WE ATTACK AT MIDNIGHT

Adapted from "The Prisoner and other Tales of Faith" by Rabbi Salomon Alter Halpern, published by Feldheim.

It was in the time of Amraffel, king of Shinnar, Aryoch, king of Ellossor, Kedor-Le'omer, king of Aylam and Tiddal, king of Goyyim when they waged war with Be'ra, king of S'dom, Birsha, king of Ammorah, Shin'ov, king of Admoh, Shem-Ayver, king of Tzevoyyim and the king of Be'la (later called Tzoar). All these came together in the Valley of Siddim (which later became the Salt Sea). For twelve years they had paid tribute to Kedor-Le'omer but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. Then, in the fourteenth year, Kedor-Le'omer came with the kings that were his allies. They smote the Refo'im in Ashteros-Karnayyim, the Zuzzim in Hom, the Aymim in Shoveh-Kiryosoyyim and the Chorim in the hill-country of what was later Sayir, as far as El Porron, which borders the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to Ayn Mishpot (that is, Ko'desh) and they conquered the entire countryside (which later was the territory of the Ammolaykim) as well as the Emmorim who lived in Chatzatzon-Tamar. Then the kings of S'dom, Ammorah, Admoh and Tzevoyyim and Be'la (that is, Tzoar) marched forth and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with Kedor-Le'omer, king of Aylam, Tiddal, king of Goyyim, Amraffel, king of Shinnar and Aryoch, king of Ellossor: the four kings against the five. Now, the Valley of Siddim was full of tar pits and when the kings of S'dom and Ammorah tried to flee, they fell in there, while the rest fled to the hills. The invaders seized all the possessions of S'dom and Ammorah and all the food and they went their way. With them, they took also Avrom's nephew, Lot, who dwelt in the vicinity of S'dom, and his possessions, and they departed. A refugee came, and told Avrom the Hebrew, who was living in the plains of Mamray the Emmori, a clansman of Eshkol and Onare, allies of Avrom. When Avrom heard that his clansman had been taken captive, he led forth the trained men of his household, three hundred and eighteen man, and he chased after the invaders, catching up with them at the place (later) called Don. He divided his forces against them and attacked that night, he and his servants, and he defeated them, and chased them as far as Chovah, which is to the left of Damascus. He brought back all the possessions and also Lot his clansman he brought back, and his possessions, and also the women and all the other people. Later, the king of S'dom came out to meet Avrom in the Valley of Sho'veh (that is, the Valley of the King) after Avrom had returned from defeating Kedor-Le'omer and the kings that were his allies. Then Malki-Tzeddek, king of Salem — he was priest to the Most High G-d — brought out bread and wine. He saluted Avrom and said: "Avrom is blessed by the Most High G-d, Possessor of heaven and earth! And blessed, too, is the Most High G-d Who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" and Avrom gave him a tenth of everything. The king of S'dom said to Avrom: "Give me the people and you can keep the possessions." But Avrom replied to the king of S'dom: "I have lifted up my hand and sworn to G-d the Most High, the Possessor of heaven and earth, that I will not take anything, not even a thread or a shoe-lace, nor anything that is yours, so that you cannot later say, 'I made Avrom rich.' The only exception is what the young men have eaten and the share which belongs to my allies, Onare, Eshkol and Mamray: they deserve their share."

[Berayshis, Chapter 14]

From his hiding-place amongst the rocks, Paltiel peered up at the sky. He knew the stars well — the old shepherd with whom he used to keep night watches had made him repeat their

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names over and over again. And the stars were the same here as at Chevron, even here in the foothills of the Lebanon highlands.

Yes, calculated the boy, soon it would be midnight. A fire-arrow shot from the opposite hill would be the signal. And then they would charge the enemy.

The enemy! "Some enemy!" thought Paltiel. Thousands upon thousands of trained fighting-men! The four combined armies of the Land of the Two Rivers. Paltiel shuddered. He was only sixteen and had never fought men before — though he had fought jackals. Once, he had even helped to chase a bear. But men, soldiers! His heart felt like a lump of ice.

What was it the Master had said? "Anyone who is afraid can stay behind. And if we should not return he shall be free of his bond." Should he turn back? There was still time. But — was he really a coward? He wondered whether the other boys — or even the men — of his group, now waiting in their hiding-places in the surrounding hills, all round the enemy camp, had the same feeling. Well, they had all been pretty frightened on the day of the assembly.

Paltiel remembered how pale they had looked when they rose, one after the other, and spoke against the plan. All the older men, bondmen or free, the Master had asked them all. And each had said more or less the same: "How can a small band of shepherds hope to win against four mighty armies?"

And then the Master, Avrom, had spoken. Paltiel recalled the intensity and deep feeling of the Master's words, spoken so quietly but so powerfully. As he had spoken, Paltiel saw that what he said made such good sense. It was so ***right***. And Paltiel realized again what a great leader the Master was and he felt so happy to be one of his followers. The Master's speech had made such an impression that he could still recall it clearly, almost word for word.

"It is very hard for me," he had begun, "to order you to go to war. For years I have taught you all to extend peace and kindness to all men, friend or stranger. How, then, can I order you now to go and kill or be killed?

"We are a small band, not even kin to each other. But our common aim unites us more strongly than ties of blood. And yet, ***because*** we are men of peace, ***because*** the tyrant has not attacked us ourselves, just because of that, this is our fight. I have taught you that G-d, the Lord of heaven and earth, is good and merciful and that He wants all men to be good and merciful like Him. I have taught you that He bids all men to live their lives in peace and harmony, to do justice and live righteously, and that He bids us to help those in suffering and want and to defend the helpless against evil men and cruel despots. I have always taught you that we stand for peace, for justice, for kindness, for that is the way we serve the Lord of heaven and earth.

"Now this tyrant with his allies has attacked and vanquished not only his former vassals but many tribes who had done him no harm — and he has taken captive one of our kinsmen, who is still one of us, still trying, in his own way, to carry on the way of G-d, even if he has parted

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company with us. He was not a citizen of the Confederation of the Five Cities but a stranger, peacefully pasturing his sheep in the open plains. Yet at this moment he is being taken into slavery, together with all the people of the Confederation. And we all know how they treat slaves in the Land of the Two Rivers.

"Therefore, we who stand for peace and justice and kindness must do something for these unfortunate people and their wives and children. It is true that if we should fail, and if we ourselves should be taken captive, there will be no one of us left to carry the message of G-d. But it is true, too, that if we stand by and do nothing, then we shall have betrayed our duty and people will rightly say that our great ideals and teachings are mere words. We shall have nothing left to live for.

"But if we go out and fight, not for ourselves, but for justice; if we go out and fight these cruel tyrants to help those who are now being enslaved and oppressed, then, whether we live or die, we shall have done the greatest thing a man can do — we shall have offered our lives for G-d and His message to mankind. Whether we live or die, humanity will be better because men have fought to help others, have fought for justice, and not for themselves.

"Therefore, whether you obey me or not, I will go. I cannot insist that you join me but I will go and do my utmost to help these captives, to save them from the hands of the tyrant. If need be, I will go alone and sanctify the Name of G-d in the world with my life."

For a few moments no one had moved. Then Eliezer of Damascus, the oldest and most trusted of the Master's pupils, had stood up and said: "You will not be alone, my Master. I too shall go." And then more men had called out: "And I!" "And I!" In the end, everyone who was able in body had joined, three hundred and eighteen men in all. The Kenaanite neighbour, too, had honoured their alliance with the Master and had called out their men, promising to guard the homesteads and flocks of Avrom's people while they were away.

And now, after their long march, they were still three hundred and eighteen. Not even one had taken advantage of the Master's call that those overcome by fear can return home. And should he, Paltiel, be the only one? No! All he could do was to hope that he would survive the battle — but he could not desert the cause of right.

There and then he prayed to the G-d of Avrom, the Lord of heaven and earth, for strength and courage and for willingness and loyalty to the end. After that, he felt strangely encouraged as he waited tensely in the moonlit night.

And there was the signal! As soon as the fire-arrow shot into the sky, he went forward towards the enemy without fear. The others, too, came out from their hiding-places so suddenly that Paltiel wondered to himself how they had all managed to hide themselves so well. They rushed upon the enemy and took them completely by surprise. The enemy's guards tried to make a stand. Bugles were sounded and torches were lit all over the camp — but it didn't help them. Avrom's men fought like lions. Paltiel himself struck down two of the

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guards and then a third and a fourth. After that he lost count. He found himself in the midst of the enemy, striking out right and left. He knew now that G-d was with them, fighting on their side, for it had become a night of wonders. Arrows and spears hailed down upon them but miraculously they were not hurt — the enemy's weapons were as harmless as straw and dust. Thousands of the enemy were slain in the fighting but not even one of Avrom's men was killed. At last, the enemy turned and fled, pursued by Avrom and his men.

Paltiel stayed behind and watched the remnant of the great armies flee, with Avrom and his small band giving chase. From the rise where he stood, it looked almost comical to see in the grey dawn that vast crowd of terrified fighting-men running for their lives, pursued by such a small band of shepherds!

After a short while, he turned to the other part of the task that had to be done: he and the rest of the boys, together with the old men, had been told to take care of the rescued prisoners. They were in a sorry state indeed. They had been beaten and starved and had been made to carry their own belongings for their captors. Even now they could not believe that they had been freed. The pitiful captives were confused and dazed at the attack and didn't even dream that they had been freed. In their dejection, they thought that they had merely changed masters.

The only one of them who understood what had happened was Avrom's nephew, Lot. As soon as he saw that it was his uncle and his people who were the attackers, he realized that they were free. As Lot and his family helped to feed and comfort the others, he thought to himself how such an escapade was, well, just typical of his uncle.

The main party returned the next evening. They had pursued the enemy to near Damascus and completely scattered them. They all rested that night and in the morning they started on their long way back.

Their progress was slow. The freed captives, mostly women and children, were unable to walk quickly. Behind them came a long train of donkeys and camels laden with the recovered loot or carrying those who were too weak to walk. At the head of the long caravan rode Avrom with his rescued nephew.

Paltiel overtook them and soon left them behind. He had been ordered by Eliezer to ride ahead and bring the news to the survivors of the Confederation. When he arrived, Paltiel saw that their kings had come out of hiding and had gathered the remnants of their men about them. He told them what had transpired and when they heard how the invaders had been routed and had fled, there was great rejoicing. "Maybe," thought Paltiel to himself, "these rich townsmen, who could only think of themselves and their wealth, have learned their lesson. Maybe they have learned not to be so selfish in future and will take an example from the Master to care for others."

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The news spread to all the tribes of Kenaan and delegations arrived from all over. Together they marched to meet Avrom and his men. They gave him a triumphal reception and showered honours upon him. The priest-king, Malki-Tzeddek, of the town of Salem, where the worship of the true G-d survived from the days of No'ach, came out to greet Avrom and praise him and his G-d Who had helped him so wondrously.

Later, the king of S'dom held a public audience with Avrom. He had come out of his hiding-place in the caves and now, surrounded by those of his court that had survived the invasion, the king spoke to Avrom, carefully choosing not to mention Avrom's rescue of his townspeople. He seemed most reluctant to have to thank Avrom for what he had done and straightaway came to the point that concerned him most. "By the conventions of war," he said, "you are of course entitled to keep all that you have taken back from the invaders. That would include all the people and the property. I would ask, however, that you return the people to me and you can have all the possessions that you have recaptured."

Avrom looked at this king who considered people as nothing more than material to be bartered away. He answered slowly and deliberately, "The people are not captives. I will not keep them as my "property." They are free. As for the property, I make a solemn oath that I will not take anything — not even a thread nor a shoe-lace — from you, so that you cannot later say 'I made Avrom rich' when it is G-d Who has made me wealthy. The only exceptions are that those who came with me shall not have to repay what they have already eaten from the booty while they were with me on this mission, and also the share which belongs to my allies, Onare, Eshkol and Mamray, who looked after our homesteads and flocks while we were away. I cannot speak for them and they, too, deserve their share."

When Paltiel heard Avrom's response to the king's words, he was so proud! But he wondered to himself whether the people of S'dom understood what the Master meant. Maybe it would dawn on them later why the Master refused the riches. Paltiel, who had known Avrom and his teachings for some time now, knew exactly what made the Master refuse the riches. This deed had been done for G-d and for justice. This had been a battle fought to protect the victims of cruel tyrants. Even if, by the rules of war, the victor was entitled to keep what he had taken in the battle, this attack and its moral victory would be spoiled if they were to gain from it. Perhaps the people of S'dom, and their king, would learn that there is such a thing as kindness to others, to do something for others without taking something in return.

But as they were making their way back to the plains of Mamray, Paltiel noticed that they had received something after all. He saw that many youngsters and children were coming with them, to learn the way of G-d in the House of Avrom.

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