

Maamarei Mordechai

הסבר לפי ממש פשוט

Parshas Matos - Maasei – 5783

D. Mordechai Schlachter

Moshe commands Bnei Yisroel to seek vengeance.

וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-הָעָם לֵאמֹר הִחַלְצוּ מֵאִתְּכֶם אַנְשִׁים לְצַבָּא וַיְהִיו עַל-מִדְיָן לְתֵת נִקְמַת-
יְהוָה בְּמִדְיָן:

“And Moshe spoke to the nation saying, ‘Enact troops from among you of qualified men for battle, and they should go upon Midyan, to go and avenge Hashem in Midyan.’” (Bamidbar 31:3).

Why did Moshe seek vengeance on Midyan while Moav was also complicit in causing Bnei Yisroel to err? Were they spared simply because they were Moav or did Midyan do something else? How can Moshe ask that Bnei Yisroel strike Midyan when he owed *hakaros hatov* to Midyan who took him in when he ran from Pharaoh?

This week’s parsha is full of lessons in personal responsibility. When judging when a wrong is done it is important to judge who did the wrong and who is really at fault. An example is when a person vows. That person must fulfill that vow. (Ibid 30:3). However, the Torah allows others a father to nullify his daughter’s vow (ibid 30:5) and a husband to nullify his wife’s vow (ibid 30:9). However, should they remain quiet, the vow stands. (Ibid 30:12). There is personal responsibility but there is also obligation on the father and husband to check that obligation.

When the warriors came back from victory in striking Midyan, Moshe was upset that they left the women alive. (Ibid 31:15). Yet, the women were the ones that caused Bnei Yisroel to sin, not the men, so vengeance should have been primarily directed at them. (Ibid 31:16). וַתְּהִי הַמַּגֵּפָה “they caused the plague.” (Ibid). Bnei Yisroel did sin with Moav’s idol. (25:5). However, that was only incidental to what caused the plague. The plague was caused by Midyanim. (Ibid 25:18). How does this reconcile with the pesukim that seem to blame Moav?

When the warriors came back from defeating Midyan, the second time – this time killing the women, too – Moshe told them they were all as if tameh and could not reenter the camp. Moshe uses the word תִּתְחַטְּאוּ “you have sinned” instead of tameh. (Ibid 31:19). Just as a person who is tameh mes – impure from contact with a dead body – these soldiers had to observe the seven days of quarantine and purify on the third and seventh day. (Ibid). On the seventh day they can purify themselves, wash their clothes and become pure, and reenter the camp. (Ibid 31:24). Moshe uses the word וַיִּטְהַרְתֶּם “and you’ll purify” not the word you’ll be absolved. The terms do not match. It says sin and purify instead of tamen and tahor or sin and absolved. This is because Moshe was teaching them responsibility. A war commanded by Hashem against gentiles will not make one tameh. However, they made themselves impure by not following the guidelines of the war. Their compassion had no place here. Hashem said take vengeance, then the women should not

have been spared. Thus, they sinned in their compassion which resulted in their status of being impure, so they had to get purified – not forgiven. They already fixed their wrong by killing all the women. (Ibid 31:18). They merely had to go through the purity process as their atonement. (Ibid 31:19).

Reuven and Gad were taught responsibility, too. They asked for land on the Transjordan plains. (32:5). Moshe was incensed and denied this request. (Ibid 32:15). He pointed out that they learned nothing from the sin of the scouts and the forty-year punishment of wandering and an entire generation having to die out. (Ibid 32:13). They learned from their error and approached Moshe again, later. They would first fight for the Land of Israel and then return to these lands, Transjordan. (Ibid 32:17). At this, Moshe concedes. (Ibid 32:24).

Murderers must be executed. (Ibid 35:16). However, an inadvertent murderer should be spared. (Ibid 35:25). He can run to the sanctuary cities, ir miklat. (Ibid 35:26). Still, kin of the victim can still exact blood vengeance and be free from liability. (Ibid 35:27). This teaches that while all murder may be avenged, an inadvertent actor has a haven. However, he must run to the sanctuary and must remain there until the Kohen Gadol dies. (Ibid 35:26). Even if inadvertent, taking something so precious from someone else has a responsibility on the taker.

Midyan was really at fault. Balaam was put to death. (Ibid 31:8). Yet Balak was spared. Balak, became a baal teshuva and a convert. (See ibid 24:25). וַיָּקָם בַּלְעָם וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיֵּשֶׁב. “And Balaam returned to his place and, also, Balak went on his way.” (Ibid). While Balaam returned to his place, continuing to be evil, Balak set himself on a path of redemption. That is how Moshe was able to record the story. The parsha of Balak is the only portion of the Torah (from Shmos) that he would not have had firsthand knowledge of. He knew, because Balak did teshuva, converted, and thus, was spared.

Moavi women initiated and enticed Bnei Yisroel. (Ibid 25:1). And that angered Hashem. (Ibid 25:3). וְהָיָה אִישׁ מִבְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כִּי יִקְרַב אֶל-אֶחָיו אֶת-הַמְדַּנִּית לְעֵינֵי מִשֶּׁה וּלְעֵינֵי כָל-עֵדוּת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל וְהָיָה בְּלִים פֶּתַח אֶהָל מוֹעֵד: “Behold! An important man from Bnei Yisroel came and he brought close to his kin a “Midyan woman,” to the eyes of Moshe and the eyes of the entire assembly of Bnei Yisroel. And they were crying at the entrance to the Ohel Moed.” (Ibid 25:6). Behold – the circumstances were aggravated. It was not just Moavi women and idol worship. Behold, Midyan was involved. Bnei Yisroel was mourning the plague that was caused by Midyan. (Ibid 25:18). It appeared to be Moavi women who instigated but really Balaam and Midyan were behind the entire matter. (Ibid 31:16). Balak, the king of Moav, repented. Balaam got Midyan to keep contesting. And it was in public “in the eyes of.” Pinchas followed Moshe’s call to strike the leaders (ibid 25:4) and struck down a leader (ibid 25:8).

Twenty-four thousand died in that plague. (Ibid 25:9). Moshe did have hakaros hatov (gratitude) to Midyan. The country took him in. (Shmos 2:15). Yisro took him in (ibid 2:20) and gave him his wife (ibid 2:21). This vengeance was not his, though. This vengeance was Hashem’s. לֵתֵת נִקְמַת-יְיָ לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּמִדְיָן: “Go and take Hashem’s vengeance in Midyan.” (Ibid 31:3). He was not showing any ingratitude toward Midyan. He was balancing the tally of responsibility.