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The Great Reveal

Bilam advised the Midyanites how to strike at the heart of the Jewish people. Following his advice, the Midyanites caused the deaths of 24,000 Yidden. The tragic details of that plague are recorded at the end of Parashas Balak (25:1). In this week's parashah, we encounter the "revenge war" that the Jewish people were commanded to wage against Midyan.

A thousand men were to be chosen from each *shevet*. The Torah states, "A thousand from each *shevet* were delivered from the Children of Israel—וַיִּמָּסְרוּ." (31:5) The word וַיִּמָּסְרוּ is unusual. The Torah could have simply written וַיֵּלְכוּ (they went) or וַיִּקְחוּ (they took), both of which would have expressed the idea clearly. Why, then, does the Torah use this particular expression?

The Sifri interprets it to mean that they were ready to "sacrifice themselves"—a phrase associated with נפש מוּסַר. These warriors were prepared to risk everything for the mission.

Rashi, however, takes a different approach. He explains that the word implies they had to be "coerced" into going. But not, *chas v'shalom*, because they were afraid. Rather, their hesitation was born from reverence and love. They

knew that Moshe Rabbeinu's passing was destined to follow this war. Hashem had told him: "Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midyanites; afterward you will be gathered to your people" (31:2). They didn't want to hasten that moment. Even if, during the forty years in the *midbar*, they may not have always shown proper appreciation for Moshe, deep down, they could not bear the thought that their victory would come at the cost of his life.

The Torah uses this word to teach us that they had to be, "coerced" into going to fight this war.

The Sifri also cites the view of Rabbi Nosson, who understands וַיִּמָּסְרוּ as "they were called out." According to him, a leader from each *shevet* publicly identified the soldiers who were worthy to go to battle—those who were kosher and tzaddikim. The call was: "So-and-so is worthy to go to war; so-and-so is a tzaddik." (איש פלוני כשר יצא למלחמה. איש פלוני צדיק יצא למלחמה)

The Sifri then cites Rabbi Elazar Hamodai who explains that the word implies revelation. These righteous men were hiding—not out of fear for their lives, but because they too didn't want to bring

about Moshe's death. Therefore, they had to be revealed and brought forth.

It's possible to explain their concealment in another way. True tzaddikim often hide their greatness, and in their humility would never have come forward on their own to announce their worthiness. That's why someone else had to reveal them. Rabbi Nosson and Rabbi Elazar Hamodai may be in agreement on the core point—that these men had to be revealed—but differ on the nature of the reveal: Rabbi Nosson speaks of spiritual "outing," while Rabbi Elazar speaks of physical location being "outed."

THE GREAT REBUKE

But this isn't just an exercise in *pshat*. The definition of this word, וַיִּמָּסְרוּ, became practical *mussar* advice from Rav Aharon of Belz on how we are to live our lives today!



CARLSBAD, SEP, 1931. THE BELZER REBBE. FAR RIGHT IS R' YITZCHAK MENACHEM NACHUM TWERSKI

Rav Aharon Rokeach was born in 1880 to Rav Yissachar Dov, the third rebbe of the Belzer dynasty. After his father's passing in 1926, he became the leader of Belz until his passing in 21 Av 1957. He miraculously escaped the WWII with his half-brother, Rav Mordechai the Rav of Bulgorai. Both of their entire families were murdered. Rav Mordechai remarried and had a son who succeeded Rav Aharon.

Rav Aharon of Belz, whose greatness was apparent even to those far from Chassidus, taught that this word is a blueprint for how to live.

Rav Aharon had a mysterious quality, but one thing was clear: he refused to speak negatively—about people or about events. He always chose to see the good.

Once, a rav from Tel Aviv came to sell his *chametz* to the Rebbe on Erev Pesach. After the *mechirah*, the guests were offered lekach and brandy, and the rav gave a *dvar* Torah that highlighted the sins and transgressions of some people — which of course the holy ears of the Rebbe could not accept.

Since the Rebbe did not want the gathering to end on such an inappropriate note, he spoke up and said:

“Now I will cite a Torah thought:

“Those who were chosen to wage war against Midian were great tzaddikim,” as Rashi explains—it was necessary to choose the most righteous individuals from each *shevet*.

But when someone is truly righteous, he does not volunteer when such a call goes out.

Therefore, the Torah writes, ‘וַיִּמְסְרוּ וַיְהִי וְהָיוּ וַיִּבְרָאוּ’—which means that the Children of Israel

went and informed (snitched) Moshe Rabbeinu, saying: ‘So-and-so is a tzaddik, and so-and-so is a tzaddik.’”

To emphasize this important lesson the Rebbe said this with great fervor, and pointed his finger at those present, saying [aloud to Hashem]: “He is a tzaddik, and he is a tzaddik, and he is a tzaddik.”

We can add that the Rebbe was teaching them, that the Torah uses the term “snitch” when it is revealing positive qualities about the third party, but one has no permission to “snitch” on another Jew—whether to another person or to Hashem—when it is derogatory.

Rav Aharon became known for his radical commitment to judging every Jew favorably—no matter how far removed they appeared. It was comical how far Rav Aharon would go to explain away circumstances — even regarding the worst transgressors.

The Rebbe explained that this is no different than learning Torah. “If you are learning and you are confronted with a difficult Rambam, what do you do? You think of potential explanations—no matter how farfetched they may be—until you find an answer. The same should apply whenever you come across a difficult Jew. You must work hard at understanding him until you find an answer.”

This practice was already his hallmark back in Belz. When a townsman informed the Belzer Rav that a barber wasn’t closing his shop on time on Erev Shabbos, he fined the barber for keeping his shop open, the informer for slandering him, and himself for having believed the negative report.

Rav Aharon’s chassidim once reported that

members of a kibbutz in Northern Israel had begun raising pigs, thinking that such open desecration of the Torah would surely emit scathing criticism from the Rebbe.

His response surprised them: “The opinion of the *Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh* is that during the days preceding Mashiach, the world will be uplifted to such a higher spiritual plane that pigs, the most unclean of all non-kosher animals, will become permissible to be eaten. Apparently, our fellow Jews in Israel believe so strongly that Mashiach is imminent that they are making final preparations!”

Reb Aron Meyer Safier, was a devoted Belzer chassid. He would proudly relate the story told among the Belz community about the Rebbe’s first Shabbos in Tel Aviv. Gazing out the window and observing all the cars driving on Shabbos, Rav Aharon refused to say a negative word about another Jew, so he remarked, “I didn’t know there are so many doctors in this neighborhood.”

“Kulam kedoshim, all are holy,” he would say

about the Jews of Tel Aviv. He refused to call Jews who didn’t observe Shabbos “mechalelei Shabbos, — Shabbos desecrators”; instead he referred to his neighbors as “shochechei ikar Shabbos—those who forget the principle of Shabbos.” In the presence of Rav Aharon, chassidim learned to refer to non-observant Jews as “Yidden who don’t put on Rabbeinu Tam’s Tefillin” (the second pair of tefillin that chassidim don after davening).

While walking home one Shabbos morning, Rav Aharon spotted a Jewish doctor who wasn’t Shabbos observant. Upon seeing the Rebbe from afar, the doctor hastily discarded his lit cigarette. Another Rebbe was present and said derisively, “Here are your righteous ‘forgetters of Shabbos!’ If he truly ‘forgot’ that today is Shabbos, why did he throw away his cigarette when he saw us?”

“Because the moment he saw us wearing our shtreimelach,” Rav Aharon responded, “he remembered that it’s Shabbos!”