

ROSE AMONG THE THORNS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, "Avenge Bnei Yisrael's revenge from the Midianites." (31:2)

What was the sin of the Midianites? They were 'partners' in the scheme of the wicked Bila'am; to entice the Jews to sin and return to idol worship by ensnaring them with the Moabite women. It was for their part in the plan, which succeeded in leading thousands of Jews astray, that Moshe was commanded to ensure they were paid back for their deed.

In truth, though, it was Balak, king of Moav, that hired Bila'am to curse the Jews. While he was unable to curse them, he didn't leave Balak totally empty handed. "Their G-d despises adultery," he told him, "have your women lead them to sin, and they will be cursed even without my curses (see Rashi 31:16)." Bila'am, a Midianite, came up with the idea; Balak, and his nation Moav, were the ones who put it into action.

It is true that the Midianite women must too have played some role in the ruse; Kozbi, daughter of Tzur, who was killed by Pinchas at the beginning of last week's parsha, was a Midianite noblewoman. Still, it is clear that the Moavite women were the principal sinners, with the Midianites taking no more than perhaps a secondary role:

"As Israel was dwelling in Shittim, the people began to defile themselves with the daughters of Moav. They invited the people to partake in their idolatrous sacrifices; the people ate, and they bowed to their idols. Israel attached itself to Ba'al Pe'or [the name of their idol]; Hashem's anger became ignited against Israel." [25:1-3]

Midian doesn't even get honorary mention! Clearly, they were at most accomplices to the crime. So why are they the recipients of the Torah's punishment, while Moav seem to get off 'scot-free'?

The Gemara in fact says that Moshe himself made exactly this calculation: He posited a kal-ve'chomer (a-fortiori argument), "If Hashem commanded me to take revenge from the Midianites, who only helped Moav accomplish their deed, He certainly meant for us to smite the Moavites!"

Replied the Holy One, blessed is He, "Your thoughts, Moshe, are not the same as Mine. There are two fine turtle-doves that I plan to derive from Moav—Ruth the Moavite (grandmother of King David), and Na'amah the Amonite (wife of Rechavam, son of King Solomon)!" [Bava Kamma 38a]

The Sifsei Chachamim asks: Because of these two 'doves' an entire wicked nation escapes punishment? Were Hashem to so desire, He could find many other ways to spare these two, yet

ensure the rest of the nation get its due!

In the introduction to his master work, *Nesivos Ha-mishpat*, R' Yaakov of Lisa zt"l, in a display of great modesty, writes that even if there is in his entire *sefer* just one true novel thought, it would still have been worth all the effort of writing and printing and going through all the trouble he did.

R' Shlomo Kluger zt"l, in his work *Nidrei Zerizin*, proves this very point— from our lives. How many of us pride ourselves that, *be'ezras Hashem*, after living out our 120 years, give or take, we will, like our ancestor Sarah, be able to claim, "all of them were whole and perfect?" How many of us truly claim that the books of our lives are full of *novellae*, brimming with originality and sincerity?

At best, we hope that Hashem will collect the roses from among the thorns. We pray that despite the fact that, "the days of our lives are seventy years, or at best eighty years, and most of them are toil and iniquity, (*Tehillim/Psalms* 90)" the sparse gems we have amassed will somehow outweigh the overwhelming amount of chaff, dust, and pebbles we seem to have gathered. Like the rose among the thorns, whose beauty is not diminished even when she is outnumbered and surrounded by thousands of prickly neighbours, we hope Hashem will too find beauty and consolation in the quality, if not the quantity, of our limited righteous deeds and altruistic moments.

Of course, we can not ignore the danger of this line of thinking: If the innate beauty of even one true *mitzvah* is so great as to adorn with its light even the most mundane of lives, why should we bother striving towards *shleimus* (character perfection)?

No one can deny the exceptional beauty of a diamond. It's safe to say that if one were to come across a 3 carat gem while strolling on some South African beach, it would be the find of a lifetime. Yet how foolish would he be if, after picking up the first baseball of a gem, he notices a whole collection of them sparkling around his feet, yet doesn't bother to pick them up?

The value in realizing and internalizing the sublime value and beauty of even one *mitzvah* is not to escape a lifetime of collecting as many gems as we can, but rather to remind us of the dictum that, "Your nation—they are all righteous," for even the emptiest among them, in some way or another, basks in the light of some small *mitzvah* that he once did without any ulterior motives.

"Even were a Jew to once in his life to say, *Baruch Hashem—thank you Hashem!*—and felt some small degree of thanksgiving towards the Almighty in his heart," said the Alter of Kelm zt"l, "it would still have been 'worth it' for Hashem to have created the entire universe, with all its complexity, for all of time!"

And therein lies the lesson of Moav. For the sake of two doves—two jewels in the rough—Hashem saves an entire nation. There may have been many other ways to accomplish the deed, but then we would never have discovered the lesson of the inestimable value of one Jewish life! [*Mayan Ha-Shavua*]

In truth, it's not only a lesson for others. Sometimes we need to hear it ourselves. As R' Yisrael

Salanter zt"l used to say, after spending many hours preparing and delivering a derasha: "If, after all my hours of effort and preparation, just one Jew will daven Ma'ariv with a drop more concentration, it will all have been worthwhile—and even if that one Jew is me!"

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