

Exact the revenge of Bnei Yisrael from the Midyanim... Moshe sent them... with Pinchas ben Elazar HaKohen. (31:6)

Hashem instructed Moshe *Rabbeinu* to exact revenge against the Midyanim for their role in causing *Klal Yisrael* to sin with the Moavite girls and worship the Peor idol. Moshe himself did not lead the way; instead, he chose Pinchas. *Rashi* attributes Moshe's reasoning to the fact that Pinchas had begun the deed of reckoning, by slaying Kozbi, the Midyanite Princess, who had cohabited with Zimri, the renegade Prince of the Tribe of Shimon. Let the one who initiates the revenge carry on to the next phase. Alternatively, Pinchas was a descendant of Yosef *HaTzaddik* who was sold by his brothers to the Midyanim, who, in turn, sold him to the Egyptians. Veritably, Yosef was actually sold three times: the brothers sold him to the Yishmaelim; who sold him to the Midyanim; who, in turn, sold him to the Egyptians.

The idea that Pinchas should exact revenge due to his ancestral connection to Yosef begs elucidation. The Midyanites referred to in the Yosef-sale were merchants, interested in purchase, sale and profit. To them, Yosef was nothing more than a piece of merchandise. Therefore, asks the **Avnei Nezer**, is this a reason for his descendant, hundreds of years later, to take revenge and decimate the Midyanim?

Understandably, this incident contains much more than meets the eye. **Horav Mordechai Miller, zl**, explains this based on an important lesson to be derived from the *Manna*, the Heavenly food which sustained our ancestors for forty years in the wilderness. After entering *Eretz Yisrael*, *Klal Yisrael* ate from the produce of the land. This began on the day after *Pesach*, after the *Omer* offering was waved and brought up to Hashem. In *Yehoshua* 5:11, 12, *Rashi* explains that the *Manna* actually stopped falling on the day Moshe died, the seventh of *Adar*. Nonetheless, the *Manna* which they gathered on that day sufficed to sustain them until the fifteenth of *Nissan*. This idea coincides with the *posuk* that says, "They ate *Manna* for forty years." A mathematical difficulty remains, since they began eating *Manna* on the sixteenth of *Iyar* – one month after *Nissan*. Thus, we actually ate *Manna* for forty years minus thirty days. The Torah does not make mistakes. How are we to understand this? *Rashi* explains that for the first thirty days after leaving Egypt, prior to receiving the *Manna*, the nation ate *matzah*, which had the taste of *Manna*!

Rav Miller posits that *Rashi's* commentary not only solves our technical difficulty, but it also provides us with a critical principle essential to our spiritual development. The shift from *matzah* to *Manna* was gradual; the transition was gentle. To shift from eating physical food to living off Heavenly sustenance must occur gradually. The people had to become accustomed to the taste of the *Manna* before being presented with it in its physical form. Spiritual growth requires gradual modification. One does not leap to the top. He scales the heights of spirituality step by step, rung by rung, at a steady pace, establishing his spiritual foundation solidly on each step before he ascends to the next level.

Likewise, when the nation entered *Eretz Yisrael*, a measured gradual alteration took place as they transitioned from eating *Manna* exclusively to eating the natural produce of *Eretz Yisrael*. This was not a culinary transfiguration, but rather, a preparation for an entire spiritual change in their manner of living. The wilderness was the backdrop for miracles on an almost steady basis. The nation understood that miracles were real and nature only a concealment of reality. Crossing the border into the Holy Land, they would be expected to live on a totally new spiritual plane. Their perspective would be altered as they confronted the world of nature, of cause and effect, a world in which the Divine Hand of G-d, which is always in control of the rudder, would be obscured. They would have to look with a profound and discerning eye to perceive the Divine maneuvering of life. Thus, the people were slowly weaned off the *Manna*, which last descended on the seventh of *Adar*. It continued to taste like *Manna*, but it did not arrive daily with the morning dew. Just as they ascended from Egypt on a gradual and gentle basis, likewise, they descended back into the world of obscure reality, where man must gaze through the maze of ambiguity resulting from the veil of nature to see the Divine truth.

There is, however, a negative side to gradual descent: one is very likely unaware of his decline. It is so gradual and gentle that what he perceives as nothing is actually another nail in his spiritual coffin. Thus, one might commit a small sin, an activity that on its own is not significantly damaging, but when he overlooks a few of these insignificant sins, he is sadly laying the foundation for a major and cardinal transgression.

In his *Gur Aryeh* commentary to *Bereishis* 25:28, **Maharal** advances this idea with regard to the sale of Yosef, a sale whereby he was thrice exchanged. Yosef was sold a number of times. The change was gradual, as he moved from one domain to another. He was first sold by his brothers to the Yishmaelim – who were also descendants of Avraham *Avinu*. While the Yishmaelim were not his brothers, since they shared in the Patriarchal lineage to Avraham, they maintained a certain element of kinship. Thus, the descent was gradual. The Yishmaelim brought Yosef to Egypt; Egypt was the home of their ancestress Hagar. In Egypt, Yosef was sold to peddlers who had Midyanite origins and were not considered Midyanim, but rather, businessmen who were going about their vocation. After this, Yosef was sold to Midyanim, who then sold him to the Egyptians. Hashem made Yosef's descent into Egypt as gradual as possible. This was a country in which hedonism had been elevated to a cultural status, where moral debauchery was a standard by which the people lived. Coming from Yaakov *Avinu*'s spiritually sequestered home, this was a devastating transformation for Yosef. It had to be very gentle and gradual.

Having laid the foundation for understanding the Midyan factor in Yosef's life, *Rav Miller* returns to our original difficulty: Why Pinchas? Why was he the one chosen to exact revenge on Midyan? We mentioned that *Rashi* offers two reasons. First, Pinchas began the job by killing Kozbi; he might as well complete the work. Second, as a descendant of Yosef, he was taking revenge for what the Midyanim had done to his grandfather. On a cursory level, the two reasons appear disparate. In reality, they are related and even complement one another.

Midyanites were, sadly, very successful in their attempt to seduce *Klal Yisrael*, to pull the rug of morality from under our feet. Why? It was precisely due to their closeness to our people, their lineage descending from the union of Avraham and Keturah. It was uniquely as a result of our sense of kinship to these people that we were so susceptible to their contemptible influence. When one falls under the influence, especially an influence based upon the erroneous belief that the other person/nation, the aggressor, would never harm you because of their closeness – then one falls very hard. This is what happened to the Jews. They allowed themselves to be violated by the Midyanites guile-- to become compromised by them, because they believed in them. After all, we are kinsmen. They would never hurt us. (How many times throughout our tumultuous history have we repeatedly made this same mistake?)

The Midyanites personified a slow, insidious calculating lowering of personal values. The individual who could successfully battle against them would have to be an individual who represented unbending, untarnished truth. When Pinchas saw Zimri make a fool of himself by desecrating himself and profaning Hashem's Name in public, Pinchas acted decisively, with courage and resolution, to expunge this evil from the midst of our nation. Pinchas acted swiftly to eradicate the evil of a nation whose primary strategy was an agenda of gradual corruption. Pinchas unleashed his vengeance swiftly and with malice, avenging the injustice perpetrated against his ancestor.

Rav Miller adds that Midyan had a great and wily mentor: the evil-inclination, whose primary technique for leading people to sin is gradual and gentle persuasion. First, it is a tiny compromise for the sake of a *mitzvah*, then it is a greater compromise, so that people will see that we are flexible. By then the protective armor has developed a crack, a chink which ultimately leads to the fatal flaw. Each and every Jew has as his life's mission the responsibility to remain steadfast and strong; to serve as a bulwark of truth and moral values, so that we withstand the strong winds that constantly seek to undermine us.