

If a man shall strike his slave or his maidservant with the rod, and he shall die under his hand, He shall surely be avenged. (21:20)

The *Torah* addresses a very sad situation in which a Jewish master strikes his non-Jewish slave with such force that he kills him. The master is liable for the death penalty; *Nakeim yinakeim*, “He shall surely be avenged.” It is sad for a number of reasons. First, a Jew is to be executed for a violent act of murder. Second, is the fact that we can have among us a person of such low character that he can kill another human being – for whatever reason. This *pasuk* obviously does not apply to the normal *ben Torah*, observant Jew, whose commitment to the *Torah* shapes his character ethics, and morals. Nonetheless, it is still sad.

Rabbeinu Bachya cites *Rabbeinu Chananel* who explains why the Torah uses the words, *Nakeim, Yinakeim*; “Vengeance, he must be punished.” He receives the ultimate punishment. Where does vengeance fit into the equation? He explains that the master acted with malice, planning to take out his rage against this slave. He did not just lose it – he planned it. Thus, the Torah instructs us to take vengeance. If this is the case, we already (*pasuk* 14) had a case in which a man planned to kill another Jew. He is to be removed even from the *Mizbayach*, Altar (If he is a *Kohen* performing the sacrificial service). Why does the Torah not use *nekamah*, vengeance, in this context as well? Why is the murder of a gentile slave more reprehensible, such that the murderer’s execution is characterized as vengeance?

Horav Tzvi Meir Bergman, Shlita, explains that *nekamah*, an unusual term for carrying out justice against this master, reflects to the man’s lack of *hakoras hatov*, gratitude. His slave worked for him 24/7, often performing back-breaking, menial labor. Certainly, with a master like that, the slave must have suffered numerous indignities, but to be murdered as if he were an unwanted animal is the ultimate outrage. How low can a person stoop? Where was the master’s sense of human decency? We do not take advantage of people. We do not humiliate and demean people. We certainly do not kill someone just because he belongs to us. This was a man who had slaved for you. Where is your *mentchlichkeit*, humanity? For someone so vile, the Torah instructs us to be vengeful.

Showing gratitude even to the most humble servant highlights the value of each person’s contributions. Every person wants to know that his contribution, however small, is valued and makes a difference. When we acknowledge the work of those whom society often ignores, we recognize their humanity and remind ourselves that dignity is not reserved only for the high and mighty. Gratitude fosters respect and encourages kindness. It underscores the role every individual plays in a community. Gratitude is a reflection of our character and a practice which enriches our relationships, and cultivating a better society. Thus, this master not only murdered a human, he committed a grave incursion against society as a whole, and, by his actions, impugned the very underpinnings of *Yiddishkeit*.

Horav Nachman Breslover, zl, writes, “Gratitude rejoices with her sister, joy, and is always ready to light a candle and have a party. Gratitude does not really like its old comrades of boredom, despair and taking life for granted.” When the *Kotzker Rebbe, zl*, replaced a pair of worn-out shoes, he would carefully wrap the old ones in a newspaper before placing them in the trash. He would declare, “How can I simply toss away such a fine pair of shoes that have served me so well during the past years?”

We go through clothing without thinking of its meaning to us. I felt the same way; a suit becomes old, and it is time for the garbage, until I saw young men wearing suits that were worn out and did not fit them. We take everything for granted. Gratitude teaches us not to take anything for granted.

Horav Eliyahu Lopian, zl, was speaking to a student following *Shacharis*. At the same time, the *Mashgiach* was folding his *tallis*. Since it was a large *tallis*, he used the “services” of a *shtender*, upon which he rested the *tallis* as he folded it. This is a seemingly innocuous act which we all do daily. *Rav Elya*, however, noticed that the *shtender* was a bit dusty. He went to the hall to fetch a towel to dust off the *shtender*. The student, realizing what his saintly *Rebbe* was about to do, ran ahead to fetch the towel. *Rav Elya* held up his hand to stop him. “No, No! I must personally wipe down the *shtender* to show my gratitude to it for convincing me to fold my *tallis*.”