

A STINGING DEMOTION

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Matos

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"They killed the kings of Midian along with their slain ones: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; and Bilaam the son of Beor they slew with the sword." (31:8)

In the Torah's narrative of Klal Yisrael's defeat of the Midianite armies, we read a name with which we are vaguely familiar: Zur.

Zur's first appearance in the Torah was at the end of Parashas Chukas, as the father of Kozbi, the woman with whom Zimri sinned publicly.

Midrash Tanchuma tells us that Zur was the greatest of the five Midianite kings, but he was demoted and appears third in the Torah's listing of the Midianite kings because he readily sent his daughter to commit a vile, immoral act in public.

We have to wonder when we read such a midrash: does Zur really care? Does it bother him in the least if the Torah lists the Midianite kings and places him third instead of first?

A similar question strikes us when we read a midrash in Parashas Chayei Sarah. In one of the pesukim describing Avraham's purchase of Me'aras HaMachpelah, Ephron's name is written without a vav. The midrash tells us that Ephron lost the vav because of his shady handling of the sale of Me'aras HaMachpelah.

Again we have to wonder: does Ephron care? When we read the parashah, it is quite apparent that Ephron is a particularly greedy person, who was far more concerned about the amount of money he

could derive from Avraham Avinu than with the number of letters he merits in the Torah.

The truth is that these questions stem from a false perception that we all possess to some extent.

As long as we are here in olam hazeh, the physical world seems so real to us and Olam Haba (the World to Come) seems so far off that we consider the physical world a reality and the spiritual world somewhat fantastic.

In the physical world, one can blatantly ignore or shrug off even the greatest of insults. In Olam Haba, however, all the false illusions of "the Real World" are exposed. Every single person, even a person who had no spiritual values in this world, suddenly realizes that spirituality is all that matters. The Torah, the source of all spirituality, is the only entity that the souls in Heaven bother contemplating.

As long as they were here on earth, Zur and Ephron would have snickered if we would have told them that they were being punished by being mentioned disparagingly in the Torah.

As they look down now — or up, as the case may be — from their rightful spot in the next world, Zur and Ephron suffer extreme anguish because of their stinging demotion.

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