich, *Vayikra* 13, Parashas Tazria)

God promises that the Jewish people will survive for eternity. If the only way to save them requires a miracle, as was the case for Pinchas, then one can count on that miraculous strategy to get the job done.

At the same time, Pinchas had to make the effort to implement the best strategy he could come up with. He pretended to be joining Zimri’s ranks, he concealed his spear by turning it into a walking staff, and then he relied on the Almighty for a miracle. He knew

Hashem was going to enable him to succeed because he was acting solely to save *Am Yisrael*.

During the economic downturn at the beginning of the twenty-first century, a nurse specializing in pain management came to treat me. “Rabbi,” she asked, “what do you hope to achieve with my help?” I told her that I wanted to be strong enough to go fundraising in America.

The nurse was taken aback. “Don’t you realize that America is going through one of the worst economic periods in recent history? How can you raise money in such a climate?”

I answered her, “It all depends what I’m raising money for. If I’m raising funds for my private yeshiva, then the downturn in the economy will affect me, but if I’m raising money to save the Jewish people, then I don’t have to worry about the limitations created by a bad economy.” To save the Jewish people, you can count on a miracle.

Miracles Today

To those of us living in Israel, it is obvious that the Jews here are relying on miracles. There is no other way to explain our survival and our commitment to remain here while surrounded and outnumbered by a vicious enemy who wants to destroy us. Neighboring countries are determined to build weapons to wipe us off the face of the earth, while at the same time, the rest of the world is becoming more and more anti-Semitic. We cannot rely on them to protect us.

But more than six million Jews do live in Israel, without looking to flee the country. Israel consistently ranks in the top fifteen countries in the world happiness index. Tourism is booming. Ultimately, the reason we feel safe and secure despite our precarious situation is because we are relying on a miracle. We know Hashem will take care of us.

As individuals we cannot rely on a miracle, but as a nation we can bank on it.

Today, because the Jewish people are disunited and assimilating, we need a miracle perhaps more than ever before. Millions of our brethren are on the brink of being lost to their people forever. We need miracles – to bridge the gap, to understand each other, to reach out to our brothers and sisters and bring them back to their Father in Heaven.

We can count on God to do miracles if we dedicate ourselves to creating a renaissance to bring back our people. We just need a few good men, *kana'im*, zealots, like Pinchas – not fanatics, but serious people who are not self-absorbed and who passionately care about doing the will of God, regardless of the consequences.

The Jewish People needs you! Make the commitment, and remember: When working on behalf of the Jewish people you can rely on miracles. If we are true *kana'im*, the Almighty will empower us to do the seemingly impossible.



Life-Changing Words

Wise words spoken at the right time and place can be influential. If they bring about positive change, they become transformative. This idea is illustrated by five sisters, whose life-changing words affected history.

This week's Torah portion speaks of the five daughters of Tzelafchad (Zelophehad). In their

merit, the Torah's laws of inheritance became fully revealed. Here's some background: Tzelafchad died in the wilderness following the Exodus. He had no sons to receive his inheritance. At that time, the inheritance of land was passed on exclusively to sons. Tzelafchad's daughters became distressed when the Land of Israel was being allocated. Challenging the status quo, they petitioned against what they felt was the injustice done to them, their father, and their family. The unmarried sisters courageously presented their bold argument before Moshe and the elders: "Why should our father's name be omitted from among his family because he had no son? Give us a possession among our father's brothers."

Moshe was perplexed by their plea. He brought the sisters' request before God, who responded, "What Tzelafchad's daughters are saying is right. You must certainly give them an inheritance of land among their father's relatives and give their father's inheritance to them."

And so, it was done. Tzelafchad's daughters helped pave the way for countless unnamed women in the generations that followed to inherit and own land. Our Sages state that these devout sisters were "very wise and chose the right time to present their request. They knew how to interpret the Torah and were very virtuous."

In contrast to that of the men, the women's devotion to the Land of Israel never wavered, as was demonstrated when the spies were sent to scout the land. God said (to Moshe), "Send for yourself men to scout out the land of Canaan." The *Kli Yakar* explains that God wasn't commanding but rather permitting Moshe to send men on this mission. God was saying, "From My perspective, seeing the future, it would have been better to send women, because they love and cherish the land and would never come to speak negatively about it. However, since you are

convinced that these men are worthy and do indeed value the land, I give you permission to go ahead and send them."

These men, however, returned with a negative report of the land. Upon hearing the report of these scouts, a group of men declared, "Let us appoint a new leader and return to Egypt."

Notwithstanding, the women were steadfast and declared their dedication to and love of the land. Because they valued and treasured the Promised Land, they valued their inheritance. Tzelafchad's daughters rightfully received their inheritance of land.

Jews who don't value or are unaware of their Jewish heritage forfeit an unrecognized treasure. Their spiritual inheritance waits to be claimed. The transmission of Torah and Jewish heritage is fueled by love and devotion. Without these essential elements, Judaism is missing its heart and soul.

Because the daughters of Tzelafchad so greatly loved the Land of Israel, they merited to have a law pertaining to the land brought out in their names. What had previously been concealed was revealed.

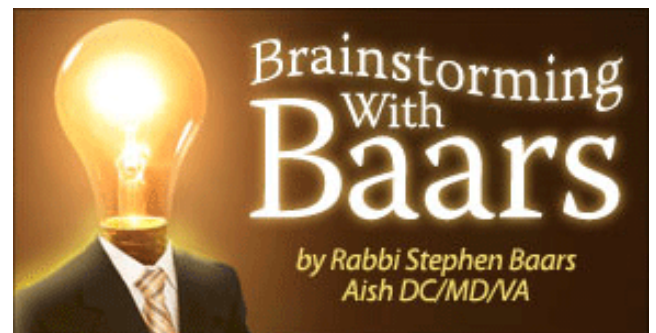
Today, we can take for granted that women enjoy the right to own property. Yet for centuries in the United States and Europe, a woman's husband or other male relative controlled any property allotted to her. A woman's right to own property was a process that took place over time and began in the 1700s. It wasn't until the twentieth century that it was finally commonplace.

The case of Tzelafchad's five valiant daughters was a watershed moment in history. It brought out important new laws that would affect women across time. Their story is a compelling lesson for all those who think that their destiny is fixed, or that Divine justice has abandoned them.

May our forthright words be spoken at a conducive time. May they help open doors and provide opportunities for us and future generations. Ultimately, may we merit to use our wise words to bring about positive, life-changing results.

Making It Relevant

1. Speak out if you think your words can bring about a desired outcome. Choose to be mindful of the timing and the place.
2. Speak positively and encouragingly to yourself. If you actualize your "self-talk," your own words can become life-changing.
3. Strive to express yourself with composure and dignity. Otherwise, your significant point may not be well received.



Job Opening: Leader

*"If you have wisdom, what do you lack?
And if you lack wisdom, what do you have?"*

-- Midrash, Vayikra Rabba

George Burns used to quip, "How come all the people who know how to run the country are cutting hair and driving cabs?"

Unfortunately, we tend to elect leaders for their ability to articulate what is wrong. What

is really needed, which few possess, is the understanding of how to make things right.

It is with this in mind that we have to ponder God's choice to follow Moses as the next leader of the Jewish people - Joshua, a heretofore relatively unknown figure in the Bible.

It's a choice made all the more interesting since it comes in the parsha of Pinchas, one of the more famous individuals and someone with impressive "leadership skills." In fact, we could argue that Pinchas exhibits a kind of leadership virtually unmatched in Jewish history.

Pinchas' actions are so impressive that God rewards him with the "Covenant of Peace." It is hard to find a similar champion in the Torah.

Obviously God is making a point. Leadership is not what you might think it is.

Let me explain. Your son is going through a hard time in school and often comes home angry and frustrated. You call your therapist for advice who brilliantly assesses the situation and lays out a series of steps you need to take with various options and alternate outcomes.

You are eternally grateful.

But then you think, "Wouldn't it be easier if the therapist raised my child?"

The truth is that the therapist has as much angst with her own son as you have with yours - if not more. Every parent since Adam says at least 453 times, "Where did I go wrong?" Sometimes they say it in one day!

This idea of letting "experts" raise our children is not new, however. The Russian communists tried it. They actually developed boarding schools run by people trained to raise children. In other words, kids raised by professionals.

But here's the mistake, which if you are a parent you may have already realized, and which the communists eventually found out. When it comes to parenting, and similarly to leadership, there is no such thing as a professional.

It's not knowledge that qualifies you to be a parent or a leader, but caring. You are the best person to raise your children because no one cares about them as much as you do.

The ramifications of this are enormous. Your children are better off with parents that don't know what they are doing but care, rather than the other way around.

Why?

I recently had a conversation with an old friend. We had been discussing her children and how they seem to have turned out OK after all, and that all that worry was for nothing.

I remarked "No," they turned out OK because of all that worry.

Children need for their parents to get it right, but it's more important that they worry whether they are getting it right. Your concern tells your children that they are important. That's the most important message you can give them.

The truth is, however, that you will never get it right unless you care.

This story is a little gruesome, but taught me an amazing lesson. When I was single I happened to babysit the children of some friends of mine. While on duty their son caught his little finger in the door (ouch). The parents rushed home and frantically drove the boy to the hospital.

Shortly later they called me, as they needed me to find the end of the finger so that they

might be able to sew it back. By this point I was joined by one or two other friends in the house and we all searched high and low but couldn't find it even though we knew which door it was.

With no other choice, the mother came home and simply ran to the door and with no more than a simple glance, picked up the necessary body part and ran back out the door to the hospital.

It's the person who really cares who will find the answers.

It's not to say Pinchas didn't care, but that was not his essential virtue. He was, when all is said and done, an expert in one particular crisis. So is a therapist.

The exact same is true in leadership. Joshua was chosen because he, above all others, cared the most about his people.

The cab driver may know what the country needs and he may also know what your children need, but neither will do better under his leadership. He wouldn't do any better a job because he doesn't care enough to do anything about it other than talk about it. Like Joshua, your care and interest will carry you farther than anyone else can.

P.S. the boy's finger was successfully re-attached.

BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS TO PONDER

Question 1: Do you think people who don't vote should be fined?

Question 2: Do you think people should pass some kind of proficiency test to be allowed to vote?

Question 3: What do you think should

disqualify a person from running for public office?



Discovering the Divine Voice Within

What drives us to risk everything for a principle? What enables us to act when everyone else freezes? And what does it take to ensure, in that moment, that our motives are pure? The story of Pinchas is the Torah's answer — and it holds the key to finding and trusting the divine voice within.

Holy Vigilante

After failing to curse the Jewish people, the wicked prophet Bilaam and the Moabite King Balak draw up a twisted scheme to destroy the nation from the inside out. The daughters of Midian and Moab infiltrate the Jewish camp and, using progressive levels of seduction, lead the Jewish men to promiscuity and idol worship. As punishment, God sends a deadly plague among the Israelites.

The episode reaches its climax when Zimri, a Jewish prince of the tribe of Shimon, takes a Midianite princess to the front of the Tabernacle where Moses and the elders hold court. According to the Midrash,¹ Zimri challenges Moshe: "Is this woman permitted or forbidden? The very woman who is your wife is a Midianite; and who permitted you to have her?!" Taken aback, Moses stumbles. The

proper ruling slips from his mind.

Then, in broad daylight, before the eyes of the holiest men in history, Zimri proceeds to engage in public cohabitation. Witnessing this atrocity, godly fury courses through the blood of Aaron's grandson, Pinchas. He picks up a spear and, in one mighty thrust, pierces through the shameless prince and his Midianite mistress, killing them on the spot and ending the plague. As a reward, God gives Pinchas His "Covenant of Peace" and entry into the eternal Priesthood.

The Razor's Edge of Zealotry

This dramatic sequence represents a singular moment in history — not a model for imitation. Jewish law permits acting as a zealot only under an almost impossibly narrow set of conditions: witnesses a Jewish man having intercourse with a non-Jewish woman in public, during the act itself, after being warned by two witnesses.² Furthermore, the zealot must not consult the court — if he does, they forbid him.³ The Talmud⁴ considers the convergence of these conditions so unlikely that it regards Pinchas' act as miraculous.

But the text reveals something even more remarkable. God describes Pinchas' act as "avenging **My vengeance**."⁵ What does God mean by calling Pinchas' act of vengeance "**My vengeance**"? The Ohr HaChaim, celebrated 18th century Moroccan biblical commentator explains: "When man performs a mitzvah for absolutely pure motives, without the slightest consideration of personal benefit, this is the most beloved act in God's eyes. This is why the Torah calls it '**My vengeance**.'" Through absolute purity of motive, Pinchas' act ceased to be his own — it became, in effect God's. So complete was his selflessness that God rewarded him with the eternal Covenant of Peace.⁶

This is the portrait the Torah paints of Pinchas

— and it is a humbling one. The conditions that made his act valid were so narrow, and his inner perfection so complete, that neither will ever be replicated. So what exactly are we supposed to learn from someone so far beyond our reach?

Servant Leadership

First, Pinchas asks us to examine something we rarely look at honestly: how much of what we do is truly for the cause, and how much is for ourselves?

At the end of the 18th century, consumed by the spiritual devastation the Enlightenment was wreaking upon European Jewry, Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin approached his teacher, the Vilna Gaon, with a plan to open a yeshiva. The Gaon rejected him. Months later, Rabbi Chaim returned, more urgent. Again, the Gaon rejected him. Finally, Rabbi Chaim returned a third time and stated plainly: "I'm opening a yeshiva." The Gaon replied, "You have my blessing. Now go."

According to tradition, the Gaon had been testing Rabbi Chaim's purity of motive. Only when the yeshiva had become purely about saving Torah — and nothing about Rabbi Chaim — did the blessing follow.⁷ As a result, the Volozhin Yeshiva became the model for every Torah learning institution that followed. Not built on the force of one man's personality, but on the purity of one man's mission.

The secular world has independently confirmed this power of pure motivation. In researching *Good to Great*, Jim Collins and his team spent five years analyzing 1,435 companies, ultimately identifying eleven that achieved returns at least three times the market average over fifteen years. What separated them? The decisive factor wasn't strategy, talent, or vision. It was what Collins called Level 5 leadership. He writes, "[Level 5 leaders] are incredibly ambitious — but their ambition is first and foremost for the cause,

not themselves.”⁸ The leaders who made history were those who cared most about the cause and least about the credit.

This standard isn't reserved for Torah giants or corporate legends. It's a practice available to anyone willing to look honestly at their own motives. In practice, this means catching and redirecting yourself whenever the spotlight feels important. Not suppressing the ambition, but asking: what does the mission need right now, and how can I best serve it?

Aligning Your Inner Compass

Purifying our motivation opens the channel to divine clarity, but there's a second step. As we saw, one of the conditions of zealotry is that the zealot must act from self-developed conviction — he cannot consult the court.⁹ That inner capacity to think for one's self is what our tradition calls *daas*, and each of us has the capacity to develop it.

"But we aren't prophets!" you might protest. True — but Judaism asserts that we each possess a spark of prophetic intuition. R. Shlomo Wolbe, in *Alei Shur*,¹⁰ teaches that the verse "Many are the thoughts in a man's heart, but it is God's counsel that will prevail" (Proverbs 19:21) contains a hidden instruction. God's counsel lives *within* the multiplicity of your own thoughts. The task is learning to distinguish God's voice from the noise of your ego, fears, and desires.

To build this capacity, R. Wolbe prescribes two practices:

- **Torah learning:** Anyone learning Chumash or Talmud will constantly encounter questions on the text. Resist the temptation to immediately turn to Rashi and the other commentaries for answers. Instead, sit with the question and form your own understanding. Then look at Rashi. When his reading

diverges from yours, ask why — what did he see that you missed? Over time, this trains your mind to think like the greatest minds in Torah.

- **Life decisions:** You're faced with a major life decision. Wisely, you schedule a meeting with your mentor. Good, but before that meeting, stop, identify the options, weigh them honestly, and reach a tentative conclusion. Then, present your thinking to your mentor. They will confirm what you saw clearly and show you where you went wrong. In time, the divine wisdom that guides your mentor begins to guide you as well.

In an age where people increasingly outsource their thinking to social media, news networks, and AI, we must master the countercultural practice of *daas*. Wisdom cannot be downloaded. It can only be earned through the discipline of thinking for yourself. When we combine *daas* with the purity of motive we explored earlier, we approach the clarity and perfection of Pinchas. And perhaps, as we walk that path, we too can earn our own Covenant of Peace — the inner harmony that comes from acting purely for God

May we develop the inner clarity to hear God's counsel within us, and the purity of heart to act on it for His sake alone.

Shabbat Shalom!
Avraham

1. Tanchuma, Balak 20
2. The Mishna (Sanhedrin 81B) adds in two other cases in which the Torah permits zealotry: one who steals a Temple vessel, purposely serves in the Temple in a state of ritual impurity, and one who curses God in the name of idol worship. In all of these cases, the perpetrator must be warned by witnesses of the consequences of his actions, yet proceed willfully in violating the law. Only if he carries on with willful defiance may others take justice into their own hands.
3. Sanhedrin 82a. Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Biah 12:5. Additionally, the Talmud records that had Zimri turned and killed Pinchas in self-defense, Pinchas would have had no legal recourse — even a permitted act of zealotry offered no protection.
4. Sanhedrin 82b

5. Bamidbar 25:11
6. You might be wondering, “What does peace have to do with an act of violence?” The Malbim, a preeminent 19th-century Eastern European Torah commentator, on this verse (Bamidbar 25:12), explains: death comes from the opposition and separation of forces within a person. Peace is the harmony of all one’s inner forces unified under the divine soul. When every part of a person moves in the same direction — toward God, with nothing pulling elsewhere — peace reigns within. The Covenant of Peace was not an external reward — it was a recognition of who Pinchas already was on the inside.
7. Heard from Rabbi Dovid Steinhauer. The version recorded at [jewishhistory.or.presents.the.tradition.of.the.Gaon’s.words.as.the.first.time.‘‘too.much.of.your.ego.was.involved.’’The.historical.gap.between.Rabbi.Chaim’s.initial.discussions.with.the.Gaon.\(c.1792\).and.the.yeshiva’s.founding.\(1803\).independently.suggests.a.prolonged.process.of.inner.refinement.before.the.blessing.was.given.](http://jewishhistory.or.presents.the.tradition.of.the.Gaon’s.words.as.the.first.time.‘‘too.much.of.your.ego.was.involved.’’The.historical.gap.between.Rabbi.Chaim’s.initial.discussions.with.the.Gaon.(c.1792).and.the.yeshiva’s.founding.(1803).independently.suggests.a.prolonged.process.of.inner.refinement.before.the.blessing.was.given.)
8. Jim Collins, “Level 5 Leadership: The Triumph of Humility and Fierce Resolve,” *Harvard Business Review*, January 2001, available at [jimcollins.co.The.findings.are.expanded.in.Collins.Good.to.Great.Why.Some.Companies.Make.the.Leap.and.Others.Don’t.\(HarperBusiness.2001\).Chapter.2](http://jimcollins.co.The.findings.are.expanded.in.Collins.Good.to.Great.Why.Some.Companies.Make.the.Leap.and.Others.Don’t.(HarperBusiness.2001).Chapter.2)
9. Sanhedrin 82a; Rambam, Hilchos Issurei Biah 12:5.
10. Alei Shur, vol. 2, Daas — Vaad 4, pp. 251–252.