Strangers Amongst Us

by

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We live in a time of paradox, when contradictory impulses pull at us with such force that it is a wonder that the center can hold. We see incredible wealth and poverty side by side. Technology brings the capacity to magnify human interaction even as it isolates. Medical advances hold incredible promise even as millions lack access to basic care. This same paradox animates the Jewish community.

Even as Jewish learning exists on a level than ever before known, the degree of Jewish ignorance and secularization is astounding. The numbers of *Ba’alei Teshuva* grow and grow, even as thousands upon thousands leave the fold. Greater levels of observance. Greater neglect. More Jews eat *sh’murah* matzah even as greater numbers of Jews eat chometz.

More commitment. More defection. More hope. More crisis.

In light of the American Orthodox community’s growing strength and the on-going decline of the non-observant community, it would seem logical that the Orthodox would focus their resources, strengths, and talents on *l’hagdil Torah ul’ahadira* – on unity and strength. After all, every segment of the Orthodox community – modern, centrist, Yeshivish, Chassidish, and Litvish – establish a solid foundation for our children and students. Yet, ironically, the more successful and accomplished we become, the pettier, splintered, and irrational we become. We grow suspicious of one another. We are intolerant, and worse. A vise ofzealousness and intolerance has gripped too many within the observant community. Our fervor has not lifted us up but has made us small and ugly.

So how should the Orthodox Jew, who lives and loves Torah and who must walk modern streets, conduct his life?

Rabbi Yaakov Rabinowitz addressed this question clearly in the first issue of *Ten Da’at:*

*We can expect a feeling of love for all Jews, whatever their background, whatever their status. There will be those whom we will applaud, those whom we will oppose, those who will give us pain, even make us cry. But we will try never to forget that we are one and that the inner door should never be closed. And we will keep an outer door, to the outside world, open as well. To be sure, it will have a screen. Not everything is needed or wanted. But it is, after all, God’s world and we live in it, not despite it*.

And yet, we see too many in the Orthodox community use their fervor to build walls rather than doorways. They are indeed zealous, but what is the nature of their zealotry truly? And what must be our response to this zealousness and extremism?

In *Parshat Pinchas* we learn of Pinchas’ zealotry. When he killed Zimri and Kosbi, a great controversy was unleashed among the people. Were his actions correct? Were they murderous? Ultimately, we learn that his zealotry was correct, as God rewarded him with “the covenant of eternal *kahuna*” and the “covenant of peace.”

His actions were those of an extremist; he slew a man on the spur of the moment, without trial or previous warning, without testimony being heard and in defiance of all judicial proce­dure prescribed by the Torah. He took the law into his own hands, which certainly, from legal, moral, social, and educational perspectives, constitutes a dangerous prec­edent. We know his actions were condemned by the people and by the leaders. And yet, in the face of this extremism, he is rewarded.

Why?

*Ka’naaut,* extremism, is rejected and unacceptable (*ein morin lo kein*). Ex­tremism is too often based on false motives. The only possible defense of *ka’naaut* must be based on authentic and genuine interests for the glory of God.

Rabbi Baruch Epstein explains in his *Torah Temimah:*

*Such a deed must be animated by a genuine, unadulterated spirit of zeal to advance the glory of God. In the case, who can tell whether the perpetrator is not really prompted by some selfish motive, maintaining that he is doing it for the sake of God, when he has actually committed murder? That was why the Sages wished to excommunicate Pinchas, had not the Holy spirit testified that his zeal for God was genuine.*

Indeed, dividing the Pinchas episode between two *Parshiyot,* the act of extremism in *Balak* and the reward in *Pinchas,* teaches us that the motives and goals of any act of *ka’naaut*, even of a Pinchas, must be thoroughly reviewed, examined and scrutinized to assess its sincerity. Such scrutiny demands time, perspective, and honesty.

If the motives are found to be real and pure, then God will bestow His approval, reward, and blessing. If not, then the act deserves the rejection of God and the people.

A fundamental benchmark for assessing whether the zealot is authentic or not is by ascertaining whether his *ka’naaut* separates him from the community or whether he remains *b’tocham* – among them. If the act separates him, it must be *of necessity* an act of extremism which must be universally condemned.

The notion that any act of *ka’naaut,* even by the most pious, requires scrutiny and examination is corroborated in *Haftarat Pinchas,* which focuses on the life of Eliyahu Hanavi. *Chazal* were of the opinion that Pinchas and Eliyahu are one and the same. Each exhibits forms of *ka’naaut.* As Eliyahu escapes to the desert fearful of Izevel, who seeks his life, God inquires, “What are you doing here, Eliyahu?” Eliyahu replies, “I have been very zealous (*kano kineiti*)for the Lord God of hosts, for the children of Yisrael have forsaken Your covenant, thrown down Your altars, and slain Your prophets with the sword, and only I am left; and they seek my life, to take it away.”

What passion! Certainly, Eliyahu Hanavi is a true soldier of God!

*Chazal* convey a somewhat different sense and mood to this dialogue. When Eliyahu says, “And he said I have been very zealous for the Lord God . . . for they have forsaken Your covenant” God responds, “My covenant? Perhaps your covenant?” So too when Eliyahu says, “Thrown down Your altars.” God says, “My altars? Per­haps your altars?”

“Your prophets they have slain with the sword.”

“And of what concern is this to you?”

“And only I am left, and *they seek my life to take it away*.”

Eliyahu argues for his zealousness but God reacts with disdain and doubt, “…and of what concern is this to you?” This thorough scrutiny ultimately reveals an ulterior motive of even Eliyahu Hanavi – they seek my life to take it away. Even his *ka’naaut* had become confused with fear, insecurity, inflexibility, and intolerance with his own people.

God rebukes Eliyahu be­cause his zealousness is inappropriate. He reappears to him in wind, in earth­quake, in fire, and finally in a still, small voice. It is then that God inquires once again, “What are you doing here, Eliyahu?”

Ultimately, Eliyahu is called upon to guarantee his unswerving commitment and uncompromising love *for the Jewish nation* by being an agent for its ultimate redemption. Until that final redemption, we Jews must expect a “…feeling of love for all Jews, whatever their background, whatever their status. ... We will try never to forget that we are one and that the inner door should never be closed.”

Those in the Orthodox community who build walls, who condemn – rather than love, teach and redeem – those in the Jewish community who dare demean the crowning achievement of the modern Jewish world – the reestablishment of the State of Israel as a Jewish homeland – they must look to their hearts and ask themselves, Are they like Pinchas? Is their zealousness true? Or are they as Eliyahu?

As we usher in the Three Weeks, it is instructive to recall the comments of the Netziv about “baseless hatred”. In his Shu’t Mayshiv Davar, the Netziv powerfully states that baseless hatred is not just defined as being directed towards people for petty iniquities but that it includes a hatred for “any Jew who practices their *avodas Hashem* in a different manner than them.” Aren’t we all drowning in such waters of hatred? “If one saw another Jew relying on a Halachic leniency which was accepted in that person’s community,” the Netziv continues, “but wasn’t relied upon in their own circles, instead of accepting that “*Eilu vEilu divrei Elokim chaim,* that person was deemed a heretic and was baselessly hated to the point that people were attacked or even killed for being different.” An attitude which unfortunately sounds all too familiar!

Refusing to accept differing legitimate views or ways of serving Hashem is one of the reasons that the Galus has extended for so long. During this period of *Bein Hametzarim*, all Jews who truly long for the arrival of Mashiach and the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdash – and the Jewish nation – need to consider this particularly in *Sinas Chinam*.

When considering the ill feelings that too often permeate the Orthodox community, it is time to ask: Do they seek to protect and reward the oneness of the Jewish community? Do they seek to open doors or build walls?

Let their answer be their judge.