

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

"War," said General Sherman, "is not the glory that boys make of it." He termed it even worse; the antithesis of Heaven. The ramifications of conflict transcend the battlefield, often impacting the lives of civilians and neutral parties in ways that are both unpredictable and terminal.

In this week's portion, Moshe is commanded to wage war against Midian, the nation whose daughters seduced the Israelites into a quagmire of sin and Divine retribution. If Hashem asks His nation to war, victory should be assured, yet this war would have devastating ramifications that would not occur through failure on the battlefield, but rather with the success of victory.

Hashem speaks: "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people" (Numbers 31:2).

The term "gathered unto your people," does not refer to a victory parade where people gather to pay homage to a victorious conqueror. Rather it means the same thing as it meant when the Torah tells us about many of our forebears. "And he gathered unto his people and he died."

Yes, Moshe was told to fight a battle for the sake of Israel's honor and then he would die. This battle was to be his last. With mission in life accomplished, and the shell of his holy body would be interred while his soul would join his Heavenly father in Heaven.

Though success on the battlefield would be his death knell, Moshe did not tarry. Immediately, in the verse after the critical directive, "Moses spoke to the people, saying, 'Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midian.'" (Ibid v. 3) Moshe did not tarry nor did he bide his time with strategic planning. He prepared his nation in prompt fashion for what would be his final battle. What is interesting to note, however, is that despite the fact that Moshe's command was immediate and succinct it differed slightly from the original directive that Hashem issued.

Hashem said, "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites." Moshe said, "to inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midian." Why did Moshe change the directive?

There is a legend told about a certain Rabbi, who was constantly tormented by the prime minister of a despot nation.

"All right, Rabbi," he taunted, "you seem to have the answer to everything. Since you are so smart," he smirked, "tell me, dear Rabbi, when will you die?"

The Rabbi knew he was in a bind. If he were to identify a date in the distant future, the king could immediately prove him wrong with a call to the executioner. Of course, if he predicted an imminent demise, the angry king would surely fulfill it.

The Rabbi, thought for a few moments and then, with a vision of clairvoyance, he smiled.

"I do not know the exact date your honor, but I can assure you one thing: I will die one day before you."

Needless to say, the Prime Minister, made every effort to keep the good Rabbi alive for a very long time.

When Moshe was told about the directive to wage war, he moved with gusto. He gathered the troops, appointed Pinchus as a general, and motivated his army for the war that would precede his own demise.

But to the people who knew of G-d's directive in its entirety it seemed almost like a death sentence. Why should they fight, knowing that as soon as they avenged their honor and accomplished the mission, the missive of Hashem will be fulfilled and Moshe would die?

Therefore, explains the Malbim, Moshe told the nation, "We are not doing this for your honor." He knew that if it was for the Jews' honor they would have tarried in their mission while knowing the deadly toll their success would have on their beloved leader. And so "Moshe spoke to the people, saying, "Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem's vengeance against Midian" (Numbers 31:3).

Perhaps for human honor, Moshe could have stayed his demise. The people would have even laid down their arms and not fought, despite the humiliation they received through Midian. However, when the honor of Hashem is at stake, then no mortal impediment, not even the passing of the world's greatest leader, can stand in the way.

Good Shabbos

Dedicated by Mr. and Mrs. Zevi Silberstein In memory of Yecheil Aryeh ben Reb Shabsi Zev — 3 Tammuz

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