

CLASS 16 - MATTOS-MASEI

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

The shiur this week has been dedicated once again by Dennis and Robin Berman of Potomac, Maryland in memory of Robin's parents, Sara bat Yehuda v Malka and Nachum ben Yisrael v Sara. May the Torah learning be in their zchut. Thank you very much!

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take the revenge of the B'nai Yisrael from the Midianites, after which, you will be gathered in to your nation."

"And Moshe spoke to the nation, saying: bring forth from yourselves men for the army, who will come upon Midian, to give the revenge of G-d upon Midian." (Bamidbar 31,1-3)

Does G-d need vengeance?

Revenge is retribution, taking payment for damage done. G-d cannot be harmed, nor can His will be stymied, so what can be achieved by reprisal on His behalf?

In our shiur this week we will answer this question, demonstrating why the world waits anxiously for G-d's revenge.

1

Why is revenge so sweet? Why is it so difficult to refrain from the opportunity to cause an enemy harm?

The Torah describes the obligation to exact revenge from a murderer, one whose act was intentional and premeditated.

"And do not flatter the land that you are in, for blood flatters the land, and the earth will not atone for the blood that was spilled in it, except with the blood of the murderer." (Bamidbar 35, 33)

How can land be flattered?

"The wicked murderers flatter the earth, giving it something to swallow....Giving something undeserved, in order that the recipient, in turn, gives you something as well, is flattery. And so too, the earth flatters the wicked, giving produce and all their needs, which come forth from the earth, and also a place to live, and build themselves, although the wicked do not deserve any of this." (Kli Yakar, ad. loc.)

Flattery means providing a benefit that is disproportionate to the recipient's merits. This behavior is

inappropriate and unjustified, for reward should be in direct correlation with one's deeds.

The earth, and all of Olam HaZeh, are responsible for reflecting the will of G-d in the physical dimension of this world. By sustaining the wicked, life's true aim is distorted, and evildoers are given an undeserved place in existence.

How can one man kill another?

Man naturally sees himself as the center of existence, relating to the world around him as a tool for his own advancement. There is truth to this perspective, for each man is a world unto itself, relating to G-d from an inner dimension that only he shares. But, though helpful at times, this attitude can also inflate man's view of his own place in life, and he sometimes forgets that he is merely part of greater mankind.

At its heart, the essence of murder is the sense that the victim's very existence is subject to his oppressor's discretion. A killer views all of life as his private domain, traveling across G-d's land as if were his own.

For this, the earth must take revenge.

Man has no right to destroy another. It cannot be.

Man can flatter the earth for only so long. Ultimately, the earth must right itself, expressing the unity that defines its existence. While those who stoop to flattery create an imaginary, self-centered dimension, life is destined to reveal the G-d of Heaven and Earth, sanctifying His name.

True revenge rights a wrong and makes it whole. A persecuted man senses a deficiency in his very existence, hence the need to rectify the injustice. Revenge is sweet for it repairs the damage to one's self, restoring the pride and self-esteem of a healthy human being.

2

G-d remains forever whole, and nothing can truly sully His name.

The need for Divine revenge is not self-imposed, for no damage has been done. Rather, it is only man that senses a void, an absence of G-d's presence. It is for this reason that the Torah refers to Divine vengeance as an expression of G-d's beneficence, not judgment; Chesed, and not Din. His revenge is a gift to man, an opportunity to witness Divine glory, but in actuality, G-d remains forever whole.

This explains why G-d refers to the retribution taken from Midian as "revenge of the B'nai Yisrael", while Moshe Rabbeinu transmits this command to Klal Yisrael as "the revenge of G-d." It is man, with his limited perspective, who feels the need for Divine justice, for in G-d's world, justice is always served.

We can now understand why the Torah prohibits man from any form of revenge, even to the extent

of holding a grudge. The man who relates to G-d sees no need for animosity, and harbors no ill will. No harm ever truly befalls him, and no one can do him wrong. He lives in G-d's world, a world of love, kindness, and justice.

3

We have seen that the spilling of blood is the catalyst for Divine vengeance. The physical world will not rest until justice is served and murderers are shown their place.

The Talmud describes a scene of true bloodshed.

"Titus HaRasha was blasphemous and disgraceful towards Heaven. What did he do? He took a Zonah into the Kodesh HaKodashim, spread a Sefer Torah and committed an Aveirah upon it. He then took a sword and sliced the Paroches. A miracle occurred, and blood bubbled forth, and he thought that he had killed G-d." (Gittin 56b)

Titus was no fool, he understood that man cannot murder G-d. Yet, he felt certain that he had done irreparable damage to G-d's name, desecrating His holiest site. This, he felt, is the ultimate Chilul HaShem, and the blood bursting from the Paroches seemingly vindicates this belief.

The word 'Chilul' is related to 'Chalal' - a corpse, for a desecration of G-d's presence drains life of its vitality.

As the Pasuk states, it is the spilling of this blood that activates Divine vengeance.

Rav Chaim Volozhiner explains that Titus did not have the strength to destroy the Holy Temple. He attacked a mere shell, a facade whose life-force had been siphoned by the sins of the Jewish people. Klal Yisrael is the true Temple, the inner life of true sanctity that the physical Bais HaMikdash reflects. With this holiness gone from their hearts and minds, Titus burns down an empty structure.

It is Klal Yisrael who is obliged to sanctify G-d's name, expressing the sanctity and holiness of the Bais HaMikdash in their daily lives. If they are remiss in their responsibility, the resulting Chilul Hashem spills the blood of existence upon the earth.

And the earth cries out for revenge.

Our generation has been witness to a recurring tragedy of unique proportion. Hundreds of suicidal murderers, sent in the name of the G-d of Abraham, dedicated to the cold-blooded murder of any Jew they can find.

From where did this begin? How can the G-d of Abraham be used against his own children?

It is the Divine Name that cries for revenge, waiting for the revelation that we were destined to uncover. This can happen two ways: we can either do it ourselves, or have it imposed. One thing is certain, though: "... and the earth will not atone for the blood that was spilled in it, except with the blood of the murderer." (Bamidbar 35, 33)

When we express the same devotion as our enemies, sacrificing our hearts and sanctifying our lives for the sake of G-d's name, we will merit to see the fulfillment of G-d's promise to His land and His nation:

"Let the nations praise His people, for He has avenged the blood of His servants, and vengeance was repaid to His enemies, and He atones for His land and His people" (Devarim 32, 33)

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