

Beha'alotcha: A Mitzvah to Make a Million?

- Nisson Shulman. Wasnt the pillaging on the shores of the sea a mitzvah? Veaharei chen yetzeu birchush gadol was being fulfilled! Why did Moshe drive them away? Certain mitzvot - Chesed, Torah, represented by Menorah shel Esh, Matbea shel Esh, are to be done with zeal. NOT Bizat hayam and such mitzvot which come at others' expense...

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The Torah teaches that Moses had to drive our people away from the Red Sea because they were pillaging on the shore.

But wasn't that very pillaging a mitzvah too? Hadn't God promised that we would go out of Egypt with vast wealth? What would have been so terrible if Moshe Rabbenu would have allowed us to enjoy this mitzvah yet a little while longer?

I suggest the answer is in the fourth verse of our Torah reading.

The Torah teaches that Moshe Rabbenu had trouble casting the menorah. Her'a lo menorah shel esh: "God showed him a fiery menorah". In the same way, earlier in the Torah, Moshe had trouble with the half shekel. Her'a lo matbea shel esh: "He showed him a fiery coin".

Why was this necessary? A fiery menorah, a fiery coin?

The Menorah represents Torah.

The coin represents gemilat hesed, charity.

The fire represents zeal.

Certain mitzvot must be done with zeal. Charity? Cold blooded calculation is not enough: Matbea shel esh. Torah? Calm detachment is not enough. There must be total involvement, Menorah shel esh.

Bizat hayam is, indeed, a mitzvah. But with zeal? Not at bizat hayam! If maase yaday tovim bayam veatem omrim shira applies to the angels, then it applies to the people of Israel in connection with bizat hayam as well.

Moses saw the people dropping away from singing the shira one by one, leaving the mitzvah of thanksgiving, turning to this new and fascinating one of bizat hayam. With such a mitzvah you can make a fortune! More! More! What zeal we could show for such a mitzvah.

Hisian baal karcham.

Ever since then, we Jews have learned that lesson about the mitzvot to be done without zeal, like bizat hayam. We have learned that lesson well.

We are engaged in a war of defense against implacable enemies. We must defend our people, and reluctantly, we must return fire and pre-empt fire when wisdom dictates this. The world press doesn't recognize the unevenness of the attitudes on both sides. The Arabs attack Israelis, ambush civilians, with bloodthirsty zeal. We are forced to protect our own, and so we must fight against them efficiently and well. Golda Meir once said that she could forgive the Arabs everything except forcing our sons and daughters to learn to kill: forcing us to learn the lessons of war. Even though a war of defense is defined as a milchemet mitzvah, a war commanded by God, even so it causes us anguish to turn our compassionate Jewish hearts to war.

In 1981, when Israel bombed the Baghdad nuclear reactor, the Wall Street Journal made an editorial comment that could well be applied today: "The Israelis are not infallible. But their security since they came into being has depended on making careful power judgments. They know that their best chances for avoiding bloodshed lie in frequently reminding their neighbors that they are strong and their wishes are not to be taken lightly. Their outlook on the world and on what it takes to earn the world's respect offers a few lessons we ourselves could profitably learn."

And one of the chief concerns in this very troubling time when withdrawal from Gaza towns is debated, is that the enemy should not perceive this as a weakness on our part, and therefore start the round of murder and terror again. So that once again we would have to retaliate to keep our people safe.

At the Red Sea, many enemies lost their lives. It grieved us. To us it was tragic that a cruel enemy brought upon himself his own doom by refusing to make peace with Israel's people. We see that happening before our eyes today.

We pray for a time to come, when all mitzvot before us will be those to be performed with zeal; mitzvot of helping our fellow human beings, symbolized by matbea shel esh; mitzvot of studying and teaching the word of God, symbolized by the fiery menorah. Then we shall show the world what real zeal means. Then we shall be able to help all people with dedication and with love, on that day when "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore".