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בס"ד

## Parashat Mattot Part III Numbers 31–32

### 1. The War Against Midian

G-d transmitted the instructions that Israel should battle against Midian promptly after the Phinehas episode to which it was connected (Num. 25:16-18). The narrative account of it, however – with G-d transmitting instructions for the battle a second time – appears a number of chapters later (in Num. 31). The latter follows the census, G-d's informing Moses of his imminent death and the legislation concerning sacrifices and vows.

Many commentators assume that the deferment in textual location reflects the delayed execution of the war, not merely a late placement of the narrative thereof. Some explain that the war had to await the census, one purpose of which was military preparation. However, since all the tribes contributed an equal number of men to this war and the number was only one thousand per tribe, the census was not needed for this purpose. Moreover, the wars against Sihon and Og had recently been successfully waged (Num. 21:21-35) without need of a census, and those kings were the mightiest of the region.

Others speculate that the narrative of the Midian War was placed just before the Gadites and Reubenites petition for Transjordanian territory (Num. 32) in order to shed light on that request. It was the defeat of Midian and the appropriation of its enormous booty, which vastly increased the Israelites' livestock and secured their safety from the remaining regional force, that gave those tribes the idea for their radical request. However, such an association does not appear adequate to justify recording an event out of chronological order. The answer to our question seems to lie in a different approach.

The two formulations of G-d's communication to Moses to battle Midian emphasize different details.

The chapter 25 statement expresses the command with its rationale but does not indicate that it must be imminent. It should be done in the proper time. In the chapter 31 formulation, however, G-d says to Moses that after the war with Midian he was to be “gathered to your kin” (Num. 31:1), implying that this battle was specifically designated to be the final item on Moses' agenda. In essence, Moses is told, “Do it now and conclude your life's work.” After Midian's deceptive and seductive ploys against Israel, Moses' life would be incomplete without the follow-up battle and the point would be highlighted by it being the final item.

This war would signify the critical importance attached to actively fighting evil and would help establish a national disposition to always do so. The several passages that follow the war are either concluding items directly related to entering the promised land or are of a summation nature appropriate to closing the book. The petition of the Gadites and the Reubenites for Transjordanian territory was spontaneous and unanticipated, as was the question of the Manasseh's clan leaders related to the inheritance of the daughters of Zelophehad.

This may point to an intended correspondence between Numbers and Deuteronomy. In the latter, Moses set the command to blot out the remembrance of Amalek at the end of his lengthy explication of the legal code (Deut. 25:17-19). It was followed in the law compendium by two concluding passages that depict the nation successfully established in its land, dedicating its first fruit, distributing its tithe, and fulfilling several laws. Moses then turns to the last details of finalizing the covenant and transmitting his blessings before ascending the mountain to his death.

In the Torah, Amalek and Midian represent two types of evil that must be actively countered in order to ensure that civilized and moral behavior prevail in the world. Amalek attacked the weak and defenseless (the

stragglers) of a nation passing by which had no quarrel with it. Midian employed sexual enticement, even using the daughters of its nobility, in order to seduce to its idolatry a nation that was passing through its region. These acts epitomize exploitative cultures that lack minimum standards of conscience and human decency, are bereft of morality and sanctity, and must be opposed.

The word used to describe the action called for against Midian is נִקְמַת (*niqmat*), widely translated as “vengeance.” The biblical meaning of this root when applied to G-d is invariably related to “judgment” and “exacting retribution,” usually linked thereby to vindication, restoring the lost honor of the aggrieved party or to affording protection to the innocent. Jeremiah states regarding Babylon: כִּי נִקְמַת ה' הִיא הַנִּקְמָה בָּהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשְׂתָה עִשׂוֹ לָהּ (“For this is *niqmat Hashem, hinnaqemu bah*, as she has done, do to her” [Jer. 50:15b]). Regarding the Philistines we read: “I will wreak upon them great *neqamot* ... and they shall know that I am Hashem when I place *niqmati* upon them” (Ezek. 25:17). “G-d of *neqamot*, appear; Rise, Judge of the earth, render retribution to the arrogant ... how long shall the wicked exult?” (Ps. 94:1-3).

## 2. Moses' Anger

In the battle, the Israelite military killed *kol zakhar* of Midian (Num. 31:7). This term, derived from the word meaning “male” refers to the soldiery or to men of military age, a common usage of *zakhar* in the cognate languages. This is apparently confirmed in the narrative continuation that speaks of taking captive the women of Midian and טַפָּם (their young children, both boys and girls). This action of the military is congruent with the law articulated in Deuteronomy 20:13-15 concerning enemies who are not from the seven nations of Canaan. Moses obviously did not give instructions to act otherwise. Had he done so and the military contravened his instructions the text would certainly have included mention of a matter so relevant to the unfolding narrative.

Upon greeting the victorious Israelite soldiers and noticing the women captives, however, Moses became angry at the commanders, castigating them, “Have you let all females live? It was they who at the word of Balaam induced the Israelites to

trespass against Hashem” (Num. 31:15). Moses could not refer to instructions he gave the commanders since he had not touched on this point. The commanders must have been befuddled (as the reader may be). Not having been instructed to do other than they did, what did Moses expect? He probably thought that the commanders should have realized on their own that since the sexually experienced of these women were perpetrators of a widespread seduction against the Israelites and were hopelessly steeped in their culture they had to be eliminated. He may have felt that these women could once again be a snare for the Israelite men. He then instructed to kill all male children and all sexually experienced women, sparing virgin women. The spoils were permitted.

We are not told that G-d instructed Moses to act as he did in taking the lives of these captives. Although consistent with the prevalent war practices of the time, a consideration that must always be taken into account when dealing with the moral issue involved, Moses' instructions do not correspond with the law as formulated anywhere else in the Torah. Of course, the behavior of the Midianite women had been despicable, and perhaps expressed a national characteristic; their seductiveness almost caused the downfall of Israel. There always is need to use reason and common sense in applying a law, especially as regards the intentions of the perpetrators and the danger they present. But here, we may wonder whether Moses' anger upon actually seeing these women, possibly dressed in their enticing clothing, interfered with his judgment. Immediately upon concluding his statement, Eleazar, in an unprecedented role, presents the regulations of purification to the returning soldiers, a matter viewed by some commentators as his substituting for Moses at that point. The Sifre comments on this unusual circumstance as follows:

Because Moses our teacher became angry he came to error. Rabbi Eleazar stated that in three instances Moses came to anger and came to error. He got angry at Eleazar and Ithamar ... what does it then state? “Why did you not eat the *hattat*?” (Lev. 10:17); similarly, he said “listen you rebels” (Num. 20:10); what does it then state? “He lifted the rod and struck the rock twice”; here also, he got angry at the commanders; what does it then state? “Eleazar the priest spoke to the soldiery” (implying that Moses overlooked informing the soldiery of the laws that follow).

Once again, the Torah depicts the greatest of leaders as human and fallible. This may be another indication that the time had arrived for Israel to have a change in leadership.

### 3. A Unique War with Covenantal Symbolism

Several particulars about the war with Midian point to its unique significance.

- The covenant element was highlighted by the differing, but mutually coordinated, designations. Hashem termed it *מִצַּחַת הַמִּדְיָנִים*, Israel's *neqama* (Num. 31:2), while Moses referred to it as *הַבְּמִדְיָן*, Hashem's *neqama* (v. 3). Each party was focused on, and concerned for, the status of the other.

- Joshua, who shortly before had been designated to be the successor to Moses (27:22-23), is not mentioned in any capacity in conjunction with this campaign. This is surprising since he was the military leader who led the battle against Amalek (Exod. 17:13) and who would lead Israel in upcoming battles. In addition, Joshua would have benefited from an opportunity to serve in a prominent leadership role while Moses was still alive. It appears that there was no single military commander for this war since there is no mention of the appointment of one and Moses addressed the heads of the units (Num. 31:14).

- Phinehas was sent by Moses to accompany the army, not as a military man, but “with the sacred vessels and the trumpets for sounding the blasts in his hands” (31:6). The Sifre (Num. 157) posits that the term “sacred vessels” refers to the holy ark (that contains the tablets), which would be a direct invocation of the covenant. Others consider the sacred vessels to be the Urim and Thummim, the vehicle through which divine guidance is provided, as questions may arise. Perhaps it was all of these. This was a battle in which the sanctuary – with a most distinguished priestly leader and with its spiritual armaments – was most prominent.

- Amazingly, there was not one casualty from among the Israelites.

- The booty was of staggering proportions, indicating a symbolic dimension to the numbers.

- None of these features were mentioned in conjunction with the wars against Sihon and Og, which occurred sometime in the fortieth year, not long before this one.

- There is no mention in Deuteronomy of the war with Midian as there is of the wars with Sihon and Og (Deut. 1:4; 2:31 ff.), despite the miraculous features recounted and the inspirational value it possessed. This is an enigmatic matter and especially vexing to efforts to reconcile the events in different portions of the Torah. G-d told Moses, “Avenge the Israelites on the Midianites, then be gathered to your kin” (Num. 31:2). Did Moses begin his Deuteronomic discourse – which began on the first day of the eleventh month of the fortieth year – after this battle? That discourse was introduced with, “After smiting Sihon ... and Og” (Deut. 1:4). The Midian battle does not fit in during or after the discourse, which proceeds straight through to covenant renewal and Moses’ death. The remarks of Rahab to the spies Joshua sent shortly after Moses’ death are relevant to this discussion. She lived in Jericho, a city in the Jordan valley close to the plains where Israel was then encamped and near where the battle with Midian took place. She mentioned the vanquishing of Sihon and Og, but not a word of the amazing victory over Midian (Josh. 2:10).

- The booty was divided equally between soldiers and people. The soldiers contributed from their share *terumah* to the high priest in the ratio of one in five hundred while the people contributed to the Levites, guardians of the sanctuary, in the ratio of one in fifty. Rabbi Ralph Tawil pointed out that the total contributions of the three animal species equals 8888, as depicted in the following table. This indicates that, in accordance with the symbolism of the number eight, this battle and victory possess a covenantal association.\*

	Booty	50 %	1 in 500	1 in 50
sheep	675,000	337,500	675	6750
cattle	72,000	36,000	72	720
donkeys	61,000	30,500	61	610
	<u>808,000</u>	<u>404,000</u>	<u>808</u>	<u>+ 8080 = 8888</u>

The 32,000 human captives and the levies of the soldiers and public from them – 32 and 320 respectively – also contain multiples of eight. The numbers of animals and people are not combined out of respect for human dignity.

Obviously, this is a very different type of war and requires an interpretation.

In Deuteronomy, Moses' grand valedictory discourse that comprises practically the whole book is actually a case of leading Israel through a rededication to the covenant (see our Deuteronomy studies). That event is not mentioned in Numbers. As it appears likely that the Torah's presentation of the Midian war is not an absolutely literal account, perhaps it was intended as a sophisticated metaphor for covenant renewal. Israel made the commitment to fight for G-d's vengeance against evildoers and He intervened in an extraordinary way on its behalf.

### 3. The Gadites and the Reubenites

The tribes of Gad and Reuben desired to take their tribal possessions on the already conquered east bank of the Jordan River. They begin their application for it by addressing Moses, Eleazar and the chieftains (Num. 32:2), an unusually large group to whom to direct such a request. Perhaps they chose not to address Moses alone as they feared that their request might not find favor in his eyes, but by including the others – possibly having previously engaged in lobbying – they felt they would improve their chances. After all, if they take their land portions on the east bank, the other tribes would receive larger portions in the land proper, a consideration that would not impress Moses but might very well count with the heads of the other tribes.

Their first statement (v. 4) was merely a declaration of fact that reflects the passage's opening narrative statement (v. 1) to the effect that the land G-d conquered for Israel was cattle country and they possess cattle. (In the opening narrative verse it had stated that the Gadites and Reubenites possessed a "tremendous" amount of cattle. Stating merely that they possess cattle, they do not run the risk of appearing overanxious about their proposal.) By beginning with a declaration of fact, they were probably hoping that their audience would see the logic of their plan and draw the obvious conclusion without their having to explicitly state their intentions, which they apparently feared could be problematic.

At this point, however, there is a *setumah* space in the Masoretic Text followed by a second *vayyomeru*

("and they said"). This indicates that they were obliged to continue speaking and elaborate since their opening statement did not elicit the hoped for result; indeed, it apparently received no relevant response. In their second statement they employed the singular for the addressee of their remarks, as it became clear to them that they must essentially deal with Moses.

Upon the Gadites and Reubenites' asking to receive their possessions on the east bank, Moses sharply rebukes them. It was not the request in itself (which Moses does not seem to have looked upon favorably) that was the major problem. Rather, it was their statement, "Do not have us cross the Jordan," which clearly implies that they would not join with the rest of the nation in conquering the land, that was most troubling.

In a ten-verse 130-word reply Moses vigorously chastises them. He does not accuse them of a lack of trust in G-d and does not focus on bolstering them in this sphere, as was the case in the scouts' episode (Num. 14:8-9; Deut. 1:29-33). These petitioners did not betray fear of entering the land but merely a strong desire for the east bank land in which they were presently located. Moses takes them to task for not recognizing the potential danger in their request: that it may be misinterpreted by the other Israelites as fear to enter the land. It may thus trigger a repeat of the sin associated with the scouts and lead to G-d once again keeping the nation from entering the promised land. Moses is focused on the spontaneous and contagious nature of fear and lack of trust in G-d with the potential negative consequences such dispositions might engender.

The two tribes subsequently return to Moses and solve the problem by volunteering to lead the battles for Canaan as a condition for receiving Transjordan.

Still, Moses feels that there is a great deal left to be desired. He corrects and improves their proposal, fortifying the religious underpinnings of their commitment by invoking the consciousness of G-d into all aspects of the agreement.

Finally, Moses grants the two tribes and half the tribe of Manasseh the kingdoms of Sihon and Og. Mention of Manasseh is surprising as that tribe had not previously been in the discussion. Its connection to the east bank seems to represent a different process, as the concluding verses of the chapter illustrate. In contrast to Gad and

Reuben, who requested and were given already conquered territory, several Manasseh clans went forth and conquered various additional areas attached to the basic territory.

The decision of the Gadites and Reubenites to take their possessions on the other side of the Jordan River – despite their having fulfilled their commitments faithfully (Josh. 22:1-6) – betrays a materialistic motive overriding spiritual concerns. There is a difference between land promised by G-d, which was the long-term focus of national aspiration, and land appropriated by the nation basically on its own initiative.\*\* It indicates that although G-d had decided to proceed with His plans to bring the Israelites into the promised land, they still had a long way to go before fulfilling the goal of becoming the nation He desired them to be. The nation continuously depended on His great

compassion and patience for its survival. Although it may have been a great improvement over what preceded in the world, it contained spiritually problematic elements and was on a path that might bring calamitous results. This will be fully attested in the books of the prophets that follow the Torah.

### **Endnotes**

\* See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*

\*\* Although this is the perspective of our narrative and the book of Numbers in general, other biblical comments take a more complex position regarding the foreseen future boundaries of Israel.

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