

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Lipman *ben* Mordechai *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of his *neshamah*

All in Due Time

PARSHAS MATTOS –MASEI 5776

This week’s *parshah* features the war of vengeance waged against the nation of Midian. Hashem had commanded Moshe to fight against Midian as a response to their part in the episode of Shittim, when the daughters of Midian led Yisrael astray. Moshe now dispatched an army to battle the Midianites, as the *passuk* states: וַיִּשְׁלַח אֹתָם מֹשֶׁה אֶלְף לַמִּטָּה... וְאֶת־פִּינְחָס
וַיִּצְבְּאוּ עַל־מִדְיָן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ד’ אֶת־מֹשֶׁה
– “And Moshe sent them, one-thousand (men) per tribe... and Pinchas son of Elazar the Priest, to the army... And they gathered against Midian, as Hashem commanded Moshe” (*Bamidbar 31:6*).

The Choice

Moshe’s selection of Pinchas to represent him in battle is a focal point of the commentators. This choice is curious on a number of counts. After all, the original command was issued to Moshe himself, as it states (*ibid.* v. 1,2): וַיִּדְבֹר ד’ אֶל־מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, נָקִים נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת
הַמִּדְיָנִים – “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Take vengeance for B’nei Yisrael from the Midianites...” Why, then, did Moshe himself desist from participating, appointing Pinchas in his place? And if, for some reason, he felt it appropriate to designate an agent, why was the task delegated to Pinchas? Granted that Aharon was no longer among the living; but his son Elazar had taken his place as Kohein Gadol (High Priest) and Moshe’s second-in-command. Why, then, was Pinchas – Aharon’s grandson – chosen to take part in the war instead?

The Medrash (*Bamidbar Rabbah 22:4*) explains that, in a sense, Moshe was “disqualified” from participating directly in the war. This was not on account of any failing on his part, but rather, because he had previously benefited from Midian; it was there that Moshe found refuge and a place to dwell upon fleeing from Pharaoh. As such, he felt it inappropriate to engage personally in hostilities against them, in keeping with the adage: “Do not toss stones into the waterhole from which you drank.”

As to why Pinchas and not Elazar was charged with the task, Rashi advances a number of approaches. One of these states that it was because of the particular office Pinchas held, which rendered him the most suitable. While Elazar was the High Priest, there was another priestly appointment – known as “*Mashu’ach Milchamah*” (anointed for [purposes of] war) – that was filled by Pinchas. While subservient to the post of High Priest, the duties of the *Mashu’ach Milchamah* were specific to the occasion of war. In keeping with the Torah passage outlined in Sefer Devarim, the Mishnah (*Sotah 8:1*) relates that this *kohein* would address and exhort the troops prior to their entry into battle:

וְהָיָה כִּקְרִבְכֶם אֶל הַמַּלְחָמָה וְנִגַּשׁ הַכֹּהֵן, זֶה כֹּהֵן מִלְחָמָה. וְדָבַר אֶל הָעָם... וְאָמַר אֲלֵיהֶם שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל
אֲתֶם קְרִבִים הַיּוֹם לַמַּלְחָמָה עַל אוֹיְבֵיכֶם...

“And it shall be as you draw near to battle, the *kohein* shall approach’ (*Devarim 20:2*). This refers to the *Kohein Mashu’ach Milchamah*. (The *passuk* resumes:) ‘And he shall speak to the nation... and say to them: Hear Yisrael! You are today drawing near to war against your foes.’”

Leader of the Generation

There is one other matter, however, that remains to be explained. Above are outlined legitimate and compelling reasons for Moshe's transference of the mission to Pinchas. The only question is how to reconcile this decision with the simple intimation of the *passuk*; after all, in the final analysis, the command was issued to Moshe himself.

Regarding the actual command, we do find something of a technical anomaly in the wording. This directive was the final one to be issued to Moshe; it states in full: **נָקָם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל** – “Take vengeance for B'nei Yisrael from the Midianites, then you shall be gathered to your people (i.e., you shall pass away).” There seems to be a missing letter “vav” in this latter phrase; would it not have been more correct to have stated, “**and** then you shall be gathered to your people?”

R' Shimshon of Ostropolle was a legendary sage of the 17th century, who eventually met a martyr's death in the Cossack massacres of “*Tach v'Tat*” (taking place in the years **ת"ח ות"ט – 5408-09** [1648-49]). He was known for his saintliness and the level of *ru'ach hakodesh* (Divine inspiration) he attained, as well as his mastery in the fields of *remez* (allusion) and kabbalah. In any event, he addresses the above issues, providing fascinating insight.

R' Shimshon bases his explanation on the well-known Talmudic teaching (*Rosh Hashanah 25b*) that exhorts a person to display utmost reverence and adherence to whichever figure stands at the helm of Klal Yisrael at a given time, regardless of how he might compare to leaders of other generations. In fact, in a sense, the current leaders should actually be viewed as on par with the greater leaders of a different era. Thus, the Gemara states that Gidon in his generation was like Moshe for his generation; Shimshon for his generation was like Aharon for his generation; and Yiftach for his generation was like Shmuel for his generation.

These are no arbitrary examples. R' Shimshon explains that, on a deeper level, each pair mentioned above represents another instance of “*gilgul neshamos*.” This is a kabbalistic concept referring to the reincarnation of a departed soul. Thus, the *shofeit* (judge) Yiftach shared the same “*shoresh neshamah*” (root of soul) as the *navi* (prophet) Shmuel; Shimshon was a *gilgul* of Aharon; and Moshe was reincarnated in the person of Gidon. This latter pair is most significant for our discussion; Gidon was the *shofeit* who delivered Yisrael from the hands of their enemies, who were none other than the people of... Midian (*Shoftim, ch. 6-8*).

What emerges, then, is that Moshe in fact *did* eventually fulfill the original directive on his own – albeit when he returned to earth as a *gilgul* of Gidon. This, then, is the meaning of the *passuk* relating the command. There were not two separate statements here: Take vengeance against Midian, and then you shall pass on – which would have necessitated the connecting “vav” (and). Rather, the intent of the *passuk* reflects the time at which the directive would be fully implemented. Thus, the command can be rendered: **נָקָם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶת הַמִּדְיָנִים אַחֵר** – You, Moshe, will yourself take vengeance against Midian **after you pass from This World**: that is, when you subsequently return in the person of Gidon (*Otzros HaTorah*).