

# REVENGE CANNOT BE DELEGATED

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

*Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites...Moshe spoke to the people, saying: Arm men from among yourselves...that they may be against Midian to inflict*

*Hashem's vengeance upon Midian.*<sup>[2]</sup>

Both the obvious question and its solution are well known. Was the war against Midian waged to avenge the honor of G-d, or of the Bnei Yisrael? There was room for both. We are taught that each of the two aggrieved parties, so to speak, worked for the honor of the other. Hashem spoke of the crime against the Jewish people; Moshe spoke of acting to correct the dishonor done to G-d.

We can take this further. The issue here was not a semantic one. This was not a competition in politeness, or in humbly overlooking one's own honor in favor of the other party. There were practical consequences of framing the battle avenging the dishonor of Hashem or the dishonor of the Bnei Yisrael.

Assume, for the sake of argument, that the primary beneficiary was to be Hashem's honor. If the entire Midianite army would spontaneously cease breathing and die, Hashem's honor would be well served. The miracle would make it be clear that He got the last word against them; He would clearly be the active agent, avenging His own honor. If the main focus was to be Jewish honor, however, the death of the Midianite army at the hands of G-d would not do – at least not if Hashem gave explicit instructions for the Bnei Yisrael to “take vengeance.”

To be sure, Tanach knows of several examples where Hashem acts as the Warrior fighting, so to speak, His own battle. This happened at the Reed Sea, where the Jews were told to stand back in silence – not even davening – while Hashem did the fighting against the Egyptian army. It happened once more in the miraculous destruction of the army of Sancheriv, which besieged Yerushalayim. In both of these cases, the glorification of Hashem's Name was immense. We would be hard pressed, however, to say that the Jews took vengeance against their enemies in either episode.

Enemies can be dealt with in different ways. The sudden downfall of a long-time enemy is often sufficient for his opponent to feel relief, closure – and to move on. The need for revenge comes from a slightly different place. It can come after a period of subjugation, where one's essential worth has been denied. The disappearance of the enemy will not be enough. The victim wants to reverse the tables – to bring the enemy to his knees, demonstrating that the worthlessness is with the other party. The victim must subjugate his erstwhile oppressor by his own hand. That is what we call

revenge.

Hashem told Moshe that the honor of the Bnei Yisrael had been damaged; they should take revenge. Soldiers, weapons, combat – all those followed from Hashem's instruction. There could be no other way; they would have to be full participants in the battle. Moshe demurred – at least in his speech. Addressing his people, he made it to be all about Him, rather than about them. His honor had been imperiled, and He was going to do something about. He – not they – would be the active agent in the defeat of Midian.

Moshe, of course, did not intend to change Hashem's directive in the slightest. There was never any question that he would raise an army, and send them into battle. He spoke the way he did only to give honor to Hashem. He wished to say that, despite what G-d had told him, the only issue of importance before them was restoring the honor of HKBH.

1. Based on Meleches Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711.
2. Bamidbar 31:1-3.