

Mussar HaTorah

Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l

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Parashas Pinchas

“... ZIMRI BEN SALU, A PRINCE OF A FATHER’S HOUSE AMONG SHIMON.” (BAMIDBAR 25:14)

Why is this information significant?

ZIMRI COMMITTED AN ACT of public immorality with a Moabite princess. The Midrash Tanchuma (Pinchas 2) focuses on the fact that the Torah mentions that Zimri was a descendant of Shimon. Why is this information significant? The Torah, answers the Midrash, is expressing astonishment at the fact that Zimri breached a spiritual “fence” or barrier established by Shimon, his ancestor. Shimon stood up zealously to protest an act of immorality: When Dinah, was violated, Shimon partnered with Levi to kill the entire city of Shechem. This set an example, a standard of zealousness against immorality. The Torah, so to speak, finds it hard to believe – how could his descendent Zimri break down his ancestor’s barrier against immorality!?

It is true that this historical note is a fascinating inconsistency

Zimri was a prince, a leader in B’nei Yisrael. He brazenly committed a despicable act of pure wickedness in front of the entire nation. This was a *chillul Hashem* – a desecration of Hashem’s Name – of immense proportions. Certainly, it is true that this historical note, about Shimon creating a fence against immorality and his descendent Zimri breaking it, is a fascinating inconsistency. However, the most appalling aspect of this crime should be the horrifying *chillul Hashem*. Imagine, for a moment, that a prominent senator, gets up in front of a joint session of Congress, approaches a senator of the opposing political party and viciously stabs him in the back. Coincidentally, the murderous senator also happens to be a descendant of Abraham Lincoln. Would the headlines read, *Leading Senator Commits Public Murder* or rather *Great-Grandson Turns Away From Ancestor’s Gentleness*? Certainly the leadership position of the perpetrator, and that it was done in public would seem to be the most shocking issue at hand. Why, then, does the Torah wonder about the fact that Zimri, “broke the barrier” established by his ancient ancestor and not question how a Jewish leader can perpetrate such a massive desecration of Hashem’s honor? Why does the Torah go all the way back to Shimon and not just focus on Zimri himself?

This fracture in the chain of mesorah was the most severe sin

Many of us fail to properly appreciate the critical importance of *mesorah* – the Torah tradition that attaches us firmly to the greatness of previous generations. Shimon set a standard to protest and take action against immorality. This was Zimri’s *mesorah* that was handed down father to son, *rebbei to talmid*. When Zimri breached that barrier, this fracture in the chain of *mesorah* was the most severe sin that he committed – even greater than the *chillul Hashem* involved. One who has no *mesorah*, has no Torah. He can certainly study Torah and even attempt to apply it to his life, but he cannot properly integrate his Torah knowledge into a Torah-true life without the guidance of the *mesorah* transmitted to him by his *rebbei*.

In the stormy seas of life, we are tossed about and we can easily lose our bearings and veer off course. Having a *mesorah*, a connection to Sinai to keep us on course, is absolutely critical. Without an unbroken chain of Torah transmission, we are completely vulnerable to the *Yetzer Hara*, who will gladly supply us with all kinds of rationalizations to justify the most heinous sins and abominations. When we follow and uphold our *mesorah*, our *mitzva* performance and Torah study will be continually inspired and a model of genuine *avodas Hashem*.