

“Are you Jewish?”

Category: Bamidbar, Pinchas

The unexpected experience of two Yeshivah boys in California.

G-d Forbid

This week, two yeshiva students visited Southern California. What exactly did yeshiva students lose in California?

When the Rebbe arrived in the USA in 1941, he directed Chabad yeshiva students to travel to small towns all over the world and find Jews who weren't connected to an established Jewish community. Since then, every summer, hundreds of Chabad yeshiva students travel to every location on the globe to meet Jews who, in many cases, have not had any Jewish connection for a long time.

Back in California this week, the local Chabad rabbi gave the yeshiva students a list of addresses of local Jews, and they went from address to address, introducing themselves and offering to put up mezuzahs, help people don tefillin, etc.

One afternoon, they chose to look for Jews in the city center. They walked up and down the main street, going in and out of offices and shops, but with no luck. Time passed, and they only met more and more non-Jews.

The sun was about to set and they decided to head back to the car, when they noticed two teenagers. They immediately asked them the famous Chabad question: “Excuse me, are any of you Jewish”?

Without missing a beat, one of them answered, “G-d forbid!”

Wow, they thought, that was definitely an unexpected answer.

Ignoring the outburst, they continued to their car which was parked a few blocks away.

As they sat in their car, they noticed someone approaching from a distance. Suddenly, they realized that it was the same youngster who had answered, “G-d forbid”!

They opened the car window, and he approached and apologized for his outburst.

“What exactly were you looking for?” he asked them. “Why did you want to know if I was Jewish?”

They explained what they were doing, and he admitted that he was, in fact, Jewish. He was an 18-year-old medical student living with his family in California, but he said that his parents were Israeli and that he had been raised in Jerusalem.

But he was very bitter towards Jews and religion.

As a child, he had befriended a Palestinian boy and they had become very close, but not long ago, that boy was hit during an Israeli attack on Gaza and killed... The incident broke his heart, and he was angry at both sides of the conflict. Since then, he told them, he doesn't want to see Jews or Muslims and has drifted away from any form of religion — and that was the reason for his harsh reaction.

The yeshiva students were shocked; they hadn't expected such a story.

They talked about his friend and had a friendly conversation, and of course, they offered him to put on tefillin. It was something he had never done before, and he immediately agreed, saying “Shema Yisrael” very emotionally.

He told them that he was very happy to meet them, because he had recently felt a longing to regain his faith; he had visited the local temple, but didn't find answers to his questions. He also tried to browse Barnes and Nobles, hoping to find something meaningful, but he didn't find what he was looking for there either.

The yeshiva students told him about the local chabad rabbi and gave him his info, and the next day, he reached out to make an appointment with him.

When Moses Lost It

Parshat Pinchas begins in the middle of a story.

The story began last week, in Parshat Balak, when — as you all remember — Balaam attempted to curse the Jewish people and instead was forced to bless them.

Balak was very disappointed with Balaam because he did not “deliver the goods,” and he voiced his displeasure quite openly. Perhaps to appease him, Balaam gave him a piece of advice before he left. “There is one way to cause trouble for the Jewish people,” he told Balak. He suggested that the Midianites and Moabites set up a flea-market; Jews, after all, are always willing to go shopping for a bargain, and when they arrive, Balaam said, they should be approached and seduced by the Moabite girls — who would cajole them to worship idols and bow down to Baal Peor.

The plan worked perfectly, just as Balaam predicted. The Jewish men went out with the Moabite & Midianite girls and worshiped idols with them. As a result, G-d was angered at the Jewish people and a plague broke out among the people (Pinchas 25:18 and in Rashi, Matos 31:16).

In the midst of all this commotion, the Torah tells that “A man from the Israelites came and brought a Midianite woman close to his brothers, in front of Moses and in front of the entire congregation of Israel; and they wept at the opening of the Tent of Meeting” (Balak 25:6).

What happened? Why was Moses crying? The man who stood up against the entire Jewish people when they sinned with the Golden Calf had suddenly lost his courage?

That man had come before Moses and asked, “Moses, is she forbidden or permitted? If you say she is forbidden, who gave you permission to marry Jethro’s daughter?” (Rashi).

Something very serious had happened here. This fellow comes to Moses and asks, “Am I allowed to marry this Midianite?” But before Moses had a chance to answer, he challenges, “What about you?” Moses’s wife Zipporah was the daughter of Jethro, a Midianite priest. “We can’t but you could?”

Moses obviously could have answered that his wife had converted, in addition to the fact that they had been married before the Torah was given. But as soon as this person had asked about Moses’ wife, Moses became personally implicated in the question; no matter what he would answer, it would sound like he was just trying to defend himself.

When that happened, Pinchas, the grandson of Aaron the High Priest, saw that

the Israelite man was attacking Moses and the sanctity of the Jewish people in a public defiant manner, he got up and killed them both — and the plague that caused the death of twenty-four thousand stopped.

Last week's parsha ended at this point in the story.

He Was a Jewish Guy

In our parsha, the Torah reveals the name of the couple who dared be so insolent to Moses, "And the name of the Israelite man who was beaten...Zimri ben Salu and the name of the woman who was beaten was Kozbi bat Tzur."

During one talk, the Rebbe cited a beautiful teaching from the Or Hachayim.

The Or Hachayim was written by a famous rabbi, Rabbi Chaim ben Eter, who lived 300 years ago in Morocco (who immigrated to Israel at the end of his life).

He writes a wonderful explanation.

On the verse, "The name of the Israelite man..." he points out that "even when a Jewish person does evil, he will ultimately return to his source. That's why the verse calls him, 'an *Israelite* man.' Despite the incident, he was still called a Jew [*bisheim yisrael yichuneh*]."

The Rebbe continues:

"Despite Zimri's implication in the story, and the results which affected twenty-four thousand people, nonetheless, he is still called a Jew" (Sichos Kodesh 5739 v. 3 p. 338).

The message is that every Jew — even one who practiced idolatry and caused a plague — always remains a Jew. He too, is called "an Israelite." As the verse says, *lo yidach mimenu nidach*; ultimately, no Jew will be lost to the Jewish people.

When you meet a Jew, don't judge him by the way he looks or the way he behaves. When you ask him if he is Jewish, he may answer, "G-d forbid"; but he too, has a Jewish soul throbbing inside him, that is thirsting for a bit of faith.