The Power of a Single Action: Thoughts on Parashat Pinehas

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Rabbi Daniel Harstein, a teacher in Yeshivat Lev HaTorah in Beit Shemesh, points out that throughout Sefer Bemidbar there are many individuals and small groups who had a huge impact on the community at large. At first, the Torah mentions those who changed the community for the worse. The spies created chaos and rebellion which doomed an entire generation to death in the wilderness. Korah caused an internal unrest over the leadership of Moshe. Bilaam, according to the Midrash, incited the Israelites to sin, leading to a plague that killed 24,000 people.

Beginning with Pinehas at the end of Parshat Balak, we finally see how one individual is capable of changing things for the good. By killing the flagrant sinners--Zimri son of Salu, a Prince of the tribe of Shimon, along with Cozbi--Pinehas, in this one act stopped the Israelites from their sins and ended the plague.

In Parshat Pinehas, there is another incident of a few individuals making a big change. In the beginning of Chapter 27, the Torah relates the story of the daughters of Tzelafchad. Tzelafchad had five daughters and no sons, so upon his death, there were no sons to receive his inheritance. His daughters approached Moshe and the other leaders of Israel to ask for a portion in the land of Israel as inheritance. Moshe turned to Hashem to resolve this issue, and was told: “The daughters of Tzelafchad speak properly.” Rashi (27:1) points out that these women were righteous and held the land (of Israel) to be precious; this is why they desired to have a portion in the land of Israel.

Rabbi Yoni Levin, assistant Rabbi of Congregation Aish Kodesh, quotes another comment of Rashi (26:64) that after the sin of the spies, the Israelite women were not punished with death in the wilderness as the men were because the women of Israel held the land to be precious. The men of Israel said they wanted to go back to Egypt after the incident of the spies, but the women asked for a possession in the land.

How do we get from the daughters of Tzelafchad loving the land to all the women of Israel loving the land?

Rabbi Levin answers that the single action of these five daughters of Tzelafchad had a ripple effect of inspiration, making the other women realize their love for Israel, which ultimately saved the entire generation of women from being punished.

Every individual is capable of performing acts of great good and great evil; everyone is capable of causing great influence and making great change. However, changing the world does not always have to be the end goal. Doing good deeds can still be tremendously impactful on the micro level. Acts as seemingly trivial as greeting a neighbor with a smile or holding the door for a stranger can completely turn around someone's day.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan, the Chafetz Chayim was asked how he became such a big influence on the Jewish community, to which he responded: "Originally, I set out to change the world, but I failed. So I decided to scale back my efforts and only influence the Jewish community of Poland, but I failed there, too. So I targeted the community of my hometown of Radin, but I achieved no greater success. Then I gave all my effort to changing my own family and I failed at that as well. Finally, I decided to change myself and that's how I had such an impact on the Jewish world."

The Chafetz Chayim teaches us that it is not always possible to save an entire generation from punishment in one moment, but everyone at any time is capable of doing something positive, which over time, can have a great effect.