

A Person Cannot Criticize Himself

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

Self-blame: is it useful? Take a lesson from Moses.

Why Cry

People like to cry. Not everyone, but most people feel relief and comfort after crying. There are tears of joy, like a father marrying off his daughter. Then there are tears of sadness, like someone mourning the loss of a loved one.

In the Torah we find examples of both kinds of crying. When Yosef and his brothers were reunited and the family was whole again, Yosef cried. He cried a second time when he embraced his father, Yaakov. Yaakov had a turn too; he cried when he first met Rochel, his wife.

There are also tears of sadness. When Aharon the Kohain passed away, the Torah says, "and all the Jews cried for him." The same is true about Moshe's passing.

This week, we read the story of Pinchas. The story actually begins at the end of the previous portion, Balak, where it says, "Israel settled in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moav," followed by "Israel became attached to Baal Peor."

Then the Torah tells us "Then an Israelite man came and brought the Midianite woman to his brethren, before the eyes of Moshe and before the eyes of the entire congregation of the children of Israel, while they were weeping..." Moshe cried!

The only other time we find in the Torah that Moshe cried was when Pharoah's daughter found him floating in the Nile, as it says "And she opened it...and behold there was a baby crying." Since then, we don't find anywhere that Moshe cried. But here, we are told that Moshe was crying. What happened that caused Moshe to cry?

Moshe had already seen and done everything. He fought with Pharoah, split the sea, fought with Amalek, suffered through the whole story with the spies, the uprising of Korach and his crowd and the most traumatic of all, the Sin of the

Golden Calf. Now, after 39 years of all this, we find Moshe crying?

True, there were members of the nation worshipping other G-ds—so Moshe should get up and restore order! And if some people are going out with Moavite girls, that's reason to cry? On the contrary, people look for a leader to get up and enforce order, not cry!

True Objectivity

The Rebbe says that Rashi gives us the answer to this question. Rashi says that Zimri son of Salu, a leader of the tribe of Shimon, brought Cozbi daughter of Zur before Moshe, in front of all the Jews. He asked “Moshe, is she forbidden or allowed? If you say forbidden, then who made the daughter of Yisro permissible to you?”

He was asking—why was it okay for Moshe but not the rest of the Jews. At that moment Moshe could no longer be objective; Zimri had made it personal, and therefore Moshe couldn't answer.

Certainly, Moshe had an answer for Zimri. He could have reminded Zimri that he and Tziporah had married before the giving of the Torah and they were now 40 years later, and that Tziporah had converted, etc.

But Moshe's answer wouldn't really matter. It wouldn't sound good, having Moshe defend himself when technically one shouldn't be believed in matters where he is not objective or has a personal interest. Any answer he gave would not be readily accepted. Everyone would say that he was only justifying and defending his own actions.

So, Moshe began to cry, not tears of joy or even sadness, but tears of helplessness.

A similar story comes up later in the Parsha. We read about the division of the land according to tribe and family. Then the daughters of Zelafchad come to Moshe and complain “Our father died in the desert.....and he had no sons. Why should our father's name be eliminated from his family because he had no sons? Give us his portion.”

Sons inherit their fathers' portions and Zelafchad had only daughters. So they

came to Moshe asking for their father's portion and the Torah tells us that Moshe brought their question before G-d. Moshe did not made a decision himself, but asked G-d. It seems like this is a simple matter: what is the Halacha in this situation? When there are no sons, only daughters, who inherits? Was this really something Moshe needed to ask G-d's help with? Is it possible that over 40 years this question never came up? Everyone had sons?

The Rebbe explains that when the daughters of Zelafchad came to Moshe with their complaint, they said, "Our father died in the desert," and then added, "and he wasn't among those who rebelled with Korach, he died of his own sin." They were clarifying that he hadn't joined forces with Moshe's enemies; he had died for different reasons. Moshe now felt that they were trying to bribe him with their words and he was, once again, no longer objective. Therefore, he did not want to make this decision on his own and turned it over to G-d.

Think about it: the story of Korach happened 39 years earlier, and what, after all, were the daughters telling him? Only that their father didn't join Korach's group. And even so, Moshe felt that he could no longer be objective and refrained from making the decision.

Don't Blame Yourself

What is the lesson for us from Moshe's behavior?

Halacha says that if a person comes to the Bais Din and admits that he murdered someone and deserves death, the Bais Din cannot believe him and cannot judge him solely on his own admission. The laws of our country would have him convicted and sent to prison, but halachically he is not to be believed. He is not objective and we cannot know the true reasons that he's blaming himself; perhaps he's depressed.

As the Rambam writes: "Perhaps he is from those who are depressed, who wait for death, who stick swords into their own stomachs or throw themselves from rooftops. Perhaps he is coming and admitting to something that he didn't do only in order that he be killed (as punishment)."

How can we relate this personally?

Many times, people blame themselves. If their children are not successful in life, they say, "If only I had done such and such, they would've been more successful." Sometimes it's blame for a fatal disease, "If only I had taken better care of him, he would still be alive today." People schlep around with them bundles of guilt and blame themselves for all the suffering in the world; if they had only behaved a little differently, things would be much better....

The Gemara comes and tells us "A person is close to himself" and that "A person cannot call himself wicked." You are not objective and so you cannot judge yourself. On the contrary, you need to listen to what the people around you are saying. They are more objective and will know that your behavior was as it should have been and that there was nothing you could have done to change anything. So instead of blaming yourself and carrying around guilt for the rest of your life, it would be better to accept that everything is divine providence and the will of G-d.