**YESHIVAT HAR ETZION**

**ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)**

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**midrash on the *Parasha*:**

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**Parashat Matot:**

**The War Against Midian**

**The righteousness of the men of war**

The war against Midian is expounded in the *Sifrei* on *Parashat Matot* in a detailed and lengthy manner. In this *shiur,* we will deal with the main idea that emerges from these *derashot —* the exemplary behavior of the combat troops sent by the Israelites.

The confrontation is presented in the *Sifrei* as a war fought by utterly righteous people. This idea is emphasized in four different *derashot,* which we will discuss below.

### The tribal duty of recruitment

The first *derasha* is composed of three short segmentsthat relate to the way in which the Israelites respond to the order to recruit a thousand men from each tribe:

"So they were handed over, out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, [twelve thousand armed for the host]" (*Bamidbar* 31:5).

The Torah indicates that they were worthy and righteous men, who put their lives at risk for the matter.

Rabbi Natan said: Others hand them over.

This worthy man will go out to war; this righteous man will go out to war.

Rabbi Elazar of Modi'in said:

Come and see how dear the shepherds of Israel were to Israel!

At first, they knew not that Moshe's death would follow the war against Midian.

What is written then? "What shall I do to this people? They are almost ready to stone me" (*Shemot* 17:4).

However, when they heard that Moshe's death would follow the war against Midian, they began to hide.

Nevertheless, they were handed over against their will, as it is stated: "So they were handed over, out of the thousands of Israel."

Each of these *derashot* portrays the members of Israel's army in a positive and noble manner. What is more, each is based on the unusual wording of the verse, "So they were handed over" (*vayimaseru*):

And Moshe spoke to the people, saying: Arm you men from among you for the host, that they may go against Midian, to execute the Lord's vengeance on Midian. Of every tribe a thousand, throughout all the tribes of Israel, shall you send to the host.

So they were handed over (*vayimaseru*), out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for the host. (*Bamidbar* 31:3-5)

The first segment expounds the root *mem-samekh-reish* in the sense of readiness to give up one's life in battle. This readiness stems from both a desire to fulfill God's command and an awareness of the significance of the war as "the Lord's vengeance against Midian." Therefore the men who go out to war are characterized in the segmentas "worthy and righteous."

The second segmentis built on the passive form of the verb "*vayimaseru*," "they were handed over," in the verse, which indicates that those who participated in the battle are chosen by those who know them, who attest to their righteousness. According to these two segments, the Divine demand for a thousand people from each tribe indicates that worthy people must be chosen.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Rabbi Elazar's segmentis also built on the passive form of the verb *vayimaseru*, which he expounds as indicating that the men who fight in the war are recruited against their will in reaction to their intention not to do anything that will move up the day of Moshe's death. This segmentinterprets the passive form of the verb as indicating compulsion.

**The parallel to Pinchas**

Let us now turn to the second *derasha* in the *Sifrei,* which gives expression to the righteousness of the men who go out to battle against Midian:

"And Moshe sent them (*otam*), a thousand of every tribe, to the host, them (*otam*)and Pinchas" (*Bamidbar* 31:6) — This indicates that they were equal to Pinchas, and Pinchas was equal to all of them.

The *Sifrei* expounds the extraneous instance of the word *otam*, "them," in the verse, "And Moshe sent **them**, a thousand of every tribe, to the host, **them** and Pinchas the son of Elazar the priest, to the host, with the holy vessels and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand" (*Bamidbar* 31:6). The juxtaposition "them and Pinchas" alludes to the correspondence between them, "that they were equal to Pinchas, and Pinchas was equal to all of them." The first clause of this statement attests to the greatness of those who go out to war, while the second clause attests to the greatness of Pinchas.

**They did not seize upon the spoils of war**

The third *derasha* in the *Sifrei,* from which we learn about the righteous behavior of Israel, relates to the people's refraining from taking of the spoils of war before they can be brought to Moshe and Elazar.

"And they took all the spoil, and all the prey, both of man and of beast. And they brought [the captives, and the prey, and the spoil,] to Moshe, and to Elazar the priest…" (*Bamidbar* 31:11-12).

The Torah indicates that they were worthy and righteous men, who were not suspected of stealing.

Unlike what is stated: "But the Israelites committed a trespass concerning the taboo thing" (*Yehoshua* 7:1).

Rather here: "And they took all the spoil… And they brought… to Moshe."

The Torah describes the act of bringing the spoil to Moshe and Elazar while emphasizing its great quantity:

And the Israelites took captive the women of Midian and their little ones; and all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods, they took for a prey. And all their cities in the places wherein they dwelt, and all their encampments, they burnt with fire. And they took all the spoil, and all the prey, both of man and of beast. And they brought the captives, and the prey, and the spoil, to Moshe, and to Elazar the priest, and to the congregation of the Israelites, to the camp, to the plains of Moab, which are by the Jordan at Jericho. (*Bamidbar* 31:9-12)

This great quantity of spoils, and the comparison made in the *derasha* between the behavior of these soldiers and that of Akhan, who commits trespass at the conquest of Jericho under Yehoshua, highlight the righteous behavior of the men who fight in the battle against Midian.

**Pinchas’s testimony**

The fourth *derasha* marking the righteous conduct of Israel in the war against Midian is presented as a response in the mouth of Pinchas to the question posed by Moshe upon his return from the battle against Midian:

And Moshe was angry with the officers of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, who came from the host of the war. And Moshe said to them: Have you saved all the females alive? (*Bamidbar* 31:14-15)

The *Sifrei* states as follows:

"And Moshe said to them: Have you kept all the females alive?"

Pinchas said to him: As you commanded us, so we did.

Pinchas's testimony regarding the full observance of the word of God on the part of those who go out to war gives clear expression to their faith and obedience.

Our analysis shows that the real heroes of the war waged against Midian are the twelve thousand men who go out to battle and return. Their risking their lives, their being worthy and righteous representatives of the people, their love for and loyalty to Moshe, their adherence to what they had been commanded to do, and their clean hands — all of these together paint a picture of moral excellence, both on the personal and on the communal level.

**Process of repentance**

This raises the following question: why is it that the *Sifrei* presents the men who participated in the war against Midian in this manner? In order to answer this question, let us compare what is stated in the *Sifrei* to the manner in which the twelve thousand fighters are presented in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba*.

**Repair of the sin in Shittim**

The verses brought below from *Shir Ha-shirim* are expounded in *Shir Ha-shirim* *Rabba* as referring to the war waged against Midian:

Behold, you are fair, my love; behold, you are fair; your eyes are as doves behind your veil; your hair is as a flock of goats, that trail down from Mount Gilad.

Your teeth are like a flock of ewes all finely shorn, having come up from the washing; whereof all are paired, and none fails among them.

Your lips are like a thread of scarlet, and your mouth is comely; your temples are like a pomegranate split open behind your veil.

Your neck is like the tower of David built with turrets, whereon there hang a thousand shields, all the armor of the mighty men.

Your two breasts are like two fawns that are twins of a gazelle, which feed among the lilies. (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:1-5)

Rabbi Yitzchak interpreted the verses as referring to the host against Midian.

"Your hair is as a flock of goats" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:1).

The flocks that went to war against Midian went only by the merits of Moshe and Pinchas.

This is what is stated: "And Moshe and Elazar the priest took the gold of them" (*Bamidbar* 31:51).

"That trail down from Mount Gilad" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.). The mountain out of which you trailed, I made it a mound (*gal*) and witness (*eid*) to the nations of the world. [See this etymology of Gilad in *Bereishit* 31:52.]

What is this? This is the war against Midian.

And what is the trail you have followed out of that event?

"Your teeth are like a flock of ewes all finely shorn" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:2). Cut-and-dried matters: twelve thousand volunteered, and twelve thousand were handed over.

As it is stated: "So they were handed over, out of the thousands of Israel [a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for the host]" (*Bamidbar* 31:5).

But Rabbi Chananya bar Yitzchak said: With twelve thousand men [in total] they went to war against Midian.

"Having come up from the washing" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.).

Rabbi Huna said:

That not one of them donned the *tefillin* of the head before donning the *tefillin* of the arm.

For had one of them donned the *tefillin* of the head before donning the *tefillin* of the arm,

Moshe would not have praised them and they would not have gone up from there in peace.

Say from this that they were exceedingly righteous.

"Whereof all are paired" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.) —

When they entered in pairs to a woman,

One of them would smudge her makeup,

And the other would strip her of her jewelry.

And they [the women] would say to them:

Are we not creations of the Holy One, blessed be He, yet you act this way toward us?

And Israel would say to them:

Is it not enough that ours was taken from beneath your hands?

This is what is stated: "And the Lord said to Moshe: Take all the chiefs of the people, and hang them up" (*Bamidbar* 25:4).

"And none fails among them" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.) —

Not one of [the soldiers] was suspected of sin.

"Your lips are like a thread of scarlet" (*Shir Ha-shirim* 4:3).

This is what they said to Moshe:

"Your servants have taken the sum of the men of war that are under our charge, and there lacks not a man among us" (*Bamidbar* 31:49) —

to sexual misconduct or to sin.

"And your mouth is comely" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.) –

When they said to him: "And we have brought the Lord's offering" (*Bamidbar* 31:50),

Moshe said to them: Your words contradict themselves.

You said: “‘And there lacks not a man among us’ — to sexual misconduct or to sin;” and you said: "And we have brought the Lord's offering."

If you did not sin, for what is this offering?

They said to him:

Moshe our master, pairs of people would go in to the woman,

And one of them would smudge her makeup, and the other would strip her of her jewelry.

Is it possible that the evil inclination was not at all agitated?

For that agitation of the evil inclination, we say to bring an offering.

At that time Moshe began to praise them,

"Your temples are like a pomegranate split open" (*Shir Ha-shirim*, ibid.) —

The least learned among you is stuffed with *mitzvot* and good deeds like this pomegranate.

For anyone who has the opportunity to commit a sin, but is saved from it, and does not do it, has done a great mitzva.

And needless to say: "Behind your veil" (*Shir Ha-shirim* ibid.) —

Of the chaste and self-controlled among you.

(*Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 4, 3)[[2]](#footnote-2)

This *derasha* comes from third-generation Amoraim in Eretz Israel, Rabbi Yitzchak and Rabbi Huna, both disciples of Rabbi Yochanan and disseminators of his Torah. It deals with the meaning of the war waged against Midian not only for the people of Israel, but also for the nations of the world. Israel serves as a role model and example for the nations of the world with respect to the moral code it embraces, boldly expressed in the war against Midian.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In contrast to the *Sifrei*, Rabbi Yitzchak and Rabbi Huna see Israel's uniqueness with respect to the daughters of Midian in the restraint that they show in the sexual realm, rather than in refraining from theft or in their motivation for matters of holiness.

The manner in which the fighters are presented in *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* clarifies that Israel's war against Midian rectifies and completely atones for the sin in Shittim. Here they once again encounter women; they are not seduced by them, but rather the soldiers punish the women by removing their accoutrements of beauty, thus attesting to the tremendous change in the soldiers’ behavior and awareness.[[4]](#footnote-4) The description of the ongoing encounter with the women during the war indicates a process of total repentance.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Dealing with their desire for wealth**

In light of the comparison with the thinking of the Amoraim of Eretz Israel on this matter, the following question becomes all the more powerful: why does the *Sifrei* emphasize that the character of the fighters against Midian expresses itself specifically in not seizing upon the spoils?

In the *Sifrei* on *Parashat Balak* we find that Israel's sin in Shittim, "And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit harlotry with the daughters of Moab" (*Bamidbar* 25:1), is attributed to their desire for the spoils of the war fought against Sichon and Og:

Another explanation: "And Israel abode in Shittim," in a place of folly )*shetut*(.

For Israel were in the wilderness for forty years,

No place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates.

[And yet] they came and waged war against Sichon and Og, who fell into their hands, and they took all that was theirs…

And Israel came and waged war against them and they fell into their hands and they took all that belonged to them.

But when Israel became filled with the spoils, they began to squander the spoils.

They tore clothing and cast it away, they mutilated animals and cast them away,

Because they sought only silver utensils and gold utensils.

As it is stated: "But all the cattle, and the spoil of the cities, we took for spoils to ourselves" (*Devarim* 3:7).

They came and abode in Shittim, in the place of folly (*shetut*).

At that time, the Ammonites and Moabites rose up,

And built for themselves compartments from Beit Ha-yshimot to Har Ha-sheleg,

And they set up women there selling all types of pastries.

And Israel would eat and drink.

At that time, a person would go out to walk about the market, and try to buy something from an old woman,

And she would sell it to him at cost,

But a young woman would call out to him and say to him from inside:

Come and buy it for less.

And he would buy from [the latter] the first day and the second day.

On the third day she would say to him:

Enter inside and choose for yourself, are you not like a member of the house?

He would go in to her,

And there stood a pitcher full of Ammonite wine,

And the wine of non-Jews had not yet been prohibited to Israel.

She would say to him: Would you like to drink some wine?

And he would drink.

And the wine would burn inside him, and he would say to her: Give me your consent.

And she would take out an image of Peor from under her fascia and say to him:

My master, do you want me to give you my consent? Bow down to this… (*Sifrei Balak* 131)

In our study of *Parashat Balak*, we explained that the *Sifrei* sees the human inclination to hoard money as the root of falling to the temptations of materiality in general.[[6]](#footnote-6)If so, in the *derasha* about the war against Midian, the *Sifrei* continues in this vein. Israel's conduct in that war is a repair of the human trait that is the mother of all sin. When they "land" in the civilized world, Israel is sucked into it by way of lust for possessions. The Jews’ success in the war against Midian stemmed from the very fact that they succeed in rising above the lust for money even in the unbridled reality of war.

Through our study of the *parashiyot* in the Book of *Bamidbar*, we have come to understand that in the places where the *Sifrei* expands upon the interpretation of one verse after the other, in the style of explanatory exegesis like *Bereishit Rabba*, the issue that is expounded is of importance to the generation of the Tannaim. Is this true also for the interpretive-conceptual approach of the *Sifrei*, as we have seen here? It seems that the suspicious attitude toward human economic activity, noting the spiritual dangers inherent in it for Israel, contains an excellent educational message for the Jewish people throughout every generation.[[7]](#footnote-7)

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The number one thousand, which is the product of the numbers ten and one hundred, indicates perfection, as does the number twelve. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See also *Shir Ha-shirim Rabba* 6, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Rabbi Huna's remark "that not one of them donned the *tefillin* of the head before donning the *tefillin* of the arm" may be understood as praise for the fighters who maintain a perfect balance between the world of action and the world of concepts and ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See *Sifrei Zuta* 31, 16:

   "Behold, these caused the Israelites” (*Bamidbar* 31:16)… Rabbi Elazar be-Rabbi Shimon said: This teaches that they recognized them all [= the daughters of Midian], and they said one to the other: This is the one with whom So-and-so sinned.

   The wording of the *derasha* emphasizes not the killing, but the disarmament of the daughters of Midian, by removing their makeup and their jewelry. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See the Rambam, *Hilkhot Teshuva* 2:1. Regarding seeing the war against Midian as a rectification of Israel's sin with Ba’al Peor, see *Or Ha-chayim, Bamidbar* 25:17. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See further in our *shiur* for *Parashat Balak*, <https://www.etzion.org.il/en/parashat-balak-%E2%80%9Cand-yisrael-abode-shittim%E2%80%9D>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. In light of the rule that "anonymous statements in the *Sifrei* may be attributed to Rabbi Shimon," one may ask whether the view regarding material possessions that emerges from this *derasha* is the view of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. See *Shemot Rabba* 52, 3:

   Once there was a disciple of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai who left Eretz Israel and returned a wealthy man. The other disciples saw this and were envious and also wanted to leave.

   Rabbi Shimon knew of this. He took them to a valley facing Meiron and said: Valley, valley! Become filled with gold coins. The valley started flowing with gold coins before them.

   [Rabbi Shimon] said to [his disciples]: If it is gold that you desire, here is gold; take it for yourselves. But know that whoever takes now is taking his portion of the World to Come, for the reward of Torah is only in the World to Come.

   See also BT *Berakhot* 35b:

   Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: Is that possible? If a man plows in the plowing season, and sows in the sowing season, and reaps in the reaping season, and threshes in the threshing season, and winnows in the season of wind, what is to become of the Torah? [↑](#footnote-ref-7)