

# PARSHAS KI SISA - WHEN TO ASSUME RISK

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

## When To Assume Risk<sup>1</sup>

*Moshe stood at the gateway of the camp and said, "Whoever is for Hashem, join me." All the Levi'im gathered around him. He said to them, "So said Hashem the G-d of Israel, 'Every man, put his sword on his thigh and pass back and forth from gate to gate in the camp. Let every man kill his brother, every man his fellow, and every man his relative.'"*

If Moshe meant to rally to his side all those innocent of idolatrous service, he would have raised quite an army - not just the shevet of Levi! The majority of the Bnei Yisrael had not been guilty of avodah zarah. Moshe raised the bar much higher than that, however. He asked for volunteers who knew that they were absolutely dedicated to Hashem, to the exclusion of any other interest. He asked for those who would give up anything and everything for love of Hashem and His honor.

Moshe sought this spiritual elite because he was reluctant to place people in danger. The task he assigned this group was fraught with danger. Those earmarked for execution were hardly going to go to their deaths without resistance and struggle. Moshe's "special forces" were commissioned to perform a great mitzvah of national importance - but that did not guarantee their safety. Chazal teach<sup>[2]</sup> that mitzvah emissaries are Divinely protected from harm - but not where danger is particularly great. Moshe understood that he indeed was exposing his men to great risk, and did not want to put them in harm's way.

The solution he hit upon was to recruit a force of extraordinary people. The "great danger" exception to the rule that mitzvah emissaries are protected from harm has its own exception. Those who perform mitzvos for the usual reasons that motivate people, i.e. expectation of reward, be it in this world or the next, cannot expect to emerge unscathed from places of great danger. On the other hand, there are people who rise above the level of the ordinary good person. They dedicate themselves entirely to the Divine cause without any sense of personal needs and preferences. Such people have nothing to fear, even in the face of great apparent danger.

Hashem sent the navi Shmuel to anoint a new monarch, replacing Shaul who had been stripped of his kingly future. Shmuel balked. How can I go? Shaul will find out and kill me! Hashem agreed to give him cover. Shmuel should take along a calf, and claim that his business was offering a korban<sup>[3]</sup>.

If Shmuel needed to employ subterfuge to ensure his safety, why had Hashem not suggested it to him from the start?

Following our approach, the sequence of events is entirely reasonable. Although Shmuel was leaving on a mission associated with great risks, he was one of those few people who genuinely acted with no self-interest whatsoever. Ordinarily, he would not have to worry at all about danger; G-d therefore did not provide him with any special safety net. Shmuel's closeness with Hashem was all the protection he needed. He would protect him even outside the laws of teva.

So it would have been under ordinary circumstances. Shmuel, however, felt some resistance within himself. He was not happy at having to wrest the crown from Shaul's head, so to speak. This unhappiness told him that he was not operating on the highest level of selflessness, at which the opportunity to perform a mitzvah would have brought him nothing but joy, elation, and devekus. Understanding that he was not at peak spiritual performance, he knew that he was not vouchsafed success on his mission. He therefore had to ask Hashem for Plan B instructions - how he could protect himself even within the confines of natural law and probability. Hashem responded with the ruse of the calf-offering.

Moshe tells the people that Hashem commanded them to punish the guilty by killing the guilty. It is noteworthy that there is no text in the Torah that says as much. We do not read of Hashem giving such a command to Moshe. Clearly, Hashem did give such an instruction, but it is significant that the text omits it. We can attribute this to the fact that Hashem does not demand of people that they transcend the ordinary limitations of humankind. The madregah of ahavas Hashem that Moshe was looking for exceeds the capacity of human beings operating within the laws of human nature. Significantly, after he found his very special group in shevet Levi, Moshe transmits instructions to them in the name of "Hashem, the G-d of Israel." The last phrase was meant to underscore that Hashem would be there for His people, prepared to save them in situations of great peril and danger.

The Torah orders the Levi'im to accomplish the grim deed, pitting them against brothers and relatives. Even though Divine assistance and protection was assured to them, their responsibility included minimizing the extent of the miraculous intervention. By showing themselves ready and able to kill those closest to them, they demonstrated that they were exceptional people, with a stronger than ordinary devotion to HKBH. This would be noted by others, who would then be less likely to offer fierce resistance, recognizing their spiritual power.

The upshot of this is a practical and common application of a similar principle. The community often has to protect itself against evildoers. Persuasion and reason do not always work. We sometimes need to pursue an evildoer, inflicting harm upon him that is justifiable and necessary to achieve justice. The role of pursuer is always one of great danger. It is important to minimize the risk from those situations. When we are forced into such a position, it is crucial that the pursuer have no

personal stake, no self-interest in the case. If this is not true, the pursuer will not be free of guilt in the estimation of Heaven.

Yaakov Avinu caused great anguish to his father when he impersonated his brother in order to receive the berachos. He was not punished for this. He himself was pained for having to inflict pain upon his father. He had no choice; there was no other way. He also caused great sorrow to Esav. According to Chazal, for this he was indeed punished<sup>[4]</sup>. This pain was no less justified than that of Yitzchok. But Yaakov did find some measure of satisfaction in this triumph over his brother.

For this he had to pay a price.

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1. Based on Ha'amek Davar and Harchev Davar, Shemos 32:26-27
  2. Pesachim 8B
  3. Shmuel I 16:2
  4. Bereishis Rabbah 67:4
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