



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Matot-Masei 5770

By Aviva Presser Aiden

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*Parshat Masei* opens as the wanderings of the Israelites are coming to an end. The land east of the Jordan has been conquered and divided, and God is commanding Moshe regarding the procedures to be followed upon entering Israel. Included in these commandments is a verse that dictates that when the Jews enter Canaan, they should banish the Canaanites and destroy their holy relics and holy sites—raze them all, utterly and completely, or face God’s wrath for failing to do so: “You shall destroy all their figure objects; you shall destroy all their molten images, and you shall demolish all their altar-places.”<sup>1</sup>

Reading this verse might well make us shudder, as the overt and deliberate destruction of sites holy to any faith is repellant to many modern readers. Israel’s 1967 Protection of Holy Places law and the international outcry over the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, Afghanistan,<sup>2</sup> highlight this sentiment. Moreover, we have a strong tradition in the U.S. of respecting and enabling the religious and cultural practices of others.

But perhaps, the Torah’s explanation of the consequences of *not* eliminating the Canaanite influence can help us interpret this verse in a way that is meaningful. Bamidbar 33:55 says: God will make the Canaanites “as pricks in your eyes and as thorns in your sides.” Rashi highlights the significance of this imagery, explaining that “in your eyes” refers to being blinded by the thorns and “in your side” refers to how these brambles box us in to an unmoving position. In other words, without the moral clarity to identify practices that should be eliminated, we risk becoming ‘hedged in’ to an overly relativist moral position that can have the effect of allowing problematic practices to persist.

This is an instructive analogy for those of us brought up in the West, trained in cultural sensitivity and wary of imposing our belief structures and cultural assumptions on other groups. Our verse—though troubling in its destructive approach—insists that there are cultural or religious practices that should be exceptions to the rule of tolerance. It warns us against hedging ourselves too strictly into a position where we can neither see, modify nor mitigate real problems in specific cultural or religious practices (be they ours or others’).

History teaches us that harmful practices can and should be reassessed, and that an effective way to do so is to work for change *with* communities that practice them. One successful example of this kind of collaborative effort is the elimination of the Chinese practice of foot binding, which resulted in lifelong pain and frequent death in women and girls. This practice continued into the 20th century, when Western Missionaries joined Chinese community leaders to call for an end to it. Grassroots societies arose to encourage families not to bind their daughters’ feet, and the practice had all but ceased by 1949 when it was officially banned.

A contemporary example of a practice that could be eliminated through similar community-based efforts is female genital mutilation (FGM), which continues to be common in many countries, across religious and socioeconomic spectra. Though the

<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 33:52.

<sup>2</sup> Gall, C. “From Ruins of Afghan Buddhas, a History Grows.” *New York Times*, 6 December 2006.  
[http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/06/world/asia/06budd.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/06/world/asia/06budd.html?_r=1)

practice is most common in northeastern Africa,<sup>3</sup> prevalence exceeds 10 percent in at least 23 countries across Africa and Asia.<sup>4</sup> Complications from the procedure range from immediate wound infection, chronic pelvic infection (which can affect fertility), and increased risk of postpartum hemorrhage and fetal loss during delivery.<sup>5</sup>

Approaching FGM is a complex and thorny issue, as many communities still view it as a valued tradition, and girls who are not cut may be considered unmarried or face ostracism. Yet there is a grassroots movement to change this. Through education and community-based initiatives, women in nations like Somalia—where FGM prevalence is over 90 percent—protest the practice,<sup>6</sup> and several First Ladies of African nations have condemned it.<sup>7</sup>

Tostan, an AJWS grantee working in Africa, has had significant success with this issue, primarily due to its respectful, community-based approach. Tostan galvanized the Senegalese community against FGM in the 90's, resulting in a parliamentary ban in Senegal in 1999. In its continued work to combat FGM throughout Africa, Tostan educates community members about their human rights, their right to live free from violence, and the responsibilities the community has towards its own members on these fronts. This approach allows communities draw their own conclusions and lead their own movements for change.<sup>8</sup>

A practice may be old and religiously or culturally significant, but that does not guarantee that it is necessarily good. Yet the ethics of challenging a culture's valued traditions are not simple. Though our *parshah* illustrates an extreme approach, its underlying message—that we stand up against practices that we know to be destructive—is relevant today. As humanity learns more about itself, we should support communities that seek to reevaluate traditional practices that harm, and work in partnership to change them.



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<sup>3</sup> Somalia, Egypt, Djibouti and Northern Sudan all have prevalence rates of more than 90 percent.

<sup>4</sup> "Female Genital Mutilation and Other Harmful Practices." *World Health Organization*, 2007.

<http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/prevalence/en/index.html>

<sup>5</sup> Norwitz, E., and Schorge. *Obstetrics and Gynecology, at a Glance*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>6</sup> "Somalia: Protest against FGM staged in Abud Waq district." *Somali News*, 31 January 2010. [http://www.somaliweyn.org/pages/news/Jan\\_10/31Jan13.html](http://www.somaliweyn.org/pages/news/Jan_10/31Jan13.html)

<sup>7</sup> "Women Protest Against Female Genital Mutilation." *allAfrica.com*. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200302050110.html>

<sup>8</sup> "Abandoning Female Genital Cutting." *Tostan*. <http://www.tostan.org/web/page/586/sectionid/547/pagelevel/3/interior.asp>

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