

Parshat Matot Masei. July 10, 2021. Torah Portion: Numbers 30:2-36:13

Matot - tribe.... Masei, journeys - the 42nd and 43rd weekly Torah portion in the annual Jewish cycle of Torah reading and encompassing the last in the Book of Numbers. Torah Portion: Numbers 30:2-36:13

God told Moses, “Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites” (Numbers 31:1). The Israelites obediently armed themselves and attacked the Midianites, killing the men (verse 7). Also, “the Israelites captured the Midianite women and children and took all the Midianite herds, flocks and goods as plunder” (verse 9). When the troops returned to Moses, he was angry that they had not fully carried out the Lord’s vengeance (verse 14; cf. verse 3). The Midianite women were those who had caused Israel to sin at Baal Peor (see Numbers 25). So Moses commanded that the women be killed, and also “kill all the boys” (Numbers 31:17).

<https://reformjudaism.org/podcasts/other-hand-ten-minutes-torah-our-moral-compass-parashat-matot-masei>

On May 9th, John Spiegel reminded us of Max Ticktin’s point that a modern Jew will never be able to reconcile with three themes in Torah - the treatment of women, slavery and the genocide of the Midianites.

The details - even the veracity -- of this history, as told in today’s reading, is not the most important issue in my mind. What makes these verses so challenging - so disturbing -- is the fact the rabbis chose to include this genocide, with us as perpetrators, in our sacred book as our history, and that we are mandated read it out loud every year.

What is the lesson here?

These verses highlight the Israelites’ utter lack of humanity. Perhaps we ought to chant these terrifying verses as we do Lamentations - but lamentations with us as the perpetrators, not as victims. By reading this parasha, we must admit that we Jews have the capacity to do terrible things and that we are not that different from other nations.

It is much easier - and much more desirable - to regard our entire Jewish history through the lens of being victims who nevertheless survived, rather than as mass killers. But we have been both.

Owning this history and our role as perpetrators of genocide leads to some difficult and painful questions: By way of analogy let me pose the question reflectively and ask you to do the same:

Would I have been capable of being a Nazi? How about you?

I know how much I want the answer to be no - for me and all of us - but how confident can we be?

Let me emphasize my point in a different way: Acknowledging our historic genocide of the Midianites means that we have to look at our entire history through the millennia - including our contemporary role - with more balance and moral reckoning. For example, by focusing on our history with the Midianites - even long ago - should we not try to look at both sides of history in other periods - even, say, just before and during the Holocaust? In that horrible period, we were undoubtedly the victims. But with the Midianites, **we were the Germans.**

One of my colleagues was seriously injured and lost her father during the violence that gripped her native El Salvador as a child. Today this woman - Rosa Anaya - works to give prisoners a second chance - some of whom were part of the very same gangs who practically destroyed her family. It is Rosa's way to end help violence so more people don't have to suffer. In a recent talk she said, *"We are all capable of evil under the right pressure and under the right circumstances. But all of us are capable of unimaginable good, as long as we have a choice, under the right pressure and under the right circumstance"*

Back to our own history: I understand the difference with the Holocaust and other mass killings of Jews, stretching back to the Crusades. One difference is that the Midianite murders occurred millennia ago. But in other ways, there are similarities: uncomfortable ones.

A few weeks ago, at Paul Scham's recommendation, I read the book *Learning from the Germans* by the American Jewish philosopher Susan Neiman. In this book and in the wake of our sputtering American attempts to build reconciliation and establish equity between white and black races in this country, Neiman asks what we can learn from the Germans about confronting the evils of the past. Here answer is, "a lot." By contrast to our country that has not done much to confront our racist past - or present - the Germany government enacted laws, implemented reparations, established a strong relationship with Israel, built museums and other commemorations, taught its history honestly in schools and most recently, took in 1 million refugees - much of which can be seen as an ongoing atonement for the crimes of the Holocaust.

We rarely teach our history with the Midianites or confront its meaning in defining our identity as Jews. It makes us uncomfortable; it is hard to think we were capable of mass murder. But, as we look once more to this same troubled land that once held the Midianites and is now part of what we call Israel, shouldn't we? In the words of Elie Wiesel, "If we forget, the dead will be killed a second time, and then they are today's victims."

By confronting today's parasha, I believe we should declare our responsibility to learn, to change, to acknowledge, to remember, perhaps even to apologize -- and to become better. So, to reiterate my first question, Could I (could you) have been a Nazi? My second question for discussion is: What should we do to acknowledge and ultimately to atone for our killing of practically the entire Midianite nation?

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