

Zera Shimshon

by Rabbi Shimshon Chaim Nachmani zt"l

Published Mantua 1778*

Chapter XLII: Matot (Num. 30:2–32:42)

Essay 5. Whose vengeance was it?

מְדַרְשׁ רַבָּה עַל פְּסוּק "לְתַתּוּ נִקְמַת־הָ בְּמִדְיָן", הַקַּב"ה אָמַר "נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל" וּמִשָּׁה אָמַר "נִקְמַת־הָ בְּמִדְיָן". אָמַר הַקַּב"ה לָהֶם אֵינּוּ אֵלָּא דִּיקוּ שְׁלִכְכֶם, שְׁגַרְמוּ לִי לְהִזִּיק אֶתְכֶם. אָמַר מֹשֶׁה רַבּוֹן הָעוֹלָמִים, אִם הָיִינוּ עֲרָלִים אוֹ עוֹבְדֵי עֲבוּדָה זָרָה, אוֹ כּוֹפְרֵי מִצְוֹת, לֹא הָיוּ שׁוֹנְאִים אוֹתָנוּ וְאֵינָן רוֹדְפִין אַחֲרֵינוּ אֵלָּא בְּשִׁבִיל תּוֹרָה וּמִצְוֹת שֶׁנִּתְּנָה לָנוּ, הַלִּכְפָּה הַנִּקְמָה שְׁלָךְ "לְתַתּוּ נִקְמַת הָ בְּמִדְיָן" עַכ"ל. צָרִיךְ עֵיוֹן מְאִי בִּינְיָהוּ וּמָה אֵיכָפֶת לִיהָ לְמִשָּׁה אִם הַקַּב"ה אוֹמֵר "נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל".

There is a **Midrash Rabbah** on the verse, “**to take the vengeance of the L-rd on Midian**” (Num. 31:3).

The Holy One, Blessed be He, had said, “Avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel on the Midianites [then you shall be gathered to your people]” (Num. 31:2), but [in repeating the command to the people,] Moses had said, “the vengeance of the L-rd on Midian.” The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them, “[The vengeance] is *your* satisfaction for being injured, because they caused Me to harm *you* [i.e., through the plague that killed 24,000 Israelites].” [But] Moses said, “Master of the world, if we had been uncircumcised, or idol worshippers, or had denied [the binding force of] the commandments, [the Midianites] would not have hated us and wouldn’t have pursued us. But [they have done so precisely] because of the Torah and commandments which You gave us. The vengeance, therefore, is Yours,” “to render the vengeance of the L-rd against Midian.”

- Num. Rabbah 22:2

We need to study what practical difference there is between the two statements, and what difference it made to Moses if the Holy One, Blessed be He, said “the vengeance of the Children of Israel.”

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ואיתא במדרש ילקוט על פסוק "וַיְדַבֵּר יְהוָה אֵלַי לְשׁוֹן עֵז, וְלָמָּה דִּבַּר עַמּוֹ בְלִשׁוֹן עֵז, לִפְנֵי שְׂלֵא מִיָּחָה בְּשִׁבְטוֹ שֶׁל שְׁמֵעוֹן וְכוּ', עָלֶיךָ אָמַר הַכֹּתוּב "הַתְּרַפִּית בְּיוֹם צָרָה צָר כְּתוּבָה", וְנָהוּ "אַחַר תִּאֲסָף אֶל־עַמִּיךָ". דָּבַר אַחַר לָמָּה דִּבַּר עַמּוֹ בְלִשׁוֹן עֵז שֶׁהִנֵּה הַקַּב"ה מְבַקֵּשׁ עֲלֵבוֹנָן שֶׁל יִשְׂרָאֵל מִיַּד מִדְיָן וְכוּ' וְקִשָּׁה עַל הַקַּב"ה שֶׁקָּנַס מִיתָה עַל מִנְשָׁה וְכוּ' עכ"ל.

There is a Midrash Yalkut Shimoni on the verse, “The L-rd spoke to Moses, saying, Avenge the vengeance of the Israelites on the Midianites.”

[The word] ‘spoke’ [vaydaber] [וַיְדַבֵּר] is only used as a harsh utterance, and why did [G-d] speak with [Moses] as a harsh utterance? Because he didn’t rebuke the tribe of Shimon.¹ The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to him, “At the time that all Israel stood on one side, at the hour of the [Golden] Calf, you had only the Tribe of Levi with, and yet you stood and rebuked all of Israel.² But now that all of Israel is with you, except off to one side there is the Tribe of Shimon, you can’t rebuke them?³ **About you, Scripture says, ‘You showed yourself slack in time of trouble, wanting in power’ (Prov. 24:10), and this is [the meaning of] “then you shall be gathered to your kin (Num. 31:2).”**⁴

Another interpretation: Why did [G-d] speak with [Moses] in a harsh utterance? Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted Israel to receive satisfaction for their injury at the hand of Midian, therefore He said to Moses, “Avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel on the Midianites, then you shall be gathered to your kin” (Num. 31:2).”

It is difficult [to understand] that the Holy One, Blessed be He, imposed the penalty of death on Moses. He said, “As long as Moses exists, even though Israel has angered Me and I want to destroy them, Moses rises and prostrates before Me and requests mercy for them,” as it is said, “Pardon, I pray, the iniquity of this people” (Num. 14:19), “And the L-rd said, ‘I pardon, as you have asked’ (Num.

¹ Chapter 1 of Numbers reports that in the second year after the Exodus, the tribe of Shimon numbered 59,300. In chapter 25, many Israelite men engaged in illicit activities with Moabite women, and worshipped their god. Zimri, a prince of Shimon, had a very public affair with a Midianite woman, and Pinchas killed them both in a moment of zealotry. Because of the immorality and idolatry, G-d visited a plague on the Israelites that killed 24,000 people, but the plague stopped because of Pinchas’s actions. In chapter 26, a second census at the end of the 40 years in the wilderness showed that the tribe of Shimon numbered only 22,200! Rashi comments on Num. 26:13 that the great drop in population must mean that all of the 24,000 Israelites who had perished from the plague were from the tribe of Shimon.

² Ex. 32:19–30.

³ In Num. 25:5, Moses instructed the judges to execute their people who had engaged in illicit relations and idolatry with the Moabites. Sanhedrin 82a says that Zimri then went to the Midianite woman, and brought her to Moses, saying, “Is this woman forbidden or permitted? If you say forbidden, as for the [Midianite] daughter of Jethro [to whom you are married], who permitted her to you?” Moses was so shocked by the brazen actions of Zimri that he forgot the halacha of how to respond. It was up to Pinchas to zealously kill Zimri and the Midianite.

⁴ In our edition of Yalkut Shimoni, the quotation of the end of Num. 31:2, “then you shall be gathered to your kin,” does not appear after the quotation of Prov. 24:10, but after the following point. This translator has shown it in both places.

14:20).” “He would have destroyed them had not Moses, His chosen one, [confronted Him . . .] (Ps. 106:23).”

- Yalkut Shimoni, Num. Remez 785:23

ולפי זה הקב"ה אמר "נקמת בני ישראל" כלומר הואיל שנהם גרמו שימותו מכם וגרמו לכם תקלה ראויים הם למות. וממילא נשמע שאף משה ראוי לו למות, שגם הוא הנה גרמא בגזיקין לפי טעם הראשון של מדרש ילקוט שנהיה לו למחות ולא מיחה. ולכן דניק הפתוב לומר "נקם נקמת בני ישראל מאת המדינים" ואחרי זה גם אתה צריך להאסף אל עמך כדי שלא יהיה משוא פנים בדין. דבשלקמא אם לא הייתי עושה נקמה במדינים היינו אומרים שישראל לא היה להם לחטוא משום דדברי הרב, ודברי התלמיד, דברי מי שומעין. וממילא גם אתה הית פטור מדין זה, שיהי כפר למדת להם דעת הרב והחובה המוטלת עליהם לשמוע דברי הרב ונקא.

According to this, the Holy One, Blessed be He, said “the vengeance of the Children of Israel,” that is, since they caused some of you to die, and caused you trouble, they deserve to die.” In any case, we hear that even Moses deserved to die, that he too was a cause of the harm according to the first reason of the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni, in that he should have rebuked the Tribe of Shimon but did not rebuke them. Therefore, the Scripture is accurate to say, “Avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel on the Midianites,” and after this, you too need to be gathered to your people, so that there will be no prejudice in the law [i.e., no appearance of favoritism].

It’s as if G-d is saying, **“Granted, if I had not enacted vengeance against the Midianites, people would say that Israel shouldn’t have sinned [i.e., that Israel was solely responsible for the incident], because, as it says in the Talmud, ‘Who should one listen to? The words of the master, or the words of the student?’⁵ [Obviously one should heed the master. The point is that Moses had previously told the people not to engage in illicit relations with idolators. They understood that was the word of G-d, and that G-d was the Master, and Moses was only the student. So even if Moses had forgotten the law now that he was brazenly challenged by Zimri, such that Moses wasn’t offering any rebuke, the people should have still “listened to the words of the Master,” i.e., G-d, to recognize that Zimri deserved death.] In any case, you too, Moses, were exempt from punishment, since you had already taught them the opinion of the Rabbi [i.e., the Law of G-d] and the duty incumbent on them to precisely hear the words of the Rabbi [i.e., G-d].”**

But since G-d did decide to enact vengeance against the Midianites, the equation has changed such that Israel doesn’t get the entire blame, but does get part of the blame, and Moses also deserves some blame for not stopping this incident from getting as bad as it became.

⁵ Bava Kamma 56a; Sanhedrin 29a.

ומיד כְּשִׁשְׁמַע מֹשֶׁה כִּד אָמַר לְפָנָיו, רַבּוֹנוֹ שֶׁל עוֹלָם, וְכִי אַתָּה קוֹנֵם עָלַי מִיַּתָּה בְּשִׁבִיל שְׂלֵא מַחֲיִיתִי, וְהֵלֵא אֲדַרְבָּא כֹּל שְׁנֵאֲתָן שֶׁל מְדִינָיִם, לֹא הִיָּתָה אֵלָּא מִפְּנֵי שִׁשְׁרָאֵל שׁוֹמְרֵינן הַמִּצְוֹת? וְלָמָּה שׁוֹמְרֵי הַמִּצְוֹת? עַל כְּרִתָּה צָרִיד לֵאמֹר שְׂאֲנִי תַמִּיד מוֹכִיחֵן וּמְדַרְיֵן בְּדָרְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל, וּבְשִׁבִיל זֶה נִשְׁתַּדְּלוּ לְהַחֲטִיאֵם. וְאִם כֵּן, הוּא "נִקְמַת־הִ" וְאִין לִי לְמוֹת בְּשִׁבִיל כֶּךָ, וְאֲדַרְבָּא הִנֵּה לָךְ לְעֲזָרְנִי, שְׂלֵא תִתְעַלֵּם מִמְּנֵי הַהֲלָכָה כְּדִאֲמַרְיֵנוּ, דְּבַר שְׁנַצְטַעַר בּוֹ אוֹתוֹ צְדִיק אֵינּוּ רְאוּי שִׁיכְשַׁל בּוֹ זְרַעוֹ, וּמְכַל שְׁכּוֹן אִיהוּ גּוֹפִיָּה, שְׁטַרְחַתִּי כְּמָה טְרַחוֹת כְּדִי לְהוֹכִיחַ אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל וּלְלַמְּדָם תּוֹרָה וּלְהַדְרִיכֵם בְּדָרְךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל.

As soon as Moses heard this, he said before him, “Master of the Universe, since you are punishing me with death because I didn’t rebuke the tribe of Shimon, isn’t it true, that to the contrary, all the hatred of the Midianites against us was only because Israel kept the commandments?” In other words, the Midianites allied with the Moabites, both of which hated Israel for keeping the Torah, and they had their women seduce the Israelite men in an attempt to have them turn toward idolatry. Zimri, the prince of Shimon, had engaged in a very public affair with a Midianite woman, and he said that Moses was not in a position to forbid Midianite women to the Israelites, for Moses himself was married to a Midianite woman.⁶ G-d was mad at Moses for not rebuking the Tribe of Shimon after this, and Moses responded that the entire trouble had started because the enemies hated the Israelites for observing the Torah.

“Why do we keep the commandments? It must be said that I always reprove those who sin, and guide people in a straightforward path, and because of that [the Midianites] endeavored to entice [Israel] to sin. If so, it is ‘the vengeance of the L-rd,’ and I do not have to die for it; rather, you should have helped me, that the law [about how to handle Zimri] should not have been lost from me,⁷ as it says, ‘[regarding] the [very] thing from which that righteous man had suffered, it’s not proper for his descendants to fail in [this thing],⁸ and in any regard [the righteous man] himself [i.e., Moses], for I expended much effort in order to reprove Israel and to teach them Torah and to lead them in a straight path.”

⁶ Sanhedrin 82a.

⁷ Sanhedrin 82a explains that Moses did not know what to do, because he had forgotten the law. Pinchas remembered it, reminding Moses that he had taught, “One who has intercourse with an Aramean woman is to be dispatched by a zealot.” Moses responded to Pinchas, “The reader of the letter should be the executer of the task.”

⁸ Bava Kamma 50a: Nechunya was a digger of pits, ditches, and caves, who would dig, open, and transfer them to the public, so that there would be wells of water for public use. One day, his daughter fell into a large cistern and no one could extract her. They came to “Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa [so that he would pray on her behalf]. When the first hour [had passed from the time of her fall], he said to them: [She is at] peace [and unharmed]. [After the] second [hour], he said to them: [She is at] peace. [After the] third [hour], he said to them: She has ascended. They said to her: Who brought you up? She said to them: A male sheep happened [to come] to me, and a certain old man [i.e., Abraham] was leading it [and he pulled me out]. They said to Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa: Are you a prophet? He said to them: ‘I am no prophet, neither am I a prophet’s son’ (Amos 7:14), but this [is what] I said [to myself]: Shall the offspring of that righteous man [i.e., Nechunya] stumble by means of [the very] matter which distressed that righteous man?”

אֵלֶּא וְדַאי צָרִיךְ לִזְמֵר שֶׁהַטַּעַם שֶׁנִּתְעַלְמָה מִפְּנֵי שֶׁהַשְּׁעָה הִיְתָה עֹמְדָת לְפָנֶיחַס דְּוִקָא, כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתָבוּ הַמְּקוּבָּלִים וְאִינִי רָאוּי לְעוֹנֵשׁ כָּלֵל. וְאִי מִשּׁוּם שֶׁנִּשְׁאַתִּי צְפוּרָה שֶׁהִיְתָה מְדִינִית וְזֶה גָּרַם לְזִמְרִי לְחַטּוֹא, הֲלֵא עַל פִּי הַדִּיבּוּר נִשְׁאַתִּיה וּרְאוּיָה הִיְתָה לִי מִשְׁשֵׁת יְמֵי בְּרֵאשִׁית כְּמוֹ שֶׁכְּתָבוּ הַמְּקוּבָּלִים. אֵלֶּא וְדַאי שֶׁצָּרִיךְ לִזְמֵר שֶׁזֶּה הִיא "נִקְמַת־הַ" דְּוִקָא.

Moses continued his self-defense: **“But surely it must be said that the reason that the halacha was hidden before me [as to how to handle Zimri] was because the time was specifically right for Pinchas to take action,” as the Kabbalists wrote** (in Siftey Cohen on the Torah, parashat Balak) **“and I do not deserve punishment at all. It’s not the fact that I married Zipporah, who was Midianite, that caused Zimri to sin, for isn’t it said that I married her and she was fit for me from the six days of Creation,” as the Kabbalists wrote?**⁹ **“Rather, certainly it’s necessary to say that this was precisely ‘the vengeance of the L-rd.’ ”**

וְאֶפְשָׁר שֶׁזֶּה הִיא כְּוִנַּת הַמְּדַרְשׁ "דְּבָר אַחַר" וְכוּ' וְקוֹשֶׁה לְפָנֵי הַקַּב"ה שֶׁקָּנַס מִיְתָה עַל מִנְשָׁה מִפְּנֵי שֶׁמִּנְשָׁה יָשׁ לֹו טַעַם וְסִבְרָא לְהִתְנַצֵּל וּלְהַצִּיל עַצְמוֹ.

It’s possible that this was the intent of the Midrash when it said, **“Another matter: Why did [G-d] speak with [Moses] in a harsh utterance? Because the Holy One, Blessed be He, wanted Israel to suffer a personal injury at the hand of Midian.” It is difficult for the Holy One, Blessed be He, to impose the penalty of death on Moses, because Moses had the sense and wisdom to apologize and to try to save himself.**

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⁹ Rabbi Menachem Azaria da Fano (“Rema M’Pano”) (1548–1620), Italian Kabbalist and commentator on the Talmud, in Asara Ma’amarot (“Ten Utterances”) (Venice, 1597), Ma’amar Chakor Din, section 5, perek 9.