

WHAT'S IN CHARGE?

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Your servants have taken a count of the soldiers in our charge. Not one of them is missing.

Meshech Chochmah: The gemara^[2] takes *nifkad*/missing, lacking in a spiritual sense. Not a single soldier was lost in the battle with his *yetzer hora*. In the trying conditions of the front lines, the excited passions of warfare, and the emotional release in surviving, soldiers sometimes fall prey to their desires and to opportunities to exercise power. The officers reported that their soldiers had, without exception, conducted themselves in an exemplary manner.

They emphasized that these soldiers were *be-yadeinu*/ "in our charge," meaning that they were all accounted for physically as well. None went AWOL. The officers knew where each of their men were at all times. None had been missing, then, in a physical sense as well. By keeping tight control of their men, they kept them away from morally challenging situations.

The officers could certainly take pride in the record of those under their command. But it led to a Eureka moment. They realized that they, the officers, had successfully countered the more primitive drives of a large number of people. Immediately, they connected the dots to another episode – and were overcome with guilt. "If we were able to prevent the many from sinning by exercising deliberate and focused control, why hadn't we done more at the time of the incident with Pe'or and its worship? Why had we not stood up to the sinners, as we were able to do with our soldiers!"

We can therefore see what the officers later^[3] say in a new light. "We have brought Hashem's offering: each person who found gold vessels, chains, bracelets...to atone for our souls before Hashem." They sought atonement for their silence in the Ba'al Pe'or episode, in which they now realized they were complicit through inaction.

The military campaign against Midian turned out to be a win-win action. Both Hashem and the Bnei Yisroel were honored by the outcome. The latter in not losing a single soldier to moral turpitude; the former because His providence ensured that the Jewish army did not suffer a single fatality on the military field of battle. This accounts for the seemingly long-winded description of the donation of the offering of the army officers: "They brought it to the *Ohel Moed* as a **remembrance for the Bnei**

Yisroel before Hashem."^[4] The victory over Midian created a remembrance for the Bnei Yisrael of the greatness of Hashem, while also taking a place before Hashem, i.e. testifying before Him of the greatness of the Jewish army, whose soldiers – without exception – gave opportunistic *aveiros* the

cold-shoulder.

We could suggest an entirely different approach to the "*in our charge*" phrase. Chazal^[5] emphasize that several of Man's senses are not amenable to his complete control. Walking through the street, a person has no consistent way to evade the next scene that may enter his visual field. He may find himself looking at something that he really does not want to see. He may hear words in which he has no business hearing, and might detect the aroma of succulent meat offered to some pagan deity on an idolatrous altar. Try as he may to shield himself from undesired sensory intrusion, he cannot fully succeed.

The officers alluded to this. Their men, they announced, had resolutely held themselves apart from *aveirah*. They exercised control over their actions. They put limits on where their legs would carry them, their hands would touch, and their mouths would speak. These were all part of what is in "our charge." They could not control, however, everything that flowed into their internal lives from the outside. They did find vicarious pleasure in what they saw, which wasn't always so holy. As the gemara^[6] says, the soldiers "sated their eyes with *aveirah*." Despite having a perfect record in regard to what they could control, they came up short on what they couldn't. For this they needed atonement, and responded with their offering of part of the booty.

They called it "Hashem's *korban*," rather than "a *korban* for Hashem." Those who went out to battle returned not only gratified at the outcome, but stunned by the conduct of the war. They had not lost a single soldier! They saw in this an enormous contribution of Divine *hashgachah*. Any offering to Hashem is ordinarily accompanied by a feeling of giving something to Him that belongs to us. The offering after the battle with Midian was so lopsided, that the participants could not develop a sense of possession and ownership towards the spoils of war. Everything they took had been handed to them by HKBH. When they took their offering to the Ohel Moed, they saw themselves bringing not a *korban* for Hashem, but Hashem's *korban*. The *korban* belonged to Him before it was ever designated as holy!

Dovid expressed this elegantly:^[7] "From Your hand we have given You."

1. Based on Meshech Chochmah, Bamidbar 31:49.
2. Yevamos 61A.
3. Bamidbar 31:50.
4. Bamidbar 31:54.
5. Tanchuma, Toldos #12.
6. Shabbos 64B.
7. Divrei Ha-Yamim I 29:14.