



# DVAR TZEDEK

## Parshat Matot-Masei 5769

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The child in me wants to hide *parshiyot Matot* and *Masei* in a dusty attic somewhere; so many of their words are disillusioning, disturbing and embarrassing. *Parshat Matot* begins with sexism: all men must keep their promises, yet women's promises may be nullified by disapproving husbands and fathers.<sup>1</sup> It continues with genocide: in a spirit of revenge, thousands of Israelites invade Midian and kill every man.<sup>2</sup> When they return with captured women, children and booty, Moses is angry because his soldiers did not do enough. He commands them to kill every non-virgin female and every male child among the captives.<sup>3</sup> This massacre is especially bloodcurdling for those who remember that Moses lived in Midian for a period of his life and that his wife Tziporah and father-in-law Yitro are Midianites. Later, *Parshat Masei* foreshadows a horrific mission of ethnic cleansing in Canaan: God commands *Am Yisrael*, "You shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land... And if you do not dispossess the inhabitants of the land, those whom you allow to remain shall be stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides."<sup>4</sup>

How can we meaningfully engage with such indigestible texts that blatantly contradict our contemporary notions of justice? How do we continue to embrace the Torah and proclaim that "all her paths are *shalom*"?<sup>5</sup>

Many people choose to evade, rather than to connect intimately with these difficult issues. Some attempt to "purify" problematic passages through creative interpretations and apologetics. Midrash, for example, is a wellspring of such commentaries. Others ignore the problematic texts and focus exclusively on passages that validate their own personal values.<sup>6</sup> Although these two methods sometimes lead to profound commentaries, they ultimately limit the depth of our engagement with Torah. Whether we justify its faults or we fail to behold its wholeness, we, and Torah, are fragmented.

Rather, we must approach the whole Torah with open hearts, displaying enough patience and tenderness to remain in close relation to all of it, even amidst conflict and vulnerability. To look upon its beauty and blemishes, to engage with Torah openly and honestly is to cultivate real and sustainable *shalom*—the kind that can exist within individuals, in a society and between nations.

"Peace" is a misleading translation of *shalom*, for it implies a lack of conflict, an absence of complications. In fact, the etymological root of *shalom* is *shalem*—"whole." *Shalom* is not a state of calm; it is wholeness—a process of opening

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<sup>1</sup> Bamidbar 30.

<sup>2</sup> Bamidbar 31:7. "The practice of massacring most or all of a conquered population was widespread in the ancient Near East...but that is not exactly a palliative. It is painfully evident that this is an instance in which the biblical outlook sadly failed to transcend its historical contexts." (Alter, Robert. *The Five Books of Moses*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004. p. 843).

<sup>3</sup> Bamidbar 31:15-18. Moses argues that the women should die because they were the ones who actually tempted the Israelites into idolatry (Bamidbar 25).

<sup>4</sup> Bamidbar 33:52-55.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 3:17.

<sup>6</sup> For example, I could have ignored the disturbing texts in this week's double *parshah*, and instead focused this week's *Dvar Tzedek* on more palatable teachings found in the *parshiyot*, such as 'all men must keep their promises' (Bamidbar 30:3), 'an alleged murderer cannot be convicted without multiple witnesses' (Bamidbar 35:30) or 'blood pollutes the land' (Bamidbar 35:33).

oneself to the whole story and grappling with it. Thus, *shalom* is not peace itself, but the headwater of peace. When we avoid complexity and strive for a black-and-white understanding of reality, we erode the possibility of *shalom*. Seeing and struggling with the Torah's most disturbing faces—even when it elicits emotional responses like shame, anger and sadness—can actually elucidate our deepest values and can help us identify our own ethical and moral orientations. Our productive indignation over unjust texts motivates us to take action on these issues in our own lives.

The pursuit of global justice requires us to apply this notion to the world itself. We should strive to be aware of what is happening around the globe—the pleasant and the tragic, the heartwarming and the chilling. It can be excruciating to learn about the oppression, poverty and epidemics that persist every day. This is why so many of us turn away. How else could the genocide in Darfur possibly be entering its seventh year without a stronger degree of international intervention? How else could millions of human beings die of hunger every year while others of us have excess? How else could diarrhea, the most preventable and treatable childhood illness, kill 4,000 children per day?<sup>7</sup> If we skip over those painful “texts” in newspapers and on the news, if we choose ignorant bliss over actual awareness, then we stunt the growth of *shalom*. And where there is no *shalom*, there can be no peace.

To practice *shalom* in the world, we must extend beyond a passive awareness of international issues. It is relatively easy for us to learn about and respond emotionally to events, but knowledge without action falls short of wholeness. Our real challenge is to integrate our intellectual and physical selves, to rise up and do something once we are aware. The world will not change, and neither will we, if we sit still, steeped in thoughts and feelings.

It may seem easier in the short term to ignore complexities, but this alienates us from reality. To neglect *shalom* weakens us as activists and undermines the wholeness of Torah, the world, other people and ourselves.

Here we conclude the book of *Bamidbar*, “In the Wilderness.” *Am Yisrael* stands on the banks of the Jordan, in the final days of their wanderings. They yearn to enter *Yerushalayim*—another word rooted in *shalem*, wholeness. Like them, we still need to gaze across the waters, to find our way, to move ever closer to justice and to peace.



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<sup>7</sup> *PATH/US Coalition for Child Survival: Call to Action to End Deaths from Diarrhea*, World Health Organization (WHO), <http://www.who.int/pmnch/media/membernews/2009/pathcalltoaction/en/>.

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