

Revenge: Is It Ever Justified?

by Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel

This essay is reprinted from the book, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values” published by Urim, or the upcoming books, “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to Man” or “The Encyclopedia of Jewish Values: Man to G-d” to be published in the future. This essay is not intended as a source of practical halachic (legal) rulings. For matters of halachah, please consult a qualified posek (rabbi).

Revenge is defined as the infliction of punishment in return for injury or insult, or the desire to retaliate or repay an injury or wrong. It is a basic human emotion or action, which is both intense and natural. One can explain the very first sin and inflicted injury in history as Cain’s revenge for G-d’s favoring Abel over Cain (in their sacrifices to G-d), which drove Cain to murder his brother. If this emotion is so natural, can it be forbidden? What does Judaism specifically say about the act of revenge? Is it ever permitted in Judaism? If yes, then what is considered permitted revenge and what is forbidden revenge? Are there different types of revenge in Judaism, or is the general definition sufficient to be called a Jewish sin? The chapter will explore these questions, the feeling of revenge, the sin, the definition of the act, and when it is permitted and forbidden from a Jewish perspective – all through traditional sources.

THE INTENSITY OF THIS EMOTION

Unlike other sentiments, which may vary from person to person or situation to situation, Judaism recognizes the intensity of the emotion of revenge. Meiri says that revenge is an emotion that “attacks the evil inclination” and forces man to give into it.¹ Chinuch states that this emotion is so powerful that most people in the world will not stop searching for the person who wronged them until they pay back the evil or injury that was done to them.² The classic book of Jewish ethical behavior, *Mesilat Yesharim*, describes how difficult the sentiment of revenge is. A person cannot escape these feelings, as they cause him or her great pain, and the feeling of payback or revenge is indeed so sweet. Thus, resisting the urge to act upon this feeling is indeed difficult, and it is only easy for angels to ignore this emotion.³ In explaining the prohibition against taking revenge in the Torah, Chizkuni writes that the feeling of seething rage completely overtakes a human being.⁴ In another section, Chinuch explains that G-d does not expect a person to be wronged and pained by another, and to remain inert like a rock, without feeling the need to pay back.⁵ If this is so, if the desire for revenge is so great, what then is a Jew supposed to do when confronted by these emotions?

REVENGE IS G-D’S DOMAIN

In verse after verse, G-d tells us that revenge is to be left only to G-d. Even though normally Jews are supposed to imitate the ways of G-d,⁶ the realm of revenge is G-d’s alone. Thus, it states in Psalms that vengeance and revenge belong only to G-d.⁷ Isaiah says that G-d tells those who are afraid and who

¹ Meiri commentary to Avot 3:4

² Chinuch, Mitzvah 241

³ Mesilat Yesharim, Chapter 11

⁴ Chizkuni commentary to Leviticus 19:18

⁵ Chinuch, Mitzvah 338

⁶ Deuteronomy 28:9 with Nachmanides commentary on Deuteronomy 11:1

⁷ Psalms 94:1

have been wronged that He will take revenge for what has been done.⁸ Sometimes G-d will take revenge against His own people, the Jews who have wronged Him by sinning, by letting the enemies of the Jews vanquish the Jewish people.⁹ But in most of Scripture, G-d's revenge is on behalf of the Jewish people, as G-d promises to put on the "cloak" of revenge and repay those who wronged the Jews.¹⁰ One prophet calls G-d a vengeful G-d, full of revenge towards those who have wronged G-d,¹¹ since G-d repeatedly promises revenge upon the enemies of the Jews who have wronged the Jewish people.¹²

Why is it that in regard to all other traits and actions, Jews should imitate the behavior of G-d, but only in the case of revenge does G-d operate alone, not wanting His actions to be emulated? Perhaps it is precisely because revenge is such an intense and volatile feeling that G-d forbade it completely from the realm of man's actions. Human beings would not know how to use this feeling properly and repay a wrong in the proper proportion. Just as Cain murdered Abel as revenge for a sacrifice favored by G-d, which was certainly an "overreaction," perhaps no person can properly control rage and feeling the need for revenge, and therefore cannot administer it properly against another human being who is deserving of punishment. That is why it is left only to G-d to take revenge and avenge a sin properly, in a way that is exact compensation for a wrong committed. Chizkuni implies as much when he says that only G-d can assuage the feeling of revenge within man.¹³

There is one place in the Torah where G-d does command the Jews to take revenge, and perhaps this exception proves the rule. When the Midianites confronted the Jewish people in the desert, it is the only time in the Torah where the Jews were attacked spiritually and not physically. G-d's name was publicly shamed. Therefore, it is possible that this is why only here G-d asked the Jews to avenge these actions and take revenge upon the Midianites.¹⁴ In a related incident, Pinchas took revenge against the Midianite woman and Jewish man who were publicly intimate as a religious act before the Baal Peor idol. Pinchas' action caused the plague that had killed "only" 24,000 Jews to cease. G-d immediately praises this act of revenge by Pinchas, and rewards him with the covenant of peace.¹⁵ But why is Pinchas praised for taking revenge, if revenge is the exclusive domain of G-d? The Talmud explains that, indeed, Pinchas was viewed by the rabbis as wrong and sinful for taking revenge and for doing this act without receiving legal rabbinic permission.¹⁶ It was for this reason that G-d had to "step in" and publicly declare Pinchas as a hero in this specific situation, before the rabbis put him to death for his actions. But why did G-d praise Pinchas's action if revenge is not generally considered "Jewish" or in the domain of human beings? Once again, this exception proves the rule. Because in this instance, G-d's name was being desecrated by idol worship and people were dying as a result, Pinchas was correct to "take the law into his own hands" and avenge the sin against G-d. But, in general, revenge is forbidden

⁸ Isaiah 35:4

⁹ Leviticus 26:25

¹⁰ Isaiah 59:17-19

¹¹ Nachum 1:2-3

¹² Jeremiah 16:10, Ezekiel 25:17

¹³ Chizkuni commentary to Leviticus 19:18

¹⁴ Numbers 31:1-2

¹⁵ Numbers 25:7-12

¹⁶ Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 48b

by Jews or by human beings.

One of the most famous narratives in the Torah where revenge apparently took place was the story of Dina, Jacob's daughter. Shechem, the son of Chamor, ruler of the town also named Shechem, kidnapped Dina and raped her. Dina's brothers were furious, and arranged a "deal" with the people of Shechem, who wanted their city and Jacob's family to become one. The brothers said that if the males of Shechem circumcised themselves, they would be able to marry into the Jewish family. After they were all circumcised, Simon and Levi walked into the town and killed not only Shechem and Chamor, but also the entire townspeople, who could not fight back. Jacob became very angry with his two sons for this act, but they defended themselves saying, "Should our sister be turned into a prostitute?"¹⁷ How are we to understand this incident? Was the act of Simon and Levi in killing the people of the town an act of revenge or not? Were their actions correct? Without delving too deeply into the incident, there is considerable disagreement about whether Simon and Levi did the right thing or not. On the surface, Jacob was still angry at them many years later for their act of revenge, and he cursed Simeon and Levi on his deathbed.¹⁸ Nachmanides states that the brothers were indeed wrong and sinful in their act of revenge.¹⁹ Even those commentaries who defend the action of these brothers explain their actions differently, never legitimizing revenge. Maimonides writes that the attack of the people of the town was indeed justified and deserved the punishment of death under Noahide law, for allowing the rape and kidnapping to continue without protest.²⁰ Maharal justifies Simeon and Levi's action as an act of war between two nations, not one family pitted against another family.²¹

DEFINING THE ACT OF REVENGE JEWISHLY: NEKIMA-RETALIATION

The Torah clearly prohibits the act of revenge in one of the most famous verses in the Torah, with the words at the end of the verse following, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."²² But the Torah uses two distinct and different verbs for the sin of revenge, *Nekima*-retaliation, and *Netira*-grudge. The verse says that both are prohibited. In order to understand the Jewish definition and implications of revenge, both of these terms need to be defined and explained in detail, and, as we will see, each of the terms is a different aspect of the sin of revenge.

The simple definition of revenge, *Nekima*, would seem to be as Rabbeinu Yonah explains it: do not do unto the other person as he did unto you.²³ Tit for tat. Repayment in kind for something that hurt you. (An "Eye for an eye" in the Torah never was meant, according to any commentary, to actually remove someone's eye as punishment. Thus, this is not a proper example or expression of revenge.) Chizkuni defines the prohibition of revenge as an action of retribution regarding money or the body.²⁴

¹⁷ Genesis chapter 34

¹⁸ Genesis 49:5-7

¹⁹ Nachmanides commentary on Genesis 34:13, 49:5

²⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Melachim 9:14

²¹ Gur Aryeh commentary on Genesis 34:13

²² Leviticus 19:18

²³ Shaarei Teshuva 3:219

²⁴ Chizkuni commentary on Leviticus 19:18

Rashbam defines it as repaying one act of evil with another act of evil.²⁵ Malbim defines the retribution in a bit greater detail – i.e., it must be a similar action committed in response to a prior act done to him, such as withholding a favor from a person who did not do you a favor in the past.²⁶ Rabbi Berlin says that it is not only evil to pay back a bad deed for a good deed done for you, but paying back a bad deed for a bad deed done for you is also evil. That is revenge.²⁷

These commentaries explain the verse but do not attempt to explain the term revenge in the legal sense. What precisely is the definition of revenge? Is it revenge if a person damages you and you take him or her to court? Clearly not. Similarly, it is not "revenge" if you defend yourself while someone is attacking you. The Talmud attempts to define this sin. It explains that *Nekima*-retaliation is violated if one day a person asks his neighbor to borrow a garden implement but is refused. The next day that neighbor asks the original man to borrow his garden implement, and the man refuses, by saying "I am not lending the item to you because you did not lend it to me yesterday."²⁸ This is *Nekima*-retaliation and is a Torah sin. This seems, on the surface, a pretty innocuous offense – refusing to lend an object as "payback." But the underlying principle shows the depth of this transgression. Of course, it is easy to understand that when someone harms a person financially or physically that it is forbidden to take revenge by doing the same (or worse) to him or her in retaliation. But even a case of refusal to lend a simple item that costs the person nothing, was not even an action but mere words (and that the person did not suffer an actual loss) would still be considered vengeful and a form of revenge. This still demonstrates that same emotion which is forbidden: I am giving you back just as you gave me yesterday. This is a Torah violation and a sin in Judaism.

Maimonides, in his Book of Commandments, defines this sin in more concrete terms:²⁹ A Jew is forbidden to search out an individual in order to repay an evil act that he suffered by the hand of this man (or a pain that was caused by this person). In his Code, Maimonides calls the act of revenge a very evil trait,³⁰ but understands how difficult it is to resist the urge and action to "get someone back" when the person feels he or she has been wronged. Yet, Maimonides says that the Jewish way is to be the "bigger person" and to lend the object to the neighbor the next day, even when he did not lend it yesterday. Overcoming one's natural desires of retribution is part of being Jewish and requires great inner strength indeed. But that is what Jewish law commands. This seems to be the consensus in defining this commandment in Jewish law.³¹

Rabbi Judah of Regensburg (1140-1271), known as Rabbi Yehuda Chasid, writes that revenge is a sin even if a relative of the person wronged "gives it back" to the person. Forbidden revenge can take the form of an action, words or cursing. Revenge can even be an innocuous act that is normally permitted on its own (it is not revenge or even forbidden to initially refuse to lend your neighbor an

²⁵ Rashbam commentary on Leviticus 19:18

²⁶ Malbim commentary on Leviticus 19:18

²⁷ Haamek Davar commentary on Leviticus 19:19

²⁸ Yoma 23a

²⁹ Maimonides, Seer HaMitzvot, Lo Taase 304

³⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 7:7

³¹ Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot, Lo Taase 60

implement if asked). But if these normally permitted acts or words are undertaken in response to a similar action or words, then they become forbidden as revenge. He advises that Jews who live in an area where retribution is common should move away.³²

Chinuch comments and adds that if someone feels wronged, he or she is not expected to keep it inside and just suffer. It is not a sin to tell the offending person how one feels.³³ But what is forbidden is to keep the anger inside (see chapter about “Anger”) and then wait for an opportunity to reciprocate, in order to intentionally cause the other person to feel what that person feels. That is revenge that is forbidden.³⁴ Thus, there is a fine line here between what is permitted and forbidden. Keeping hatred inside completely is not recommended and is prohibited. Expressing that hatred with retaliatory words or acts are forms of revenge.³⁵ However, a Jew can express his or her displeasure as a reaction to a particular action, but the expression cannot be a means of “getting back” at the person for what happened.

Rabbi Yisrael Meir Kagan highlights a point of contention about this commandment.³⁶ If a person was caused bodily damage by someone else, is it considered revenge if that person reacts and retaliates for this damage by causing the perpetrator physical harm? Chinuch says yes and forbids such retaliation, while others permit Jews to “hit back” if attacked physically. All agree, however, that in monetary matters one may not take revenge by committing a specific act in order to deprive someone else of money, steal or cause him or her property damage as an act of retaliation. Of course, in all these cases of bodily or property damage, responding by calling the police and bringing someone to court seeking justice is certainly not an act of revenge, but is perfectly legitimate and even encouraged in Judaism.

DEFINING THE ACT OF REVENGE JEWISHLY: NETIRA-GRUDGE

The second concept of revenge which is forbidden by the Torah is called in Hebrew *Netira*, which we have translated as “grudge.” How is this prohibition of revenge different from *Nekima*, discussed above? The commentaries are fairly unified in explaining that while *Nekima* is revenge either by an action or non-action (not lending the garden tool out of a feeling of revenge, for example), *Netira* is a sin of emotion only, a feeling or a thought. Thus, Chizkuni differentiates between the two by defining *Nekima* as an action and *Netira* as a thought.³⁷ Malbim defined *Nekima* as something a person does towards another individual, while *Netira* is a sin in one’s heart alone.³⁸ Rashbam says that *Nekima* is payback for one evil with another evil, while *Netira* remains in one’s heart.³⁹

The Talmud gives a much more concrete example that differentiates these two concepts of revenge. In the case of lending the garden implement, as was pointed out above, when the neighbor does

³² Seder Chasidim 557

³³ Chinuch, Mitzvah 338

³⁴ Chinuch, Mitzvah 241

³⁵ Chinuch, Mitzvah 338

³⁶ Sefer Shemirat HaLashon, Peticha, 8-9, Be-er Mayim Chaim

³⁷ Chizkuni commentary on Leviticus 19:18

³⁸ Malbim commentary on Leviticus 19:18

³⁹ Rashbam commentary on Leviticus 19:18

not lend his tool to the man the second day as an act of revenge, this is *Nekima*. However, if the neighbor does lend him the garden implement (after he was denied the garden tool the day before), then he has done an admirable act. But if, at the same time, the lender says, "You see, I am not like you. I am lending it to you, even though you did not lend it to me yesterday," that is *Netira*. The man did nothing wrong technically. No action of revenge. But his motivation in lending the garden implement was clearly revenge, and to show up his neighbor. That is the Talmud's definition of *Netira*.⁴⁰ In forming the Jewish law, Maimonides follows the Talmud's definition of *Netira*, and adds that as long as a Jew keeps in his or her heart the feeling of revenge and hatred for not receiving the initial item (or any other act that causes a grudge and engenders feelings of revenge), that revenge will come out in one form or another. G-d is commanding each Jew to attempt, as much as possible, to erase the emotion from one's heart.⁴¹ Sefer Mitzvot Gedolot also rules like Maimonides and the Talmud.⁴² Orchot Tzadikim reiterates that *Netira* is one of the few commandments in the Torah that a Jew violates by merely having a feeling of a grudge in his or her heart, without any action.⁴³

WHY IS REVENGE FORBIDDEN FOR JEWS?

If the feeling of revenge is such a basic and intense human emotion, then why should the Torah not let Jews act upon this feeling and let Jews retaliate when they feel they have been legitimately wronged? Why is revenge forbidden, especially if it is a feeling that people seemingly cannot control? Why should Jews have to go against their nature to overcome their desire for revenge?

Chinuch gives a philosophical answer why Jews should not feel the emotion of revenge or act upon it.⁴⁴ When something is done to a person, rather than blame the other person who did it, a believing Jew should realize that G-d desired, for some reason, that this person should experience this particular pain. The other individual who caused the pain was only a vehicle for this "punishment" mandated by G-d. Thus, blaming the other person (even though he did what he did out of free will) is pointless, since G-d desired for some reason that the person should feel this emotion. When a Jew realizes this, he or she will look at this action done to him and try to understand what caused G-d's punishment, rather than blame the "messenger" of the pain and seek revenge.

In defining heroism and true strength, the Mishna says that according to Judaism this is achieved by overcoming one's natural desires⁴⁵ (see chapter on "Jewish Heroes"). Much of the Torah and observance of mitzvot-commandments are G-d's desire for the Jew to go against his or her basic nature and act in a moral manner in observing the precepts of the Torah. Fighting one's basic desire to seek revenge is indeed difficult. But the Torah says this is certainly possible, and every Jew is commanded to do so. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato states that even though it is extremely difficult to overcome, and revenge is such a sweet feeling to any person, the Jew is commanded to overcome this tendency and nevertheless be strong.⁴⁶

⁴⁰ Yoma 23a

⁴¹ Maimonides, Hilchot Deot 7:8

⁴² Semag, Lo Taase 81

⁴³ Orchot Tzadikim, Shaar Shmini "Achzoriyut"

⁴⁴ Sefer HaChinuch, Mitzvah 241

⁴⁵ Mishna Avot 4:1

⁴⁶ Mesilat Yesharim 11

Another commentary⁴⁷ states that while revenge is permitted for non-Jews who are not obligated to keep the Torah's precepts, for them not acting upon their emotions and not seeking revenge is an act of special kindness, since they fight and overcome their natural instincts. But for the Jew who is commanded to observe this commandment, there is an additional benefit. It says in the Talmud that for any Jew who is able to succeed and go against his or her natural inclinations (to keep the mitzvot), all of that person's transgressions are removed from him or her.⁴⁸ Rabbi Shlomo Ganzfried (1804-1886) gives a novel reason why a Jew should not take revenge.⁴⁹ He writes that the "best" revenge is to do nothing against the person who has wronged him or her. When the wronged individual does not retaliate, the person who originally offended him or her will hear that this person is so special (by acting in this manner), and will begin to think about his or her own transgression that caused that natural feeling to retaliate. But if retaliation against does take place by that person, it will give the individual actual pleasure knowing that he or she "got under his skin." Thus, by not taking revenge, the second person will come out the better and more respected person.

It should be noted that there is fine line between the concept of "justice," which is always advisable and legitimate, and one who seeks "revenge," which always has negative connotations and is forbidden. Almost everyone who seeks revenge will not call it revenge, but rather "justice," carried out in order to correct how that person has been wronged. And seeking justice is certainly a mitzvah.⁵⁰ Because of this rationalization that will become the mantra of anyone seeking revenge, that may be part of the reason why the Torah prohibited this sin altogether. The Jerusalem Talmud gives another reason to explain that revenge is philosophically absurd.⁵¹ If all Jews are considered like one body and all are connected, then any one Jew cannot seek revenge against another Jew. It would be analogous to a person who accidentally cut one hand with a knife in his other hand. The damaged hand would never "seek revenge" against that other hand since it belongs to the same body. Conceptually, it is no different when a Jew seeks revenge against another Jew.

Finally, the key to the reason that the urge for revenge and the urge to retain a grudge should be overcome and forgotten comes from the verse itself that prohibits this sin. It is not an accident that the commandment to love one's neighbor as oneself is placed at the end of this verse prohibiting revenge.⁵² Since no one would want anyone to take revenge against him or her for something they did to another person, so too no one should take revenge against any individual who one feels he or she may deserve retaliation. Because this is so difficult to do, it is the ultimate test of the verse to love one's neighbor as oneself. Any Jew who can bury this urge and not commit revenge can be said to truly love someone else as much as he loves himself.

WHEN IS REVENGE PERMITTED IN JUDAISM?

⁴⁷ Semag, Lo Taase 12

⁴⁸ Rosh Hashana 17a

⁴⁹ Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 30:8

⁵⁰ Deuteronomy 16:20

⁵¹ Jerusalem Talmud, Nedarim 30a

⁵² Leviticus 19:18

Despite the clear prohibitions to retaliate, there are several instances where Judaism does recognize a form of revenge. Each of them needs to be understood in its own context, and it will be explained why each case is permitted. There is usually a greater principle involved in each case of permitted revenge, more important than overcoming the natural urge to bear a grudge.

The Talmud states that any Torah scholar who does not take revenge is not a Torah scholar.⁵³ Maimonides codifies this into Jewish law.⁵⁴ When and why is this an exception to the rule? Why is it that a Torah scholar is permitted to take revenge when other Jews are not? The answer is that the Torah scholar can only take revenge when it is his Torah is being challenged and insulted. This act is not only an affront to that particular learned Jew, but to the Torah itself and even to G-d. When the honor of the Torah is at stake and is affronted, then any act cannot go unanswered, and the Torah scholar must give back to the person who tried to demean the Torah.

In the same vein, when G-d's name is being desecrated publicly, a Jew is obligated to take revenge, as did Pinchas in the desert, who was praised by G-d (see chapter on "Jealousy"). Based on that incident and the Talmud, Maimonides allows a Jew to take revenge when G-d's name is being desecrated, but only if four specific conditions are met:⁵⁵

- 1) The clear desecration of Judaism or G-d must be in public.
- 2) It must be an act that takes place during the actual desecration of G-d or Judaism, and not something planned later on as retaliation.
- 3) If the person stops to ask permission to retaliate from the legal authorities or rabbis who deal in Jewish law, then it would be forbidden. It must be an act that is spontaneous, in the heat of the moment
- 4) If the person trying to defend the Torah's or G-d's honor is hurt or even killed during the attack, no legal proceedings may later be taken against the person who hurt or killed this person.

There are two specific scenarios where the emotion of revenge is most natural, and the Torah allows the emotion to be acted upon, but only in a supervised manner. The first case involves witnesses to a heinous crime, where they see a murderer kill an innocent person in cold blood. It is very natural for anyone seeing such an act to try to avenge the innocent victim and take revenge upon that murderer. Jewish law does not allow the witness to "take the law into his own hands" and kill that murderer on the spot as an act of revenge, no matter how justified. Rather, the witness must alert the authorities and bring this evil person to a court proceeding and then testify there.⁵⁶ But the feelings of that witness are still inside. It is for this reason that when the murderer is found guilty, the Torah commands that the witnesses actually take their act of revenge, by being the first to kill the murderer in the court supervised execution.⁵⁷ In describing this execution, Maimonides emphasizes how it is the witnesses who must take the lead in the execution.⁵⁸

There are often other people involved in every murder case who feel an even greater desire to take

⁵³ Yoma 22b

⁵⁴ Maimonides, Hilchot Talmud torah 7:13

⁵⁵ Maimonides, Hilchot Issurei Biah 12:4-5

⁵⁶ Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 1:5

⁵⁷ Deuteronomy 17:7

⁵⁸ Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 15:1

revenge against the murderer – the relatives of the victim. The Torah⁵⁹ acknowledges these intense feelings of revenge and says that under certain circumstances, the relative of a murdered person can indeed take revenge and kill the murderer. When there is a case of deliberate and intentional murder, Maimonides rules that the relatives – those who stand to inherit – are like the witnesses, and they are at the forefront of the execution.⁶⁰ Thus, their sense of retribution can be satisfied by taking part in the killing of the person who murdered their relative.

But there is another circumstance where the feelings of revenge may be the greatest of all because the murderer is never executed – the case of accidental murder, where a person has killed someone accidentally but the death might have been prevented if everyone had been more careful. In that situation, Jewish law mandates that the killer go to a City of Refuge until the Kohen Gadol-High Priest dies. In this situation, the pain and desire for revenge of the relatives are never assuaged, since the killer never dies at the hands of the court. How does the Torah and Judaism deal with these intense feelings to avenge the victim in this situation? The Torah does acknowledge and empathizes with the anger and feelings of revenge by the aggrieved relatives. First, if the accidental killer ever leaves the City of Refuge (illegally, before the death of the Kohen Gadol), then the relatives are allowed to kill him with impunity.⁶¹ In addition, after the person has been judged to be an accidental killer and is on his way to the City of Refuge, the Talmud understands the great anger of the relatives and is afraid that the relatives may try to kill that accidental killer on his way to the City of Refuge. Therefore, the court appoints two Torah scholars to accompany the accidental killer to the city, in case they meet up with the relatives of the victim. The Torah scholars attempt to convince the relatives seeking revenge not to act illegally and kill that person then and there, as they attempt to calm down the relative.⁶² When the Kohen Gadol dies after many years and the entire people mourn his death, it is hoped that this public mourning and the effect of time will overcome the relative's desire for revenge. Maimonides explains all these laws in detail, which demonstrate Judaism's great sensitivity about the feelings of one who seeks revenge.⁶³

There is one additional area, somewhat controversial, which allows revenge to take place in certain circumstances. Since the sin of revenge is a result of anger and a need to retaliate because of those feelings, when there is absolutely no anger, sometimes what appears to be revenge can take place for educational purposes, and there is no sin. Rabbi Elchanan Wasserman (1874-1941) speaks in general that if sins are committed for educational purposes as a demonstration to others, without negative feelings or intentions, they are sometimes permitted. (See chapter "Having the Right Intentions and Wrong Results and Vice Versa" for an expansion of this concept.)⁶⁴ Rabbi Abraham Weinfeld, a contemporary rabbi, argues that if parents (or others) want to demonstrate how revenge is wrong and hurtful by showing a child or someone else what an act of revenge is and how painful it can be, then it is permitted.⁶⁵ He brings as a proof Rashi's comments regarding the need to cut an animal (or human being) for surgery in order to heal

⁵⁹ Numbers 35:19

⁶⁰ Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 1:2

⁶¹ Deuteronomy 19:6

⁶² Makkot 10b

⁶³ Maimonides, Hilchot Rotze-ach 5:7-11

⁶⁴ Kovetz He-arot Rav Elchanan Wasserman, Yevamot 70

⁶⁵ Responsa Lev Avraham 128

the sickness or injury, where the cutting is painful and yet the person doing the cutting and healing is not deemed guilty of damaging the animal.⁶⁶ So too, says Rashi, a parent sometimes must admonish or even hit a child to teach him or her a powerful lesson for life. But this act is permitted only if it is done out of love for the child and never out of anger.

Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel currently works with Rabbi Berel Wein and the Destiny Foundation as the Director of Education, whose mission is “to bring Jewish history to life in an exciting, entertaining and interactive way.” Rabbi Amsel has also served as a teacher, a school principal, and an adjunct professor. He has also taught over 2000 educators how to teach more effectively. Rabbi Amsel has worked in all areas of formal and informal Jewish education and has developed numerous curricula including a methodology how to teach Jewish Values using mass media. Recently, he founded the STARS Program (Student Torah Alliance for Russian Speakers), where more than 3000 students in 12 Russian speaking countries learn about their Jewish heritage for five hours weekly. Rabbi Amsel previously served as the Educational Director of Hillel in the Former Soviet Union. He lives in Jerusalem with his wife and has four children and four grandchildren.

⁶⁶ Rashi commentary on Sanhedrin 84b