

DON'T TOUCH THE CHILDREN

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Take revenge for the Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites...." Moshe spoke to the people, saying, "Arm men from among yourselves...to inflict Hashem's vengeance upon Midian."

Be'er Mayim Chaim: The contradiction in these pesukim is apparent, and has attracted the attention of many commentators. Whose vengeance was it, after all? Who was the injured party, so to speak? Was it the Bnei Yisrael who needed to avenge the deaths of those who died as a consequence of the Midianite plot at Baal Pe'or, or was it Hashem's honor that was impugned, and had to be restored?

Here are my thoughts. We note that from time immemorial, other nations have chafed at the claim of Jewish specialness, and sought ways to undo it. They have tried to disrupt the connection between Yisrael and the Torah with its mitzvos, something that would make our people no different than all other peoples. Persecutions and bans against observance attempted to interfere with the closeness between Hashem and His people. (Lurking behind this was a consequence of the relationship with Am Yisrael that they stubbornly resisted. If the selection of Yisrael was connected to His giving us Torah and mitzvos, then in some way their own fortunes were dependant upon the behavior of this strange people and their observance of the Torah. This was intolerable to them; they worked assiduously to reverse the dependency, and make the Jewish people subservient to and dependant upon them, rather than the other way around.) They sought to do this by making observance difficult, if not impossible. If the Jews would not observe, then they would be discarded by G-d, and the nations could ignore them.

The strategy, if not the thinking itself, was fatally flawed. A mashal will explain why.

A servant of the king gained his favor through his musical ability. He was able to soothe the king's spirits, and the king became dependant upon him, and drew him close to him.

Other servants became jealous of this bond. One of them grabbed the musician, and maimed his arm, ending his ability to play. The king treated this, of course, as a major crime. He did not, however, treat it as an eternal crime. In time, the king replaced the injured musician with another. The original musician, no longer able to serve the king in any meaningful way, was forgotten by the king as the years past.

Imagine, however, if the musician were also the king's son. The son frequently performed before his father, to his great delight. A minister, jealous of the closeness, seized the prince and maimed him, in an attempt to end the king's closeness with the son and leave a void that he could fill in the son's stead.

The strategy would be a complete error. The love of the father for his son would not diminish; the king's anger would know no bounds.

So it is with the Jewish people. Were we simply servants of G-d and not His children, the attempts of other peoples to shunt us aside, to replace us in His favor, would not be quite as terrible as they are. In fact, though, He does regard us as His children. (This is the real intent of the phrase "Bnei Yisrael." All of Yisrael are His children.)

The Midianites made this mistake. They understood that G-d detests licentious behavior. They were willing to disgrace their daughters to entrap the Bnei Yisrael in behavior that would compromise the relationship between themselves and HKBH. Ensnaring the Jews in sin is the analogue to maiming the hand of the musician-servant.

Midian did not count on a different relationship between Hashem and the Bnei Yisrael - one of Father and children. Thus, "Take vengeance for the Bnei Yisrael," underscoring the word bnei/children. Because of this relationship, such vengeance is at the same time "Hashem's vengeance." Hurting His children is, *kivayachol*, a way of hurting Him. It follows that their vengeance is also His vengeance.

"O G-d of vengeance, Hashem; O G-d of vengeance, appear."² Vengeance appears twice here, corresponding to the two types we have spoken of: our vengeance and His. When He appears on the scene to avenge some slight to His people, He is also a G-d of vengeance a second time, reciprocating against the pain to Himself.

Sources:

1. Based on Be'er Mayim Chaim, Bamidbar 31:2
 2. Tehillim 94:1
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