YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**Student summaries of sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat MATOT**

**Sicha of HarAV Mosheh Lichtenstein**

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In memory of my beloved parents

Adia Bat Avraham, Alice Stone, *z"l*, whose *yahrzeit* was 2 Tammuz,

and Yaakov ben Yitzchak, Fred Stone, *z”l*,
whose *yahrzeit* is on 25 Tammuz.

Ellen & Stanley Stone, their children and grandchildren

Jacob & Chaya, Micah, Addie, and Ruby; Zack & Yael, Allie, Isaac, Nate;

Ezra & Talia, Shai, Ami, Lielle; Yoni & Cayley, Azi, Kovie;

Eliana & Marc, Adina, Emmy, Shira, Yisrael Meir; Gabi & Talia, Adriana

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,
whose *yahrzeit* is 21 Tammuz. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.

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**“And We Will Dwell with You, And We Will Become One People!?”**

Summarized by Itai Weiss

Translated by David Strauss

Our *parasha* describes the war waged against Midyan and its consequences:

And the children of Israel took captive the women of Midyan and their little ones; and all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods, they took for a prey… And Moshe became angry with the commanders of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, who came from the service of the war. And Moshe said to them: Have you saved all the women alive? Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Bilam, to revolt so as to break faith with the Lord in the matter of Pe'or, and so the plague was among the congregation of the Lord. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that has known man by lying with him. But all the female children, that have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves. (*Bamidbar* 31:9-18)

Whenever I study a passage in the Bible, I try to understand it not only with my intellect, but also with my imagination. The only passage that I am unable to imagine is this story. A black cloud obscures my thoughts; a barrier prevents me from conjuring it up in my imagination. The people return from battle, together with a camp of captives that includes women and children, and Moshe commands the soldiers to kill captives – all the male children and a large portion of the women!

Moreinu Harav Yehuda Amital *zt”l*, whose *yahrzeit* falls out this week, introduced a principle that at the time was revolutionary: God's commands do not come at the expense of the human morality ingrained in us. This story seems to be in direct opposition with this principle, and so we are perplexed by it. However, with all the difficulty that it imposes, we must try to understand, if not the story itself, then at least its background.

There are several surprising passages related to the sin of Ba'al Pe'or; for instance, in *Parashat Va'etchanan*:

And now, O Israel, hearken to the statutes and to the ordinances, which I teach you, to do them; that you may live, and go in and possess the land which the Lord, the God of your fathers, gives you. You shall not add to the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God which I command you. Your eyes have seen what the Lord did regarding Ba'al Pe'or; for all the men that followed Ba'al Pe'or, the Lord your God has destroyed them from the midst of you. (*Devarim* 4:1-3)

Why is the sin of Ba'al Pe'or mentioned in the context of the prohibition against adding to the word of God or detracting from it?

Furthermore, when the residents of the east bank of the Jordan build themselves an alternative altar, leading to a misunderstanding between the inhabitants of the two banks that almost sparks a civil war, Pinchas mentions the sin of Ba'al Pe'or:

Thus says the whole congregation of the Lord: What treachery is this that you have committed against the God of Israel, to turn away this day from following the Lord, in that you have built yourselves an altar, to rebel this day against the Lord? Is the iniquity of Pe'or too little for us, from which we have not cleansed ourselves to this day, although there came a plague upon the congregation of the Lord? (*Yehoshua* 22:16-17)

Let us try to imagine the following picture: The people of Israel arrive in the plains of Moav, where they are warmly received after the wars fought against Sichon and Og. Just as Yitro in his day came to the camp of Israel and praised the name of God, so Bilam praises the people of Israel and the God of Israel in an equally impressive way:

God who brought him forth out of Egypt is for him like the lofty horns of the wild-ox. He shall eat up the nations that are his adversaries, and shall break their bones in pieces, and pierce them through with his arrows. He crouched, he lay down as a lion, and as a lioness; who shall rouse him up? Blessed be every one that blesses you, and cursed be every one that curses you. (*Bamidbar* 24:8-9)

The Midyanites are descendants of Ketura and Avraham, making them relatives of Bnei Yisrael. Furthermore, they live within the boundaries of the land promised to Avraham. They are not connected to the "doings of the land of Egypt" nor to the "doings of the land of Canaan."

Apparently, there were those among the people of Israel who thought that it would be perfectly acceptable and even good to join with them. The days go by, and the people of Israel do in fact connect with them. Over the course of time, they become acquainted with the daughters of Midyan, and quite naturally, they are on the verge of assimilating among the Midyanites in a manner similar to what the brothers of Dina had once suggested to the people of Shechem:

Then will we give our daughters to you, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people. (*Bereishit* 34:16)

Such a process takes time, perhaps several months, and it ends with the people of Israel attaching themselves to Ba'al Pe'or and assimilating.

When the issue at hand is the survival of the people of Israel – when the danger of assimilation threatens the very existence of the people of Israel, and thereby the meaning of the existence of the entire world – extreme measures are taken. This is probably one of the reasons for the directive, so contrary to natural morality, that was given during the war against Midyan: the order to kill prisoners.

In the days of our return to the land of Israel, in the time of the first *aliya* and especially of the second *aliya*, many important thinkers advocated for "Canaanism": the establishment of a single nation that would include both us and the Arabs. The poems written at that time in Hebrew and in Arabic reflect this spirit. One of the greatest miracles that happened at the time of our return to the land of Israel is that the Arabs treated us with hostility, and that from the first moment the majority were not interested in friendly relations with us.

In Europe at the beginning of the Enlightenment, Jews who tried to integrate into general society were met with great resistance. (We all know where those sentiments ultimately led.) Alongside all the sorrow and anger this rejection caused, it brought about one good result: many Jews did not assimilate. If, for example, nineteenth-century German society would have welcomed Jews into it, it is not at all clear what the state of German Jewry would have been after that. Today, the rate of Jewish assimilation in the United States and Canada is so great precisely because resistance toward the Jews there is weak.

Another small mitigating factor regarding the morality of killing the Midyanites can be found in the words of the Rambam:

When a siege is placed around a city to conquer it, it should not be surrounded on all four sides; only on three. Space should be left for the inhabitants to flee and for all those who desire to escape with their lives, as it is written (*Bamidbar* 31:7): "And they besieged Midyan as God commanded Moshe." According to tradition, He commanded them to array the siege as described. (Rambam, *Hilkhot Melakhim* 6:7)

In Rambam’s understanding, it was precisely during the war against Midyan that God commanded that when a city is under siege, the besieged must be allowed to escape. It was precisely during this war that a great moral innovation was introduced.

A third consolation is found in the words of the Radbaz, who maintains that as in every war, so too in the war waged against Midyan, the people of Israel opened with a proposal for peace; only after it was rejected by Midyan did the fighting begin. While it is true that there is no hint of this in the plain sense of Scripture, the suggestion of someone of the Radbaz’s stature may be considered reliable.

Nevertheless, the story of the war against Midyan remains an exceedingly difficult one. Though we have attempted to find contextual explanations to make some sense of it, it still requires further clarification and study.

[This *sicha* was delivered on Shabbat *Parashat Matot-Masei* 5777.]