

TAKING ACTION

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

When we are, G-d forbid, faced with the life-threatening illness of a great Torah sage, how should we react? Should we knowingly nod our heads and blink our eyes in feigned acknowledgement that Heavenly decrees are final and not to be annulled, or do we take out our trusty Tehillim, and pray and pray for their recovery, no matter how bleak the situation may seem?

In parshas Chukas (Bamidbar 20:22-29) we read about the death of Aaron:

"And they journeyed from Kadesh, and the Children of Israel arrived, the entire assembly, at Hor HaHar. And Hashem said... 'Aaron shall be gathered unto his people... Take Aaron and Elazar his son, and bring them up to Hor HaHar. Strip Aaron of his vestments, and dress Elazar his son in them. Aaron shall be gathered in, and die there.' Moshe did as Hashem commanded, and they ascended Hor HaHar before the eyes of the entire assembly."

Immediately after the death of Aaron, the Torah tells of the Canaanite king of Arad attacking Israel, and taking captives (according to the Sages [Midrash Aggadah quoted by Rashi] only one captive was taken).

Chazal, our Sages (Rosh Hashanah 3a) explain the connection between the death of Aaron and the Jews coming under siege from Canaan: As long as Aaron lived, they explain, a Pillar of Cloud had surrounded and protected the nation. When Aaron died, it left them. Seeing this, and assuming that Israel was now vulnerable, one of the Canaanite kings launched an attack against them. This explanation, however, does not address the following question:

What had the Jews done wrong to deserve the attack?

Especially in light of the fact that captives were taken, an occurrence which did not occur in later battles, we must conclude that in some way the nation was, as a result of Aaron's death, deserving of Heavenly retribution.

Tzror HaMor (Rabbi Avraham Seba of Andrianopol zt"l) explains that the Jews committed a critical error in dealing with Aaron's death.

"They ascended Hor HaHar before the eyes of the entire assembly."

The reason for their ascent to Hor HaHar was not lost to the nation. It was clear that Aaron was to die there. The Jews stood back and soberly accepted the Heavenly decree. What should they have done? They should have made a tumult! "How can it be," they should have argued, "that Aaron was

capable of stopping the Angel of Death (see Rashi 17:13), yet he himself should perish in the desert?!" They should have set up a road block! They were far too quick to accept the death of their beloved High Priest.

As a result, Hashem, as it were, sent them a Heavenly wake-up-call: They were attacked and suffered losses. It was as if to say, "You have failed to grasp the seriousness of Aaron's death - perhaps this war will bring home how great your loss truly was!" It was a powerful and unfortunate lesson that nevertheless needed to be learned: We should never be still in the face of a threat to the lives of others, especially the lives of our sages and leaders.

They say: "Fool me once - shame on you. Fool me twice - shame on me." I believe that in this week's parsha we will find that the Jews indeed learned their lesson. They were faced once again with the same situation, and did not fail to take action.

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people. (31:2)'"

Moshe was told by Hashem that the war against Midian was to be his last. His days were numbered. Rashi notes that, to Moshe's credit, he did not delay, although he knew that the end of his life was directly tied in to the speed with which Israel defeated Midian.

How did the Jews react? They refused to go to war!

"So there were delivered from the thousands of the Children of Israel... twelve thousand armed men for the military. (31:5)"

Rashi notes that they had to be "delivered" against their wills. When the soldiers heard that Moshe's death was dependent on this war, they categorically refused to go to battle, until they had to be forced to do so. This time, they would not allow themselves to fall victim to complacency when faced with the death of their beloved leader and shepherd.

It is told R' Chaim of Brisk once said: We are taught that there is a time and a use for every middah (character trait). Even anger and haughtiness have their places. So what is the appropriate use for the middah of kefirah (disbelief in G-d)? When faced with the suffering of others, he explained, we must act as if we were disbelievers. We must never "trust Hashem" that all will be well, thereby failing to do everything we can to help a Jew in need!

When faced with strife and illness, it is all too easy to lift our hands to Heaven in feigned bitachon and acceptance of the decree, and not take any proactive measures. (Often, when faced with our own shortcomings, we are prone to do the same!) It's much easier to simply surrender to difficult situations, than it is to accept the responsibility that perhaps we can make a difference. Maybe this time it depends on us! If we fail to do everything we can, we may be taken to task.

Text Copyright © 2000 [Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann](#) and **[Project Genesis, Inc.](#)**
