

Hashem gives Moshe one more task to do before he is to “gathered to his people.”

נִקְמָם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶת הַמִּדְיָנִים אַחַר תִּאָסֵף אֶל-עַמֶּיךָ:

“Avenge, the revenge owed to Bnei Yisroel, from the Midyanim, afterwards be gathered to your people.” (Bamidbar 31:2).

The wording of this pasuk seems odd. Hashem asks Moshe to avenge the revenge of Bnei Yisroel. A simpler instruction would be to *take revenge against Midyan*. Was it not his revenge to take, too – is he not owed it as leader of Bnei Yisroel? Also, what is the connection between this revenge and Moshe being gathered up? Further, if it is the revenge owed to Bnei Yisroel, why did Moshe have to do it? Did he not owe Midyan gratitude (like he did the waters) because Midyan hosted him when he fled Pharaoh, and he married a Midyan woman?

Gemara Nedarim 37b says, *vocalization, ornamentation by the scribe, and words read differently than written are all passed down orally from Har Sinai. Ornamentation by the scribe examples are the word “achar” in several cases, including “afterwards be gathered up to your people.” (Bamidbar 31:2).* There is a special connection between Moshe – the transmitter of the Torah from Har Sinai – and the scribes who beautify the letters of this pasuk.

Midrash says, *Moses said, “Master of the world, if we had been uncircumcised or practitioners of star worship or had denied the commandments, they would not have persecuted us. But they have done so precisely because of the Torah and commandments which You have given. The vengeance, therefore, is Yours.” (Bamidbar Rabbah 22:2).*

Rashi points out, *no revenge is to be taken on Moav. That is because Moav feared Bnei Yisroel while Midyan just joined in the fight, gratuitously.*

Ramban says, *Moshe was unable to cross the Yardein so he took care of all conquering tasks on the eastern bank of the Yardein. He took care of Amori, Bashan, and took revenge on Midyan. In this way, he received the merit of as much of the *kivush Eretz Yisroel* as he possible to him.*

Chizkuni says, *Moshe could not take the revenge himself. He owed a debt of gratitude toward Midyan. Therefore, he sent 12,000 soldiers in his stead (Bamidbar 31:5-6).*

I would differ and state, surely Hashem did not require Moshe himself to go out in battled. Sending an army is taking personal revenge, too.

Ohr Chaim says, *the same. Moshe delegated the task to soldiers and he fulfilled the commandment that way. Revenge takes two parts. First, prepare a plan and the men. Second, go out and do battle. Moshe did the first and delegated the second. Moshe could not die peacefully until the battle was successful.*

Rabbeinu Bachya points out, *this parsha (section) follows the parsha of oaths because Hashem was not going back on His oath to not allow Moshe into the Land. It was a final task and then the oath would be fulfilled.*

As the Midrash says, the vengeance is really Hashem's. Moshe did have a debt of gratitude toward Midyan. Moshe was also a man of peace his whole life. He saw what violence did. Hitting the Mitzri caused him to have to flee Mitzrayim. Hitting the rock caused him to be a water of strife and to lose out on Eretz Yisroel. Further, while Bnei Yisroel had issues with Midyan, Moshe did not. Moshe was actually rescued by (or was able to dwell in peace in) Midyan after fleeing Pharaoh. (Shmos 2:15). He married a Midyani woman (Ibid 2:21). He did fight with Midyan shepherds but it was to save his future sisters-in-law from them. (Ibid 2:17). Also, his father-in-law and sisters-in-law probably still lived in or around Midyan. His revenge, then, was only on behalf of Bnei Yisroel and Hashem.

"Avenge!" Hashem commands Moshe to take revenge. "Revenge owed to Bnei Yisroel." Bnei Yisroel were attacked by Midyan, tricked by them, and twenty-four thousand died in a plague Midyan instigated. If, as the leader of Bnei Yisroel it was obvious that Midyan deserved retaliation, why did Moshe need a commandment? Hashem gave Moshe the command to give him merit in conquering the Land. Defeating a neighboring enemy that already tasted blood helps secure the Land. Additionally, Moshe would not think of taking the revenge himself because of his debt of gratitude. Hashem had to tell Moshe that his obligation to the Bnei Yisroel superseded this. While Midyan did good to Moshe, it also harmed him greatly by attacking his people. It would

be akin to Moshe being saved by the waters of the Nile but then almost drowning in the waters of the Jordan.

What is poignant here, implied but unstated, is that Aharon is not present. In the past, when Moshe had to use the water, he turned the task over to Aharon. Here, there was no Aharon to delegate this task to. Further, Moshe did split the waters by the Yam Suf crossing. There are times when his obligation to the nation superseded his personal gratitude debts. "And Hashem said to Moshe, 'Why do you cry out to Me? Speak to the Bnei Yisroel and let them travel.'" (Shmos 14:15). Hashem had to tell Moshe to split the sea. Moshe did not want to because of his debt of gratitude. Hashem commanded him to: obligations to the nation supersedes that debt. Here, because it was "revenge owed to Bnei Yisroel" Moshe was able to exact the revenge himself.

"From the Midyanim." Revenge is usually focused on the wrongdoer. Here, this was a *carte blanc* to attack the nation of Midyan. Surely, he could send word to his family to escape. However, the entire nation and cities of Midyan were now the enemies of Bnei Yisroel. That is why their revenge was on every male and other victims (Bamidbar 31:7-8), every complicit woman (ibid 31:17), and Bnei Yisroel plundered (ibid 31:9), and destroyed the cities (ibid 31:10). The מִדְיָן makes Midyan a proper noun so that the revenge was directed at all things "Midayn."

"Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people." Do not read it "and afterward you will be gathered." Read it: "afterwards be gathered." It is a positive commandment to pass away peacefully after exacting revenge. Moshe could not be gathered while this task lay outstanding. It was his life's work and it needed completion. Further, "אַחֲרָיִם" does not have a *vav* before it. It is not "and afterwards." It is "afterwards." This is because it was not two separate commandments. This was a second command that hung on the first. The entire command was: *Exact the revenge owed to Bnei Yisroel from Midyan, after that be gathered to your people.* It is a second command, not just a chain of events.

Because it was a command, Moshe was able to pass away in his own course. He did not pass away immediately. He tallied the booty (ibid 31:31), accepted gifts of gold (ibid 31:54) and dealt with Reuven, Gad, and Menashe and their request for land on the

eastern bank of the Yardein (ibid 32:5). He also conveyed to the entire Bnei Yisroel the Torah and other words of advice (Book of Devorim). He was able to do these things because he was commanded to “be gathered to his people.” That was all part of him being gathered to his people and passing away peacefully.

The Torah is clear. Leaders must put the obligations of their constituents before their own duties and debts, and exit their position of leadership with their government secure and ready for transition.