

TAKE VENGEANCE FOR HASHEM

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

Dedicated in loving Memory of Asher Ben A'Faradj Farzan O"H, who passed away on 23 Tammuz; by wife Rivkah, daughter Sara, and sons Yeshua, Yehuda, Hertzl and Moshe Farzan.

"Avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel from the Midyanites; then you shall be gathered into your people [you will die]. And Moshe spoke to the nation, saying, 'Prepare men from among you for war, to attack Midyan, to take the vengeance of HaShem from Midyan.'"
[31:2-3]

The K'sav Sofer questions why *Moshe* changed the statement as given by the Holy One, Blessed be He, and also why the death of *Moshe* appears to be dependent upon the war with Midyan.

He explains, first of all, that Midyan injured the Nation of Israel in two ways: they caused Israel to commit the sins of immorality and idol worship, and they also injured "the body of Israel" because many died as a result. There was both spiritual and physical damage.

Moshe was punished, told he would never enter the land of Israel, because he said "hear me, you rebellious ones." [Numbers 20:10] He responded angrily when the nation demanded water, instead of recognizing their pain - they were thirsty, and concerned that they would die in the desert.

We find, similarly, that *Yaakov* is criticized in the *Medrash* for responding angrily to *Rachel* when she demanded children. Although it was certainly incorrect for her to say "give me children," as if *Yaakov* could give what only G-d can provide, nonetheless, a person cannot be condemned for something said in pain. *Yaakov* should have soothed her and shared her trouble, rather than responding critically.

The K'sav Sofer says that the same is true regarding *Moshe*. Even though Israel spoke badly of G-d and *Moshe*, nonetheless he should have shared their pain and not criticized them. He should have realized the genuine hurt that caused them to cry out.

This may help us to understand why *HaShem* commanded *Moshe* to take vengeance on Midyan before his death, because they caused pain to Israel and caused many to die. Although he personally did not participate in their sin, he was called upon to share their need to push the evil away - precisely because he did not share their pain earlier. This is why *HaShem* commanded him to take "the vengeance of the Children of Israel from the Midyanites," and why, afterwards, he could die

- because *HaShem* wanted him to fix this imperfection in his soul first. And indeed, *Moshe* arranged the war to avenge Israel; this was his intent, and this was his repentance.

Israel, on the other hand, was not given this same instruction. The nation was told to take vengeance not for themselves, but for *HaShem*, because Midyan had angered Him by taking Israel away from his service in order to serve idols and commit immoral acts. Rather than simply responding to an attack on themselves (which is inappropriate), they too were called upon to act on behalf of others - in this case, *HaShem* Himself.

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