

The Rebbe's Discourses

Free Summaries of the Rebbe's Chassidic Discourses בלי אחריות כלל וכלל
ד"ה וידבר וגו' פנחס בן אלעזר ה'תשכ"ה בלתי מוגה

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POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE SELF-SACRIFICE

THE KABBALISTS TELL US THAT PINCHAS WAS A REINCARNATION OF NADAV AND AVIHU, the two sons of Aaron who died when they ecstatically brought 'strange fire' into the Sanctuary. The daring action of Pinchas, killing Zimri and his Midianite consort Kozbi, despite the threat that Zimri's followers may have retaliated, 'repaired' and put right the sin of Nadav and Avihu.

What was the 'sin' of Nadav and Avihu? The fact that they entered the Sanctuary as an expression of their intense spiritual enthusiasm. Jewish spirituality is depicted as generally having two modes: 'advance' and 'return'. Advance means reaching towards the holy and the spiritual, beyond the world. Return means coming back to daily reality. The ideal is to combine both. 'Advance' without 'return' is dangerous.

This was the problem with Nadav and Avihu. Their enthusiasm expressed 'advance' without a thought of 'return'. Hence their souls left them, and they died, as described in the Torah².

In this discourse the Rebbe asks two questions. First, how did the risky action of Pinchas atone for their sin? The Sages tell us that Zimri was the leader of the tribe of Shimon. As mentioned above, it was quite likely that his followers would immediately retaliate and kill Pinchas. This means that the action of Pinchas was seemingly just as risky as that of Nadav and Avihu. So in which way did he atone for them?

¹ Maamar *Vayedaber.. Pinchas ben Elazar* 5725, published in *Dvar Malchus Pinchas* 5776. The Hebrew text was not edited by the Rebbe.

² See *Sedra Shemini*, Leviticus 10:1-2.

Secondly, what is wrong with ‘self-sacrifice’ for a spiritual cause? The Sages tell us that when we say the Shema, it should be with such intensity that it is comparable to the surrender of one’s soul, including one’s physical life, to G-d. It is an expression of Mesirat Nefesh, ‘surrender of the soul’. This, they imply, is even higher than the observance of Mitzvot³.

Further, it is known that Rabbi Joseph Karo, the 16th century Sage who compiled the Shulchan Aruch, yearned to give his life in self-sacrifice for G-d. The spiritual ‘Maggid’ who taught him⁴ informed him that he would be burnt for Kiddush Hashem. But then, for a certain unknown spiritual reason, he did not merit this exalted end. So why are Nadav and Avihu criticised to the extent that a ‘repair’ (Tikkun) is needed for their ‘sin’?

The discourse explains that there are two kinds of self-sacrifice. One is for one’s own personal satisfaction in seeking the Infinite. The other is with a sense of dedication to G-d’s Will, going beyond personal desire.

This is illustrated by a comment by the Sages about the Shema. As we saw above, the Shema is an expression of Mesirat Nefesh. But the Sages say: ‘Why does the Shema (the 1st paragraph of the Shema) come before Vehaya (the 2nd paragraph of the Shema)? So that a person should first accept the yoke of the Kingdom of Heaven, and then accept the yoke of the Mitzvot’⁵. This means that one’s movement of ‘advance’ towards the Infinite should be complemented by the ‘return’ to the physical world and the observance of the Mitzvot.

The Talmud tells of the ‘four who entered Pardes’, the deepest secrets of the Torah. One of them, Ben Azai, ‘stared and died’⁶. This is ‘advance’ without ‘return’. It is not the path. By contrast, Rabbi Akiva ‘entered in peace and came out in peace’⁷. His ‘advance’ was in order to ‘return’. This means the ‘advance’ is not just because of a quest for personal satisfaction. It is in submission to a higher goal, which includes the task to return as well.

This was the error of Nadav and Avihu. Their spiritual longing was self-driven rather than self-transcending. Hence their death is considered a ‘sin’ which needs a Tikkun, repair.

This was accomplished by Pinchas. His action was necessary for the wellbeing of the Jewish people. At the same time it was dangerous and could have led to his death. But he took this action not with a death-lust, but with a desire to make sure that Judaism survived. At that moment, because of the Midianite girls and their idolatry, it was under threat. His desperate action saved it.

³ See Mishnah Berachot 2:2 (13a). Hence the Shema paragraph, concerning pure dedication to G-d, precedes the second paragraph, Vehaya, which focuses on the Mitzvot.

⁴ Rabbi Joseph Karo would recite Mishnah by heart and then a voice would speak from his own mouth, declaring ‘I am the Mishnah which is speaking from your mouth’. This Maggid, as it is called, would teach him and Rabbi Karo recorded the teachings in his book Maggid Mesharim.

⁵ Mishnah Berachot 2:2.

⁶ Hagigah 14b.

⁷ Jerusalem Talmud Hagigah 2:1.

Hence Pinchas, the reincarnation of Nadav and Avihu, achieved the Tikkun, the Repair of their error. This becomes a teaching for our own lives: the wholesome path is 'advance' and then 'return', and this double movement characterises Jewish teaching and Jewish life.

Torah teachings are holy – please treat these pages with care