IS REVENGE A DIRTY WORD?

In our portion we see that one of the things that Moshe does before his death is that he takes care of "finishing off some business". God asks him to "Take revenge for the Israelites against the Midianites. Then you shall die..." (Bamidbar 31:1). This is not a private vengeance, but revenge for the whole nation. Moshe, when instructing the people to arm themselves for battle, refers to this confrontation as "God's revenge". The nation of Midyan, primarily its women, led the Jewish men astray, to adultery and idolatry, and now was the time to repay them. This is not just a simple tit-for-tat, but a fulfillment of God's wishes in the world. We're not talking about pettiness here, but rather about the higher value of justice.

Throughout the ages there has been a philosophical debate about the justification to kill murderers. Why kill another person? It won't bring the dead person back? One reason given as justification is that this will prevent other potential offenders from killing. For example the Rambam (Moreh Nevuchim 3:42) mentions the deterrent factor as the main reason behind punishment.

That may be one reason why humans kill murderers, but as Rav Chaim Navon explains in his book on the weekly portion, God does it for Tzedek - to mete out justice. Even if we as humans may not be able to kill a certain criminal in the human court system, we believe that God will "take care of him". Sometimes God actually lets us help Him bring justice to the world. That is the case in the war against Midyan. The bad guys must be punished. The children of Israel, with God's instructions, fight against Midyan, in order that this eternal law of God's justice, - blood for blood- will be fully realized.

Rav Navon, in his essay, reminds us that justice, and revenge are not dirty words.

There are still people today trying to fulfill this type of justice. Recently I attended the two day conference on the Holocaust organized by the Center for Holocaust Studies of Michlala Jerusalem. One of the speakers was Ephraim Zuroff, the acclaimed "Nazi Hunter" who played a major role in tracking down and bringing indicted Nazi war criminals to trial. In his speech he asked what kind of work is there left for him to do now, when most of the Nazi criminals left alive are in their 90s? Is it appropriate to bring such feeble people to trial? He told
about a number of Nazis who are on trial now, despite their age - in the name of justice. He is also fighting against Nazi collaborators who are being honored posthumously as "war heroes" by their respective countries. Zuroff continues on his mission for the memories of the Jews that these people murdered. Revenge is not a dirty word.

THERE IS A POPULAR SAYING "revenge is a dish best served cold" which means that revenge is more satisfying if enacted when unexpected - "cold-blooded" violence. So this week's recipe uses cold cuts as one of the ingredients and also mango because it is in season.

SALAD WITH COLD CUTS AND MANGO

1-2 mangos, cubed
1 onion, chopped
1-2 red chilli peppers (or to taste)
100 grams of your favorite cold cuts
1 lettuce (shredded)
1 large handful fresh coriander or parsley
1 teaspoon oil
1 lemon