

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT MATOT-MASEI

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The end of Sefer Bamidbar is directed mostly towards the impending entrance into *Eretz Yisrael*. Since the census in Parashat Pinchas, the Torah discusses the method of the division of the land (26, 52-56), and continues with the inclusion of daughters in the laws of inheritance (27, 1-11), the first command to Moshe to prepare for his death, since he will not be leading the people in to the land of Israel (27, 12-14), the selection of Yehoshua as the leader once they enter the land (27, 15-23), the laws of the daily sacrifices (28, 1-39), the special status of Gad, Reuven, and half of the tribe of Menashe in the division (32, 1-42). Parashat Masei summarizes the forty year trip through the desert (33, 1-49), followed by the necessity of war in order to conquer (33, 50-56), the borders of the land (34, 1-15), the names of the leaders of each tribe who would perform the division (34, 16-29), the laws connected to the setting up of cities in *Eretz Yisrael* for the Leviim and as cities of refuge (35, 1-34), and the problem of intertribal intermarriage and its effect on the inheritance of estates in the land (36, 1-13).

There are two notable apparent exceptions, both at the beginning of Parashat Matot. The first is the halakhic section dealing with the laws of vows, specifically the vows of women. This section is strikingly out of place, seemingly having nothing to do with other legal sections in the Biblical neighborhood, and unrelated to the place in the narrative, at the edge of the desert, before the entry to the land. In today's shiur, I wish to address the second exception, which is the war with Midyan. Chronologically, we may assume that it took place more or less at the point in the Torah where we find ourselves, but chronology here is misleading. Parashat Balak, with its immediate aftermath in the beginning of Parashat Pinchas, completes the narrative section of the Torah which brings us up to the end of the journey through the desert. This is clearly indicated by the final conclusion of the Torah to the censuses of Parashat Pinchas.

These are the countings of Moshe and Elazar the priest, who counted the Israelites on the plains of Moav, above the Jordan river at Yericho.

In these there were no people from the counting of Moshe and Aharon who had counted the Israelites in the Sinai desert.

For God had said to them, you shall die in the desert, and no man of them had survived, except for Calev ben Yefuneh and Yehoshua bin Nun. (26, 63-65)

This summation is a statement of passage – the world of the desert is over, and now – only now, since the original generation has completely passed away – now can the Jews enter the Promised Land.

Logically, the war with Midyan should have been related immediately after the story of Baal Peor, which is at the end of Parashat Balak. The war is a reaction to that incident, as God tells Moshe:

Attack the Midyanites and smite them.

For they are attackers of yours, with their designs which they design against you in the incident of Peor, and because of the incident of Kozbi daughter of the prince of Midyan their sister, who was struck on the day of the plague in the incident of Peor. (25, 17-18)

In fact, these verses are found not before the description of the war in our parasha, but immediately after the incident of Baal Peor, at the beginning of Parashat Pinchas. The Torah records God's command to Moshe to wage war against Midyan immediately, in precisely the right place. But nothing happens. The fulfillment of that command is put off until the next parasha. This should not be explained away as basically an unimportant delay. In fact, the Torah emphasizes that it is not normal to have a command in one parasha and its fulfillment in another parasha by **repeating** the command of God to Moshe in Parashat Matot. "Take the revenge of the Israelites from the Midyanites; afterwards you shall pass away" (31,2). Moshe was not merely fulfilling God's command in Parashat Pinchas when he organized the army in Parashat Matot; he was responding to another command, delivered this time immediately before the fulfillment. By repeating the command, the Torah indicates that the first occurrence was the correct location, in terms of narrative context; but nonetheless there is a reason for the second occurrence. The actual war is placed in the second context, which, as we have seen, is one connected to the conquest and division of the land of Israel. We wish to understand what the meaning of this parasha is in the overlying context.

[It should be noted that the conquest of the land of Midyan has nothing to do with the conquest of the land of Israel. Unlike the lands of Sichon and Og, the Jews do not settle in Midyan, and the land is not annexed to the Land of Israel. The war is against the **people** of Midyan, not the **land** of Midyan, or, to use the words of the Torah, it is a war of **revenge** (*nekama*), not one of **conquest**.]

There are a number of anomalies in the story of the war with Midyan. Let us list a few of them.

1. God commands Moshe, "Take the vengeance of the Israelites from the Midyanites; afterwards you shall pass on (*tei'asef el amekha*)" (31,2). What is the connection between the war against Midyan and Moshe's death? The Ramban touches on this question, explaining that anything having to do with the Jews before crossing the Jordan is Moshe's responsibility; Yehoshua only enters the picture after crossing the river. This does not, I believe, fully explain why the imminent death of Moshe is stressed as part of this command. If the conquest of Midyan belonged, essentially, to the conquest of the land of Israel, there might be a reason to explain that it is Moshe and not Yehoshua who leads it, based on geography rather than thematic unity. But in fact, as we have seen, there is no thematic connection between the war on Midyan and the

wars of conquest. The war against Sichon and Og has more of a connection (at least in the ultimate outcome) with the war of conquest, and Moshe is described as the leader in that war; yet the Torah saw no need to explain his involvement. Secondly, the verses emphasis on Moshe's impending **death** seems to indicate a connection not to geography but to something personal in Moshe's life which is the reason for the war and Moshe's involvement in it.

2. God commands Moshe to take "the **vengeance of the Israelites**" from Midyan. One verse later, when Moshe relays the command to the Jewish army, he tells them to "deliver the **vengeance of God** on Midyan" (31,3). The contrast is striking. (See Rashi 31,3, who explains why there is no contradiction, but not why Moshe deliberately changed the wording of the instruction).
3. The army, on Moshe's instructions (but without any indication that God had so commanded), is carefully constructed on the basis of tribal representation – "a thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, from each tribe of Israel, shall you send to the army" (31,4). No other war is fought in this manner. What is the meaning of this unusual "draft?"
4. Pinchas accompanies the army on its mission. Why? There are two, not necessarily contradictory, explanations of Pinchas' role. Either he was the military leader, or he served the ritual role of *mashuach milchama*, the priest who, according to the instructions found in Parashat Shoftim (Devarim 20). Either way, his participation, and especially the explicit singling out of his participation, requires explanation. A priest is not the obvious choice for military leader, and, even if we accept that the role of *mashuach milchama* exists already (even though Parashat Shoftim lies in the future), it is striking that in no other war in Tanakh is the *mashuach milchama* named – or even mentioned. The obvious answer (see Rashi, Ramban, and nearly every other commentator) is that Pinchas is sent because of his singular (and not priestly) role in the incident of Baal Peor, where he executed Kozbi and Zimri. He is now being sent, in Rashi's words, to "finish" the job. This would imply a role of military leadership. If so, why is he not mentioned afterwards, especially when Moshe rebukes the military leaders ("the military leaders, commanders of thousands, and commanders of hundreds" – 31,14)?
5. God gives Moshe a very general instruction – "take the vengeance of the Israelites from Midyan." Moshe gives a very general instruction to the Jewish army before they set forth – "Arm people from yourselves for the army, and they will attack Midyan, to place the vengeance of God on Midyan." What exactly are the military objectives? When they return victorious, Moshe angrily rebukes them for not killing the women of Midyan. Did they not follow his instructions? Were there in fact any instructions? Why did he not instruct them exactly in what he wanted, if it was so important?
6. The word "**tzava**" (normally translated as "army") appears repeatedly in this parasha. If you think this is natural when describing a war, it is worth noting that in the wars of Sichon and Og, the previous war fought by the Jews, the word does not appear even once.

Moshe spoke to the people, saying: Get ready people from yourselves for the **tzava**, and they will attack Midyan, to place the vengeance of God on Midyan.

A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, from each tribe of Israel, shall you send to the **tzava**.

There was delivered from the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand ready for the **tzava**.

Moshe sent them, a thousand from each tribe to the **tzava**, them and Pinchas ben Elazar the priest to the **tzava**, and the holy vessels and the trumpets of sounding in his hand.

They massed (**va-yitzbe'u**) on Midyan.... (31,3-7)

What is the role of this word in our parasha?

God tells Moshe to take revenge on the Midyanites and then die. I think that what this means is that this war is not merely appropriate for Moshe, but is a necessary act for him to fully fulfill his role on earth. The sentence, "Take the vengeance of the Israelites from the Midyanites; afterwards you shall pass on," is equivalent to "do this thing; then you can die." There is one more thing you must do to fulfill your destiny. That command encourages Moshe to understand the purpose of the impending war in terms of the mission of his life, and not only in terms of advancing Jewish history in general. In terms of the goal of punishing the Midyanites the role may very well belong to Pinchas more than to Moshe, since his historic role is to take vengeance from the enemies of God, specifically from Midyan. If God has given this role to Moshe, which is what is implied by making his death dependent on the fulfillment of the role, there has to be an element involved that fits in with Moshe's historic mission, which is not to be the scourge of the enemies of God.

Moshe understands that his job is to prepare the Jews to enter *Eretz Yisrael*, to be the people who received the Torah and are worthy of it. In this particular context, there had been a terrible failure, both of the Jews and of Moshe, a few days earlier. When meeting the local culture, one of idolatry but even more of licentiousness, the people had abandoned forty years of training and fallen into an orgiastic celebration of decadence. Moshe, at that moment, had not known what to do, and only Pinchas, the solitary zealot, had saved the day. The "vengeance of God" which Moshe is commanded to carry out includes, at least as far as Moshe is concerned, the element of immunizing the Jewish people from the infection which will be present as soon as they cross the Jordan and meet the local populations. Hence there is a dual role here, attached to two personalities. Pinchas is directed towards punishing Midyan; Moshe is directed to changing the Jews' attitude towards licentiousness and the glitter and glamour of the decadent populations of the region.

Back in Pinchas, God had commanded Moshe to "*Tzaror* the Midyanites and smite them." The first word, *tzaror*, comes from a root meaning to be an enemy, to bother and antagonize. A *tzar* is an enemy. The reason given by God is that the Midyanites are *tzoririm* to the Jews. I think this means that not only should you develop an attitude of antagonism – to replace the attitude of fascination or attraction which overwhelmed the Jews when they first met the daughters of Moav and Midyan. There is a psychological problem here, and it is to be treated by a change in attitude, of which the actual war is

only an expression. To kill them merely as a punishment, dispassionately, will miss the point – this is to be an act of vengeance; in other words, it is personal. You need to realize that they – and their way of life – are the enemy; and as they are enemies to you, so you must be enemies to them and all they stand for.

God does not tell Moshe exactly what to do, for this is Moshe's mission. How to educate the Jews is Moshe's life career, and this is the final educational activity before he can die. What is more, Moshe had shown an acute lack of initiative at Peor, waiting for God to tell him what to do, and that is precisely what he needs to overcome now.

Moshe tells the Jews to go and deliver God's vengeance on Midyan. Changing the phrase "the vengeance of the Jews" to the vengeance of God" is designed to make them realize that this is a holy mission and not merely a punishment. The Midyanites are not merely enemies of yours, but evil, because they are enemies of God. Perhaps Moshe thought that this charge was sufficient for Pinchas and the army commanders to realize what to do – or perhaps Moshe himself had no particular plan what to do. The aim was not to destroy Midyanite political power but to engage in acts of destruction so as to inculcate into the Jews the feeling that every manifestation of Midyanite culture and morality needs to be met with enmity and aggression. (See Ramban 31, 6, the second suggestion).

But Moshe did have one very clear idea. He told the Jews to choose and prepare a representative group from each tribe, who would form the *tzava*, the army. The word *tzava* means "group," or "mass." A *tzava* is the opposite of the individual. Moshe did not invite the Jews to come and fight. Rather, he told them to choose (*heichaltzu* – in the sense that later in the parasha the two and a half tribes would be *chalutzim*, a vanguard before the mass of the people) individuals and send them to the mass. He was asking them to merge individuals into a mass. Why? Because the sin of Baal Peor, as distinct for instance from the sin of the Golden Calf, was the sin of individuals. Sexual licentiousness is a result of the individual's inability to control himself, and even when prevalent and encompassing a mass of people is performed individually. It is, in a sense, the ultimate individual act. The Jews as a group were loyal to God and wanted to enter the Land and serve God, but, in the heat of the moment, each one forgot his ideals and group loyalty and succumbed to individual lust. Moshe is asking them to choose and prepare the vanguard, but to send them (*heichaltzu*, verse 3; *vayimasru*, verse 4) to the *tzava*, to the mass where each individual is submerged. When faced with an enemy like Midyan, and the individual and inevitable attraction of his ways, the individual needs to know how to submerge himself in the group ideal and destiny, to see himself as the sword of God against the enemy of God, and forget that he, in his individual psychology, might have a side that does not view the pleasures of the flesh as the enemy.

Pinchas is also sent – and is explicitly sent to the *tzava*. "Them and Pinchas ben Elazar the priest to the *tzava*. Pinchas is the ultimate individual, not in sin, but nonetheless in personality. He not only acted alone, the act of the *kanai*, the zealot, is by definition alone. He did not ask to represent the community, he did not consult; he arose in righteous anger and took the spear in his hand. For this he is commended by God and rewarded, But Moshe realizes that the underlying personality, the individual who is **moved** by personal

passion and not ruled by the rules of the community, is the root of the problem he is trying to eliminate. Hence, he too is sent, the passionate individual, to the *tzava*, and in fact he is not mentioned again, for it is the army as a whole that fought this battle and not individuals.

Moshe did not give military details in his instructions, for that is irrelevant. He wanted acts of destruction, acts of vengeance, acts which inculcate animosity. It is possible that Pinchas, who is personally dedicated to punishment and elimination, did not understand the psychological aspect, or it is possible that he did, but Moshe was nonetheless dissatisfied with the results. But Moshe does not accuse the army of sinning, for they have not transgressed any instruction. The Sifre, in a passage the Ramban finds puzzling, puts in Pinchas' mouth the statement to Moshe, "We have fulfilled what you commanded us to do." Only Moshe understood fully what he was trying to accomplish, and hence he demanded that specifically the women of Midyan, the objects of the sexual lust unleashed at Baal Peor, be killed.

This understanding of the significance of the war of Midyan, and its connection to Moshe and his life mission, may explain why this parasha was chosen as the place to introduce the laws of purifying non-kosher utensils, and, at least according to Rashi (unlike the Ramban), the laws of *tevilat keilim*, the purification of utensils acquired from non-Jews. If the parasha is about the attitude to the depravities of the surrounding cultures, a mitzva which requires you to purify their utensils is clearly in context.

At the end of the story, the officers of the army voluntarily bring a portion of the spoils as a donation to God, after seeing that they had suffered no casualties, "to atone for our souls before God" (31, 50). Rashi comments, "to atone for the mental lust in their hearts over the daughters of Midyan." The lesson had indeed been inculcated. No actual sin had taken place, but the fact that they had spared the daughters of Midyan was a psychological failure, and they realized that and strove to atone for it. That donation was accepted by Moshe and Elazar, and brought to the *ohel moed*, a gift to God, "a remembrance for the Israelites before God."