

## ***D'var Torah Matot-Masei***

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I appreciate the opportunity to give this d'var Torah. It's my first one at this congregation. And it looks like I landed one of the most difficult and ethically problematic portions of the Torah. It is a double portion, so I appreciate your indulgence as I take the bull by the horns and delve into the most difficult parts. Disturbing as these stories are, they are relevant to the terrible situation we are now facing in Gaza – and provide some insight that may help us respond.

### **The story**

I'll pick up where we left off last week. We heard from Craig Sumberg about the zealotry of Pinchas. Craig raised concerns about the curious support in the Torah for some brutal acts. In B'Midbar (Numbers) Chapter 26, Israelite men are seduced by daughters of Moav and Midian, leading to worshipping local deity *ba-al peor* as well as the desecration of the *Mishkan*. Following this transgression, there is a plague that kills 20,000 Israelites.

To assuage God's wrath, Pinchas spears an Israelite and a Midianite woman right through the belly. Following this action, the wrath of God appears to be assuaged. God blesses Pinchas. The plague ends. The story moves on and we think we may be done with this. But things only get worse in the *Matot* portion.

In Chapter 31, Moses is commanded by God to take "Israel's vengeance on the Midianites."

Note that it says Israel's vengeance. Not God's vengeance or Moses' own vengeance.

Moses orders Pinchas to act. He is told to select 1,000 men from each tribe. Pinchas leads the army that kills the Midianite kings and all their men. Pinchas burns down the Midianite cities, and he takes all women and children captive.

Rather than resolving things, Moses gets angry that they have left grown women and children alive. Moses orders the captives to be killed. Only the young girls who are virgins are left alive, and they are distributed as booty -- spoils of war to the Israelites.

### **What do we make of it?**

Many commentators agree that it is one of the most shocking and disturbing in the Torah. If you look closely at the words of the portion, God orders Moses to take "Israel's vengeance" as if to make good on the wrongs committed against them, without saying exactly what the

vengeance would be. God never says that Moses should kill everyone. As one commentator says, Moses has “overstepped his mandate.” A bit of an understatement.

At least it is clear that it is Moses and not God that orders the killings. There is some comfort in that. For the rest of the story, we see Moses and not God giving the orders. Moses seems to have lost his prophetic voice.

We must remember here that the Midianite army has been disarmed. The towns destroyed. Moses is ordering the killing of captive women and children who cannot defend themselves. In modern parlance, we would call this genocide.

### **Concept of vengeance**

Let us step back, for a moment, and look at the concept of vengeance in the Torah. It is a problematic concept, and we get mixed messages from different sources.

- In *Vayikra* (Leviticus) Ch. 19, the Torah commands not to hold grudges or take vengeance. Rather than seeing this as a complete prohibition, this has been interpreted by some to say that only God, not people, have the right to take this kind of action when wrongs have been committed.
- But In *Tehillim* (psalm 58) revenge is celebrated: “the righteous will rejoice when they see vengeance bathing the feet in the blood of the wicked.”

Now these words are hard to take. They sound like something from Saddam Hussein and not King David. But perhaps they could be understood as a description of what happens rather than a justification for what *should* happen. When a crime is committed, people get angry. And *even* the righteous seek vengeance and will revel in it when they see justice done. Perhaps more than they should. So:

- vengeance may be an emotional act of letting off steam - but that does not make it right;
- and there is a difference between an act of *tikkun*, correcting what is wrong, and simply destroying an enemy.

And this Torah portion provides a more humane way of responding for the lust for vengeance. In *Massei*, when Israel enters Canaan, God orders the creation of six cities of refuge. There “manslayers” can go to avoid retribution of those who may seek “blood vengeance.” Chapter 35:12 explains that these “cities shall serve you as a refuge from the avenger, so that the manslayer may not die unless he has stood trial before the assembly.”

This system helps to preserve the rule of law in the face of high passions. Even the person who kills deserves a trial rather than the justice of the angry mob.

## The revenge of Moses

But in the hands of Moses, the captive women and children of Midian do not get the benefit of such justice.

How and why might Moses have acted in this way? What led him to anger? What made him crack?

Consider that Moses is late in life. His wife and his brother Aaron are dead. He's been told he would never enter the promised land. He's sad and perhaps bitter that all he strived for in his life keeps getting challenged.

He had to stand up to Pharaoh and escape the Egyptian army to get out of Egypt. He then had to stand up to his own people who were never satisfied with their liberation. And his people kept getting attacked and attacked. Recall Amalek, who attacked from the rear, and picked off the most vulnerable among the Israelites. After working so hard, everything he's trying to accomplish may now be undermined.

What I love most about Moses earlier in life is how he bargains with God to forgive the Israelites after they transgressed – to show compassion. Yet this compassionate man succumbs to his own anger when faced by the Midianites. Why?

- Some have said that the Midianites created an existential threat to Israel, perhaps even greater than what military might could do.
- The experience with the Midianites may have exposed Moses to the dangers of assimilation, inter-marriage, the continued threat of the Israelites worshipping other Gods, now increased by the risk of by living side-by-side people like the Midianites.
- But most dangerous of all, I believe, is the fact that Moses did it because he could. In a democracy, the leaders must answer to their people. In this situation, Moses need not answer to anyone. The Israelites were clearly not going to hold Moses accountable for attacks on a Midianite people they were angry at too. A situation like this becomes infinitely more dangerous when one people are subject to the total power and control of another. When there's no democracy and accountability, there is nothing to tame the flames of anger and vengeance.

And Moses, who lost his prophetic voice, fails to act as if he has to answer to a higher authority – be that God or the values for which the budding new principles of Torah are supposed to stand.

Moses' purposes are good. He passionately desires to fulfil our hope of being a free people in our own land – a hope we have kept alive for thousands of years.

But we must ask ourselves: can crimes be committed in the name of a good and higher purpose – including the safety and security of Israel? And what of the righteous armies of Israel who committed the acts that Moses ordered them to do? Can we blame them “for just obeying orders?”

Of everything I have read about this Torah portion, the one that most hit home for me was a commentary by Rabbi Arthur Waskow. You may know of Arthur Waskow as the founder of the Shalom Center in Philadelphia, the author of *Godwrestling*. He has been a major influence on my life. When I returned from living in Israel in 1986 to take a job in Washington, DC, I sought him out. He directed me to the Fabrangen Havurah in DC where I became a member.

Arthur Waskow wrote that, all his life, he felt that the words of chapter 31 on the killing of the Midianites should be expunged from the Torah. Just cut out. There was no way to reconcile them with the other more humane elements of the Torah that value every human being.

But after years of struggling with this section, Rabbi Waskow came to the opposite conclusion: this text is meant to us as a warning. An invaluable warning. Our community, the leaders we know and love, the righteous armies that defend us, are capable of terrible acts.

I have always taken comfort in knowing that the Torah does not whitewash our own origin stories. It does not portray our forefathers or mothers as people without fault. And in this Torah portion, the story makes clear that we are not just capable of making mistakes. We are capable of committing genocide.

If I may scroll forward to today. That highly charged word “genocide” is now in the news. There are now debates among legal experts and politicians about whether Israel's acts in Gaza constitute genocide. Organizations I greatly respect, such as the Israeli human rights organization *B'Tselem*, have said that it is.

But one of the most poignant and insightful perspectives I've heard comes from the Israeli writer and Hebrew University Professor Yuval Harari – who you may know as the author of *Sapiens: A brief History of Humankind*. I encourage you to look at what he has [said](#) (see the link). The discussion of genocide, though important, may be a distraction from the most pressing question today for the Jewish people.

It is not just Israel's legal standing in the world that is at risk. It is Judaism itself. The word *B'Tselem* comes from Genesis, which says that *all* people are created in God's image. All Israelites. All Midianites. All the starving people of Gaza.

If we lose sight of this, what is Judaism itself? As I pointed out earlier, Moses treated the Midianite people as the “other,” a population to which he need have no accountability – not to his own people, not to God, not to the ethical principles that undergird the Jewish project.

I started my own career in the human rights field working in the West Bank and Gaza. My work took me to the dusty villages and refugee camps where I interviewed the mothers and grandmothers of children killed in the *Intifadah*. The mothers themselves were so young I could not grasp how they could be mothers of these children themselves.

But I heard them cry for their children. And I can tell you this: Palestinian mothers love their children. They are human beings just like us. They are people.

As Jews read this Torah portion all over the world today, I hope they take these words to heart. The portion need not be a prophesy. But as Rabbi Arthur Waskow says, it is a warning. And given the urgent crisis of starvation going on in Gaza right now, it must be a call to action.

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