

A KILLING PRAYER

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

We read in *Al HaNissim* ["For the miracles" - the section added to the *Amidah* and Grace after Meals throughout *Chanukah*] that part of the great miracle was that G-d "delivered the mighty into the hands of the weak, the many into the hands of the few, the impure into the hands of the pure, the wicked into the hands of the righteous, and the wanton sinners into the hands of those involved with Your *Torah*." The first two phrases - referring to the weak and the few - clearly point to the miraculous nature of the events. But why then does it add that the *Chashmonaim* were pure, righteous, and involved with *Torah*? How does this add to the miracle?

For a hint at the answer, we should look at another anomaly: the *Torah* consistently fails to say that the Jews killed people "with swords". As an example, when Israel fights against *Amalek* the conclusion is that "*Yehoshua* weakened *Amalek* and his people with the '*Pi*' of the sword." (end of *Parshas Beshalach*, Ex. 17:13). *Pi*, although we would translate it as an "edge" (and this is indeed a common meaning), literally means a mouth. The Targum translates this as "with the prayer of the sword," a killing prayer. The Targum claims that *Yehoshua* won not by using his sword, but rather by praying. Throughout *Torah*, we find this expression "the '*Pi*' of the sword," and Targum explains that the reference is not to the edge of the sword (which would involve unnecessary verbiage) but to a killing prayer.

[Parenthetically, the few verses before that are also worthy of note. It says that *Moshe* went up on the overlooking hill, and "whenever *Moshe* raised his hands, Israel was stronger, and whenever he lowered his hands, *Amalek* was stronger." Rabbi Shlomo Yitchoki (*Rashi*) points us to the Talmud *Rosh Hashana* 29a, in the *Mishna*: "Do the hands of *Moshe* make or break the war?! Rather, it tells you that as long as Israel was 'looking upwards' and committing their hearts to their Father in heaven, they were strengthened, and if not, they fell."]

Only once do we see that Israel actually killed someone "with a sword," and this was *Bila'am*, who had so recently come to curse the Jews. *Rashi* says that this exception is not mere coincidence, but makes a crucial point: "[*Bila'am*] came upon Israel, and he traded his area of craftsmanship in favor of theirs, because they do not win except with their mouths, BY WAY OF PRAYER AND REQUESTS, and he came and grabbed their craft in order to curse them with his mouth. So they too came upon him, and they traded their craftsmanship for that of the nations, who come with swords, as it says [in the blessing Yitzchok gives to Esav, Gen. 27:40] 'by your sword you will live.'"

What "*Al HaNissim*" tells us is that Israel cannot rely upon its military might - because this is *Esav's* area of expertise. Rather, we must remember that the victory of the pure and righteous is every bit as miraculous as that of the few and the weak... totally dependent upon our Father in heaven, to whom we must pray during these troubled times.

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