

I think that all Yeshiva students who learned in Gateshead in the late 1960s could not have been but struck by the mussar shiurim given by Rav Matisyohu Salomon shlita, who expounded the negativities of ill traits of character with such intensity, that we who attended these shiurim did not know where to flee to get away from these obstructions found in every crevice and pothole, on the path to becoming pious G-d fearing Jews the way the Torah defines it. It was no easy matter getting there either-Rav Matisyohu quoted from Rav Yisroel Salanter that it is easier to learn the whole of Shass than to break one evil inclination to the point of its total eradication.

It now becomes all the more difficult to comprehend the actions of פנחס as expounded at the very end of last week's Parsha, on all fronts.

1. Is the killing of two persons in front of all בני ישראל appropriate behaviour and in keeping with a man who has worked all his life to invalidate all evil traits of character with which he is encumbered.
2. The reward פנחס receives is "בריתי שלום" "My covenant of peace" – how are we to reconcile what looks like an act of war bordering on barbarity with the Torah's description that פנחס is deserving of בריתי שלום.

Very frequently our questions might be answered in the form of a further query, the answer to which sheds light upon the original question.

We find קרה, a person who led בני ישראל in rebellion against the perceived nepotism implied in the leadership roles concentrated in משה רבינו and אהרן at the expense of the other branches in שבט לוי. He wanted no less than to depose משה who was from the עמרם branch of his tribe and to be appointed in his place thus bringing honour to the יצחק branch of the tribe – יצחק was the second of the four brothers born to קהת and therefore he קרה should rightly be appointed the נשיא of שבט לוי whereas the נשיא was appointed from the smallest of the brothers by Divine command.

How would we have expected משה to react? Surely משה the עניו מכל אדם "the most humble of all men" might have been expected to remain quiet out of a sense of humbleness or even more to abdicate in favour of a leader chosen democratically. But no...the very opposite transpired. משה prayed that a new creation be made by הקב"ה to swallow קרה and all his followers into the earth.

What is the lesson to be had from the actions of משה and פנחס? In breaking an ill trait of character it is not to eradicate it but to sublimate it into the service of הקב"ה. What was required of both משה and פנחס was to use all their energies to stamp out the sources of evil which were threatening the very fabric and future survival of עם ישראל.

In stark contrast, שמואל rebuked שאול המלך for not fully wiping out our greatest enemy when he said [שמואל א'] "even if you are small in your own eyes you are the Leader of Israel".

Let us hope that הקב"ה will have mercy upon us and guide those in authority in ארץ ישראל to perform what is required to erase once and for all those who are seeking new boundaries for ארץ ישראל commencing west of the Mediterranean coast.