

WHOSE FIGHT IS THIS?

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

When Moshe doesn't seem to be following G-d's instructions, you know something is going on beneath the surface. We find such a case in this week's reading, and a deeper look helps us understand the root cause of anti-Semitism itself.

In Parshas Mattos, HaShem tells Moshe, "achieve vengeance for the Children of Israel from the Midianites," but Moshe turns to Israel and tells them "to deliver the vengeance of G-d in Midyan" [Num. 31:2-3]. G-d says it is the vengeance of the Children of Israel, and Moshe says it is the vengeance of Hashem! How can Moshe tell Israel something so different than what he was told?

This is a great question. It is so great that the Medrash itself asks this question. And the Medrash Rabbah reminds us that after Balak of Mo'av convinced Bila'am, the Midianite, to come curse the Jews, and HaShem prevented him from doing so, Bila'am told the Midianites to get the Jews to sin through immorality, causing Divine punishment — that that was the way the Jews could be harmed. And as we know, the scheme worked, until Pinchas stopped the Jews from sinning.

So the Medrash says as follows:

The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to them [the Children of Israel] that "this is only for your own justice, for they caused Me to harm you." Moshe responded, "Master of the Universe! If we were uncircumcised, if we worshiped idols or denied the Commandments, they would not hate us, and they would not pursue after us. Rather, it is because of Torah and the Commandments that You gave us. Therefore the vengeance is yours, to "deliver the vengeance of G-d in Midyan."

Anti-Semitism is truly bizarre. It defies logic and reason. You don't need to look into history, either: just look at the common claim that Jewish refugees, chased from their homes across the Arab world after the formation of the modern State of Israel in 1948, are the perpetrators, rather than the victims, of genocide and ethnic cleansing. It is as insane as it is evil, and yet it is voiced constantly.

It is also not a new lie about the Jews, despite being expressed in language that fits modern circumstances. The core anti-Semitic tropes remain precisely as they were — and this Medrash, which explains the actual root of the problem, predates modern Anti-Semitic expression by millenia... yet understands it perfectly.

The Jews are not hated for what they do wrong. The Jews are hated for what they do right.

Think about it. There's only one country in the Middle East where a person can say what he wants about the government and not be thrown in jail. So it's not about human rights. Israel is the one country that keeps coming up with peace offerings, so it is not about peace.

The countries in that region which beat, jail and even behead those who oppose the government are not condemned. Syria and Iraq offer cogent examples of precisely how "peaceful" these countries become once all the Jews have been expelled. So it is not about human rights or peace... except it is.

That is why the Jews are hated. That is what the Medrash is telling us. We have Commandments that tell us how to follow a moral course — including to value every human life, and to prefer peace over warfare.

And as the Midyanites knew, the more the Jews are attached to G-d and His Commandments, the greater His protection. So anti-Semitism should never make a person want to be less of a Jew: on the contrary, it requires us to strengthen our connection to Mitzvos, to doing good and bringing blessing and light into the world. The Mitzvos attach us to G-d Who gave them, and Who has protected us throughout history.