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**Unresolved Grief**  
**Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

*Parshat Mattot*

**The Eternal then said to Moses, “Avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel upon the Midianites; then shalt thou be gathered to thy people.” (Numbers 31:1-2)**

With our “post-modern,” our “universalist,” our “radical-monotheist” consciousness, we are most uncomfortable with this chapter. We do not wish to hear of G\*d’s commanding us to deadly vengeance. We do not wish to hear of Moses leading us to deadly vengeance. We do not wish to hear of our ancestors engaging in – there is no other word for it – genocide, even if we believe that the Midianites deserved it.

But we are also unwilling simply to discard a chapter of Torah, however distasteful we may find it. What’s a Renewal Jew to do?

There is no question of how the tradition has understood this chapter. Moses is commanded by G\*d to exact vengeance upon the Midianites for trying to lead the Israelites into idolatry (and very nearly succeeding). And the vengeful slaughter extends not only to the men of Midian, but to the women as well. And the tradition praises Moses for being again a “bridegroom of blood.” But most of us cannot go there with the tradition. What’s a Renewal Jew to do?

We can do a bit of – admittedly untraditional – linguistic analysis. “***N’kom nikmat B’nai Yisrael***,” G\*d’s instruction to Moses begins; “**avenge the vengeance of the Children of Israel.**” Generally, the repetition of the verb’s linguistic root – *n’kom nikmat* – is a sign of emphasis and intensification; “most assuredly, thou shalt avenge” would be a traditional rendering into English. But the words – apart from their traditional understanding – can, without too much twisting, say “thou shalt avenge the vengeance.” Perhaps it is not the Midianites upon whom G\*d instructs that vengeance be taken; perhaps G\*d is telling Moses that, justified as the Israelites may have been in avenging themselves upon the Midianites – and let us not forget that Moses’ father-in-law Jethro was not only a Midianite but a priest of Midian – vengeance will be taken for the vengeance. Vengeance breeds vengeance, G\*d seems to be cautioning Moses.

But Moses does not listen, and we cannot but wonder why. What is Moses' state of mind? The text provides a clue. If we go back to chapter 20, we find three events occurring in rapid succession:

- Moses' beloved sister Miriam, who saved his life when he was an infant, dies, and the Israelites have no water; the miraculous well that followed us through our forty years' wandering disappeared with Miriam's passing.
- Moses, although told by G\*d to speak to the rock that it bring forth water, instead strikes the rock – twice – and G\*d chastises him severely for it, declaring that Moses has thereby lost the right to bring the people into the Promised Land.
- Moses brother Aaron also dies, leaving Moses not only bereft of his beloved sister but also of his spokesman brother.

And the text never tells us of Moses' mourning either his sister or his brother, nor of his feelings after being told that he would not be able to enter the Promised Land. Perhaps he couldn't. Perhaps he felt that, as leader of the entire nation, he could not acknowledge having any personal grief. But those of us who have counseled the bereaved know full well that the grief does not simply go away if we fail to acknowledge it. Indeed, the grief demands that it be acknowledged. If it is not, it will grow and fester, taking more and more control of the bereaved until the survivor does not have the grief; the grief has the survivor.

Perhaps that's how it was with Moses. He may have been so overcome with anger (one of the first stages of grief and the one, along with depression, with which the mourner most needs to deal consciously) that he could only take vengeance, even knowing that the vengeance itself would be avenged. Just as his unresolved grief led him to strike the rock – twice! – rather than speaking to it, so his unresolved grief led him to take genocidal vengeance upon the Midianites, despite G\*d's warning that the vengeance would itself be avenged.

May we all learn to exercise the courage to deal with our griefs – great and small – and to resolve them.

Shabbat Shalom.