

## Drash: Matot

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When Rabbi Harry asked me to serve as the *darshan* today, I read our weekly *parashah*, *Matot* — מַטֹּת or “tribes” (Numbers 30:2-32:42) — with a terrible sinking feeling of dismay and a realization that, at least for me, the *parashah* would rouse something like a small crisis of faith at the very time when I feel like I am just learning to have such faith.

It is not that I had trouble grasping or contextualizing the literal meaning of *Matot*, which is comprised of three chapters dealing with the process of the Israelites’ transformation from a dissolute tribal alliance of former slaves and rebels into an increasingly self-assured people and a coherent nation, *Am Yisrael*. Here, in the Book of Numbers, the forty years of wandering in the Sinai desert after the Exodus has served to consolidate the twelve Hebrew tribes, to rid them of their former subservience and thereby to sanctify or purify them (despite a few lapses) in religious terms. Within the epic narrative of the Torah, the Israelites now, finally, are beginning to recognize themselves as a collective people with the power to grasp their covenantal relationship to G-d and to influence their own destiny, represented most prominently by the symbolic and actual taking possession of the Land of Israel.

*Matot’s* three chapters address this dawning Israelite metamorphosis in different ways. Numbers 30 deals with the concrete question of women entering into contractual obligations, which the narrator of Numbers pronounces as unenforceable if their husbands or fathers register an immediate post-facto objection. This is a legalistic matter that, although it certainly appears to treat women as the chattel of male authorities, can be understood as strikingly unjust only within a post-Feminist worldview far removed from the biblical and even rabbinic historical contexts. The primary significance of the chapter in context is that it adds to the legal and therefore administrative foundations of the new nation.

The last chapter of *Matot*, Numbers 32, deals with Moses’s efforts to adjudicate the material needs and land claims of the Hebrew tribes. The various tribes competitively jockey with each other to assure their share of the land soon to be conquered, and Moses subtly plays them off against each other in exchange for their greater participation in the planned military conquest of the lands to the east and west of the Jordan River. Although he will not live to see it, Moses is preparing the symbolic and actual ground for the establishment and perpetuation of the Hebrew nation.

It is the middle chapter of *Matot*, Numbers 31, however, that causes me the greatest consternation and that speaks to me, across the ages since the Torah was first canonized, as a profoundly troubling reminder of the tensions and ambivalences I

personally have wrestled with in coming to terms with my own faith in G-d and in sustaining my religious connection to Judaism and the Jewish people.

Numbers 31 recounts G-d's command to Moses to seek vengeance on behalf of the Israelites against the Midianites, a people descended from a son of Abraham and his wife Keturah, whom he married after Sarah's death. Moses himself is married to Zipporah, a daughter of the Midianite priest Jethro. In an earlier section of Numbers, the Midianites are blamed for luring the Israelites into sin, be it idolatry or adultery, at the behest of the diviner Balaam, who had sought to help the Moabite King Balak defeat the advancing Israelites through moral subversion.

At the beginning of Numbers 31, G-d commands Moses with the words "N'kom nikmat b'nai yisrael m'et ha-midianim" ["נְקוּם נִקְמַת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים"], which the JPS English version translates as "Avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites," but which the *tanachic* Hebrew articulates, through a linguistic doubling of the Hebrew root *nun-kuf-mem*, in even stronger poetic terms: something like "Avenge (with) the vengeance of the sons of Israel against the Midianites." The strong poetry of the sentence indicates the extent to which vengeance is a sacred procedure here that far exceeds any straightforward human act. Moses then raises an army of 12,000 soldiers, with each Hebrew tribe contributing a thousand men in further evidence of their unity as a nation, to march upon the Midianites. In the resulting war of vengeance, not only does the Israelite army put to death all the Midianite men — a number not given but presumably in the tens of thousands — including their kings and priests, but the Israelites also put to the torch all the Midianite cities and towns, appropriate the spoils, and take all of the Midianite women and children captive. When the Israelite generals return to their camp and present the booty and captives to Moses and the high priest Eleazar, Moses unexpectedly berates them for having spared the lives of the Midianite women, whom he claims had been instrumental in seducing the Israelites into sin. He then orders them to slaughter all of the Midianite women as well as all the male children, leaving alive only the virgin girls, who number 32,000 and who are subsequently shared out among the twelve Israelite tribes and the priests. Moses finally orders all of those who participated in the slaughter of the Midianites to purify themselves through physical segregation of themselves and their captives from the Israelite camp for seven days, as well as through the ritual cleansing or burning of anything the participants in this war of vengeance may have touched.

For someone like myself, who studies and has written about global atrocities, including the Shoah, Numbers 31 certainly strikes a nerve. It would be one thing, of course, if our founding epic of Jewish identity explored the slaughter of the Midianites as an instance of power abused or of manifest sin, as in, say, the murder of Abel by Cain, or again in G-d's exhortation, according to the Talmud's *Megilla* 10b, that the angels not sing *Hallel*, hymns of praise, when the pursuing Egyptian army perishes in the Red Sea during the Exodus. It is another matter altogether that the Bible includes no moral commentary here whatsoever on the Israelites' vengeful slaughter of the Midianites, regardless of whether the event is historically accurate or merely mythical. The G-d of Numbers 31 is, unarguably, as the prophet Nahum approvingly would put it, "El kano' ve-nokem adonai"

[אל קנוא ונגים יהוה], a jealous and avenging G-d. Our G-d is also, here in Numbers 31, unforgiving, punishing, cruel, and pitiless — at least if we attribute to Moses and the Israelite army the faithful and sanctioned execution of G-d's command, "*N'kom nikmah.*" What faith can I maintain in the holiness, or even in the goodness, of such a G-d? Can I ever gainsay the alienation of so many Jews, including myself at times, from a tradition in which such acts, even if they were common in the biblical period, are presented as acceptable?

And where shall I turn for a sympathetic challenge to such vengefulness? If these are the stakes of purification as presented in Numbers, where the Israelites take on a new unified identity through their purifying trials in the Sinai desert, then the very same impetus toward metaphysical purification that leads to the establishment of a Hebrew or Jewish national identity also appears to open the door to dehumanization — the absolute othering of the other — in the case of the Midianites. This is one explanation, perhaps, for Moses's order that the Israelite army undergo ritual purification for seven days after the slaughter. But is not this very desire for purification precisely the problem that led the Israelites to be able to act so mercilessly with the Midianites in the first place? Is the assumption of a national identity, rooted in *Blut und Boden*, "blood and soil," as the 19th century German romantics would put it, inevitably to be predicated on such inhumane discrimination among the pure and the impure, the righteous and the profane, the human and the inhuman?

And certainly one sees evidence of such a discourse of purification — and its destructive extension in vengefulness — in contemporary Jewish and Israeli politics. When politicians such as Ayelet Shaked, of the Bayit ha-Yehudi or Jewish Home party, compares Palestinian children to snakes and calls all Palestinians "enemy combatants" (as she did in a Facebook post on July 1), then we know we are in the metaphorical zone of purity and purification, where those to whom one is opposed are no longer looked upon as being human. When Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu cites (and misconstrues, I would add) the early modernist Hebrew poet Chayyim Nachman Bialik's poem "Al ha-Shechita," "On the Slaughter," in apparently foreseeing revenge for the murders of three Israeli teenagers, then we know we are once again caught in the register of the biblical discourse of purification and vengeance. The resulting mayhem should not surprise us. Such rhetorical allusions to vengeance and dehumanization tend to escape the realm of mere discourse, as we know, and enter the realm of physical deeds, as when a child such as Muhammed Abu Khdeir is kidnapped, burned alive and murdered by vengeful vigilantes, or when civilians are the primary victims of wars of choice, as has been the case once again in Gaza this month.

And yet. And yet...

It is nevertheless too simple, I have come to feel, to identify the Jewish tradition and faith, in all of its layers of intellectual complexity and historical diversity, with a starkly abhorrent moment such as the Midianite slaughter or the narrow political positions of some Jewish and Israeli leaders. Nor, on the other hand, can one simply evade the entanglements of faith, as in the past I have tried to do, because of such qualms. For

most of my adult life, I have connected culturally, intellectually, and politically with other Jews. I have been active in North American Jewish political organizations, such as Jewish Voice for Peace, which I helped to found in the 1990s, and I have been active in organizations with primarily cultural or social aims, such as Berkeley Hillel and the Jewish Community Relations Council of San Francisco. I have studied Hebrew and Israeli literature, and I am also a political gadfly of Israeli politics. My identification with “cultural Judaism” is evident insofar as many of my closest friends are Jewish, and I celebrate the major Jewish holidays with my family, as “cultural Jews” like myself often do. More recently, however, I have started to become more involved in the properly religious dimension of Judaism. This was stimulated, in part, by my children, who as many of you will understand, often serve as the gateways to new learning and experiences. Because my wife, Caren, and I have wanted our children to be comfortable and familiar with the Jewish tradition, we increasingly have been attending Shabbat services here at the synagogue and participating in other religious and Jewish cultural events with the Congregation Emanu-El community. I do this with and for my family, of course, but there is also an unexpected dimension of this change that is very personal to me. I have never felt particularly comfortable with religion and its mysteries, its matters of faith that far exceed rational logic, its emphasis on belief, and, let me be frank, with the very idea of serving G-d. Who is this G-d, and what does this G-d represent? Is G-d, as Western intellectuals have asserted for the past 250 years, not simply the creation, and even the pretext or excuse, of us humans seeking to deflect our own responsibilities?

Can I even say such a thing about G-d, in good conscience, here on this pulpit? Does the saying so not rob me, and us, of the very holy mystery, the humility of not knowing, with which I struggle whenever I make contact with the spiritual realm that I have come here on Shabbat today intending to affirm? For how can I make contact with my community, deeply and honestly, if I do not participate in its spiritual life? Is my community’s spirituality amenable to rational desiderata? And does it really matter, after all, whether I believe that we humans created G-d or rather that G-d created us? Is that not just so much intellectual wheel-spinning — the very problem I am trying to escape?

Yet reading a textual passage such as Numbers 31 ironically throws me back into the skeptical mode that I, a *Litvak* by heritage and at heart, have always in the past brought to my Judaism. For how can I remain silent in the face of a slaughter committed by my presumptive ancestors, and affirmed as part of the tradition I inherit, when I recommit with every prayer to my community? Judaism does not ask, thankfully, that we abandon our skepticism, our questions, or our doubts. Nor would it make any sense for me to abandon my progressive or leftist politics when I enter the sanctuary; I do not arrive here, among the members of this community, seeking to change my stripes, nor would I be capable of it anyway.

It is rather that I have come to learn a different kind of acceptance, akin more to reconciliation than to quiescence. I have come to learn from our tradition, from our beliefs, and from you, my companion community members, how to reconcile myself with the tensions of communal religious life in the face of questions I cannot answer and

concerns I cannot resolve. Why is our G-d heedless of the screams of the Midianite fathers, mothers and children? And why is our tradition, at least in its canonical texts, essentially silent about this moment in our sacred narrative? Perhaps the answer is related to my own need to reconnect with Judaism: that we are empowered to find our way to G-d, to receive Torah, and even to add to Torah and to comment on it — all without ever simply rejecting any part of our identity, our history, our tradition and our beliefs. This is the veritable paradox of faith.

Let me conclude with a coda. Numbers 31 is shadowed by another death, to which the text refers only briefly. Moses has been told by G-d that after the war of vengeance against the Midianites is complete, his own life will come to a close. In a psychoanalytic sense, then, the purging of evil that the vengeful slaughter represents may be understood as being connected to the Israelites' awareness that they are about to lose a father figure who has delivered the Law to them and guided them politically and spiritually to the point of victory over their adversaries. Is the slaughter therefore a form of displaced mourning, now translated into the need to purge the community of the remnants of infidelity? Is it the father-figure Moses's last-ditch effort to maintain control over the boundaries of the community? Moses fulfills his duty, as commanded by G-d, with notable dispatch and even goes above and beyond what G-d has specifically commanded by further ordering the death of the Midianite women and male children: is this, as in his actions during the Exodus from Egypt, another sign that Moses's anger causes him to take on inappropriate godly power, and thus a confirmation of why he cannot lead the Israelites into the Land of Israel? None of this is clearly answered in the text. But the analogy to the kind of spiritual crisis I have said that this passage provokes in me is impossible to miss. In reconciling ourselves to the post-Exodus patriarch Moses, with all of his flaws, we do as I am saying I am in the process of learning how to do: we accept the Jewish tradition and beliefs in all of their moral difficulty and unresolved mystery. We strive to maintain, in this regard, our unshakable—that is, our living—faith.

—Victoria, British Columbia