

Parsha Pearls

FROM THE WORDS OF THE GEDOLIM

Noach 5769

“However, I will hold you responsible for your own blood; every animal I will hold responsible; I will hold every man and a man’s brother responsible for a man’s blood.” (9:5)

The Midrash says that the word “however” comes to exclude certain cases of suicide that are permitted: the acts of Shaul and martyrs such as Chananya, Mishael and Azaryah. “Every animal I will hold responsible” means that G-d will punish a man who causes another man to be killed by an animal. “A man’s brother” means that G-d will punish someone who hires others to kill a man.

Then the Midrash says: Another explanation: “Every animal I will hold responsible” – this refers to the Four Kingdoms [who have subjugated the Jewish people in exile, who are represented as four animals in the vision of Daniel (7:3)]. “I will hold a man’s brother responsible” – this refers to Esav. “A man” – this refers to Israel, as it says, “You are man” (Yechezkel 34:11).

The Mirkeves Hamishneh says that according to this second explanation of the Midrash, we can revise the exclusion of the word “however” – it is coming to exclude independent action undertaken by the Jewish people. “Only I will avenge your blood from the Four Kingdoms and from Esav,” says G-d. “You are not allowed to do it yourselves.”

This, says the Mirkeves Hamishneh, is a reference to the oath administered by G-d to the Jewish people not to rebel against the nations who subjugate them (Kesubos 111a). The prohibition includes even cases when the nations have shed Jewish blood; it is forbidden for the Jews to rebel and avenge that blood. Only G-d has the right to do this.

There were, of course, times when G-d instructed the Jewish people to avenge their blood from the nations, such as the wars of Midyan and Amalek. But in exile, this is forbidden under the oath. In this aspect, our status in exile is most similar to that of the Israelites in Egypt. The Egyptians had been enslaving and killing them for over a hundred years, yet when the opportunity arose to take revenge, G-d forbid them to do so. Speaking to the Israelites at the shores of the sea, Moses said, “Do not fear! Stand by and see Hashem's saving that He will perform for you today... Hashem will fight for you, and you will be silent.” (14:13-14) (Mirkeves Hamishneh, Beshalach)

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