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The Trait of Zealousness - Avenging The Honor of Hashem

"Pinchas son of Elazar son of Aaron the Kohen, turned back My wrath from upon the children of Israel, when he zealously avenged My vengeance among them."

Pinchas knew that there is a *halachah* of "Zealots may attack" (*kanaim poegin bo*) in the case of Zimri, who had taken a Moabite woman in marriage, which is one of the three examples listed by the Sages as a law which does render punishment in Beis Din, but which a zealot may take action against.

Zealousness (*kanaus*) stems from the trait of jealousy (*kinah*). In the side of evil, "jealousy" is a trait that removes a person from the world. When this trait is rectified, it is a trait of Hashem, Who is called "A zealous, vengeful G-d."

In the soul, when *kinah*\jealousy is evil, it stems from the "animal" level of the soul (the *nefesh habehaimis*). When it is holy, it stems from the *neshamah*, the Divine aspect of the soul, which is a "portion of G-d above." Since the *neshamah* receives traits from Hashem - as it is written, "For a part of Hashem is His nation" - the *neshamah* is able to acquire the ability to be zealous and vengeful to take action that will defend Hashem's Torah.

There is also an intermediate level of *kinah*\jealousy: "jealousy of scholars", which increases wisdom. However, although jealousy of scholars increases wisdom, it is not a totally pure motivation. The holy use of *kinah*\jealousy is when it is stemming from Hashem's trait which is vengeful, "The zealousness of Hashem, the Almighty", which is rooted in "A zealous, vengeful G-d".

We need to understand, however, that although this trait is rooted in the spiritual, and it was created to defend the honor of Hashem, it is still tainted with a mixture of good and evil together, just as everything else in Creation, which currently contains a mixture of good and evil. Let us therefore see what the different kinds of unholy motivations are, which can become mixed with the holy kind of zealousness and taint it.

1- Jealousy and Personal Agendas

Many times, it can happen that as a person is being engaged in holy zealousness, there is some base zealousness mixed in, which stems from the "animal" level of the soul. Even more common than this is the fact that personal agendas are also mixed into the holy cause. It will seem to the person as if he is acting zealous in a holy way, as if he is emulating Pinchas, while in reality, the person is also acting upon various interests that are self-serving.

The root of the person's zealous act is holy, but it is the way in which it manifests, its "garment", where it can become evil, mixed with other motivations that are not about Hashem. One must be greatly cautious when it comes to being zealous in avenging Hashem's honor, and to be extra wary of any unholy jealousy that may mix in with his holy cause, and to he must make sure that he is remaining only with the holy zealousness, a result of being attached to Hashem in *d'veykus*.

2 - Born Into Zealousness

Even more so, sometimes a person is born into a certain sect, where the ideals there are to be zealous. When a person is zealous because he grew up in "zealous" surroundings, this is usually not the holy kind of zealousness.

He has simply been "educated" to become like this, and it is entirely by rote and superficial. He acts zealous because it is a learned behavior, it is "second nature" to him, but he has not really acquired the true kind of zealousness. He may perform acts that are zealous, but he is not touching upon the actual trait that is zealousness. He has simply trained himself to behave this way, and he is merely acting out what results from zealousness, but he does not actually possess the trait of zealousness.

Therefore, people who are born into an environment of *kanaus*\zealousness are usually far from true *kanaus*; it is all being practiced habitually.

3 - Unrefined Character

Making this matter more complicated, if a person has not yet tried fixing his character traits, that means his zealousness contains base jealousy, motivations of self-interest, and habit. Any sensible person can understand what kind of "zealousness" will be produced from this. These kinds of zealots are destructive people, and their trait of zealotry hasn't been built upon the proper foundations.

Thus, whenever a person wants to act zealous, he must clarify well what his motivations are.

Holy Zealotry: From A Burning Love For Hashem, and From A Quest For Truth

Where does true, holy zealousness come from? There are two root points where it can stem from.

Holy zealousness may stem from the depths of the *neshamah*, which contains a great love for *HaKadosh Baruch Hu* - as in the verse, "*For love is as tough as death, and zealousness is hard like a reed, and her sparks are sparks of fire, a flame of G-d.*" When one has revealed his *neshamah*, he is zealous for Hashem due to this lofty source. The more that a person loves Hashem - and not simply in the sense of a pleasant kind of love (which stems from the element of water in the soul), but a fiery kind of love (which stems from the element of fire in the soul), the more this fire burns, like a "constant fire shall burn on the Altar", this will produce a holy trait of zealousness that comes from the *neshamah*.

Another source of where holy zealousness stems from is, from a deep quest for truth, which is also an inherent trait of the *neshamah's* nature. "The seal of Hashem is truth", and truth is the trait of Moshe Rabbeinu, and every *neshamah* contains this desire for truth.

A person needs to tell apart the difference between zealousness that stems from love for Hashem, and zealousness that stems from a search for truth. There is a sharp difference between them.

When a person feels a fiery, burning love for Hashem, it is still possible that other impurities can be mixed into the act. A person who is zealous out of love for Hashem might become so excited that he may not notice certain subtle details, which will cause him to act mistakenly. Even when the fire is

holy, its nature is to burst out impulsively, so when a person is zealous for Hashem out of a fiery love for Him, his zealousness might just be an impulsive kind of explosion, which isn't necessarily truthful.

In contrast, if a person's zealousness stems from a search for truth, it will then be pure. This does not simply mean to act correctly, but to be one who "speaks truth from his heart" – it is an inner sense of *yashrus* (uprightness) to do what's right. This quality of truthfulness in the soul demands that zealous action be taken in order to defend Hashem's Torah.

The clearer that the truth is to a person, the more truthful his zealousness will be. This does not mean that it will always be completely holy and pure, but it will be much closer to truth.

Love and Truth Together

Thus, even in people who live inwardly and for holiness, zealousness is only holy and genuine when it meets two conditions. It must stem from both love for Hashem, as well as from a quest for truth.

There are people whose *kanaus*\zealousness stems only from love for Hashem, and usually, their zealousness is off-mark. Only those who are also motivated by a quest for truth are ready to truly avenge Hashem's honor. All *kanaus* must have these two parts: a fiery love for Hashem, and a quest for truth, which stems from an inner sense of what's right, both in the mind and in the heart, which demands the truth.

When meeting those two conditions, a person's *kanaus*\zealousness is complete. Pinchas possessed both of these qualities – he had a great love for Hashem, as well as a demand for truth. When a person has these two qualities together, he is taking the right path. However, even then, he will still need to purify his character and inner motivations, so that other factors don't become mixed in with his holy cause.

Zealousness Is Only For Individuals

Clearly, *kanaus*\zealousness is not a trait to be practiced by the general public. It is in the category of "A *halachah*, but we do not give it as a ruling for the public." There are many *halachos* which *Beis Din* did not punish for when overridden. But for someone who has true, genuine zealousness - which can only stem from a search for the truth – he may be zealous about these matters. However, only individuals reach the true *kanaus*\zealousness. Therefore, *kanaus* is mainly an *avodah* for individuals, and not for the general public.

Understanding Extremist Zealotry

There are some extremist people who act very zealous when it comes to certain matters. We should understand where this stems from and how their extreme zealousness is developed.

Some of these people are acting zealous because they have been trained to act this way since they were young, which is habitual and not truthful; others act this way because they have not yet worked on their animalistic trait of jealousy. In others, extreme zealotry stems from various personal interests that are self-serving.

There is almost no one who can remain a long time with the higher motivation for zealousness, and with time, they become vulnerable to any of the above reasons, which taints whatever they are doing. It has gotten to the point where the only people who practice *kanaus* are people with unrefined character.

To have a deeper understanding of this matter, it is because we are further from the time when we

stood at Sinai, where we had great clarity. As we become further and further away from that clarity, there is concealment upon concealment (confusion and lack of clarity of what the truth is), and the idea of zealousness undergoes changes as well, becoming more and more of a concealed matter to us. It becomes like “extremism” to us, when in reality, it is not extreme, but the words of the Torah which we must remain steadfast to.

In the times we live in, there is a tremendous lack of clarity over what there is to be “zealous” about, and the difference between matters of “*halachah*” and matters of “*kanaus*” (zealousness). This has caused much confusion about what is considered “*kanaus*”, and what is not considered “*kanaus*” (and rather clearly obligatory to all).

This is another reason that can taint *kanaus*, in addition to the reasons listed until now. It is because even when a person is being zealous in order to defend Hashem’s Torah, it is not clear to most people if he is really justified in his zealousness, or he if he just being extreme.

Differentiating Between “Zealousness” and Laxity In Keeping Halachah

To give an example, there are people today who have chosen to take a very lax path when it comes to keeping many areas of *halachah*, and they take a very “lenient” approach towards *halachah*. Clearly, this is a lack of *yiras shomayim* (fear of Heaven). However, when people get upset about this and they condemn this lenient attitude towards *halachah*, they are considered by many people as ‘extreme’ zealots!

In our generation, areas that are really words of Torah have become turned into mere “words of *kanaus*” (zealousness), regarded as extremist behavior, when in reality, these areas are not “*kanaus*”, but clearly defined *halachah* and words of Torah!

That is the destruction that takes place in our generation. What used to be clear to people before as matters that are clearly defined by *halachah*, is no longer so clear. Certain matters that are “words of Torah” are mistakenly considered by many people to just be extreme “words of *kanaus*”....

That is the dismal situation today, and only a few sparks of good still remain in the world.

Mourning The Lack of Clarity In Our Times

If a person has purified his motivations within himself, and he has an inner quest for the truth, and he hasn’t been negatively affected by harmful influences, and he truly searches for Hashem and for the truth of the Torah, he can feel the inner purity in the soul that demands the truth, to defend the values that are true to Hashem and His Torah.

He will then see a different world in front of him than what most people see, even in the world of most of those who keep Torah and mitzvos. He will see that there are many areas and situations which are clearly defined as obligations of *halachah*, which many in the generation are lax in keeping to. Those areas are not matters of “*kanaus*” - they are rather the foundations of *Yiddishkeit* being ignored and uprooted!

When you realize the way things are supposed to be according to the pure *halachah*, and when you contrast this with the situation that is taking place today, in which there is blatant laxity towards the keeping of *halachah*, you can then recognize the depth of the terrible destruction which *Klal Yisrael* is found in right now. It will pain you, and it can bring on a deep crying of the *neshamah*.

Then you can feel the deep desire of the soul to be zealous to avenge the honor of Hashem - providing that it stems from love for Hashem, as well as a quest for truth. You can see the words of

Torah and Chazal in their purity, and then you see the destruction in front of you, because many people are being lax in those areas.

However, as emphasized, you must have those two conditions met (a burning love for Hashem, and a quest for truth) in order for the *kanaus* to be genuine and holy.

Let It Burn In Your Heart, But Don't Always Act Upon It

How much of the *kanaus* should remain in our heart, and how much of it should we act upon? In order for a person to know the answer, he must reach the level of *chassidus* (piety), and then he will know.

Practically speaking, most of the *kanaus* (zealousness) that we will feel needs to remain in our heart, and we cannot act upon it. It remains as a burning pain in our heart, so that we can mourn the *Shechinah*^[1], over the situation of *Klal Yisrael*, which has descended to such a low, unbecoming level.

The reason why we should generally not act upon any *kanaus* (zealousness) that we feel is because in any case, there are no actions we can do that will change the situation of the generation today. Therefore, it is impossible to change the generation through any *kanaus* (zealousness). Only through the light of *mesirus nefesh* (self-sacrifice), which comes from Above, can the generation change - but nothing can be done in the active sense to change the generation today.

In Conclusion

May Hashem let us merit the time in when the *Beis HaMikdash* and *Klal Yisrael* will be rebuilt again in their full glory, when “*The earth will be filled with the knowledge of Hashem.*”

^[1] The dwelling of Hashem's Presence