

This week we finish reading Sefer Bamidbar (In the Wilderness), a.k.a. Numbers because of its many censuses. It is a vivid portrayal of human behavior at its best and its worst. Its protagonists represent a cross section of humanity, acting and reacting much like people do today. There are stories of courage and of cowardice, of heroes and villains, of great tenderness and extreme brutality. It is the painful, often tragic story of newly freed slaves navigating uncharted territory by fits and starts while learning how to build a society based on principles of individual and collective responsibility. And it is the story of the difficult transition from childhood to adulthood. It is rife with negativity and conflict, but it is also full of promise and potential. It is about accepting authority, both divine and human. It is about individuals, and it is about becoming a people. And it is about finding ways to balance the needs of the individual with the needs of the community. Ultimately, it is profoundly human, and that is why it is my favorite book of the Torah. Nevertheless, I always approach the story of the war against Midian in Parashah Matot with trepidation, and year for year I am repulsed and ashamed at the all-out slaughter of women and children. It is difficult reading, especially for us post-Shoah and still in the throes of the October 7 pogrom and the ensuing war in Gaza. It is difficult not only because of its appalling brutality, but also because we realize that this mindset still exists today all over the world. Moreover, this is not the only uncomfortable text in our TaNaKh. Similar passages like the ending of Psalm 137: “Praiseworthy is he who will take and dash your infants against the rock,” and many others that extol violence make texts such as Proverbs 3:17: “Its [Torah’s] ways are pleasantness, and all its paths are peace.” ring hollow. But they are part of our canon and we must engage with them. It is futile to pretend they do not exist, and it is unwise to sanitize, justify, or try to reinterpret them. The war against Midian is not the only indigestible story in Parashah Matot. The blatantly sexist laws concerning vows made by women (30:4-16) that begin the parashah and immediately precede the war narrative are offensive in their own right. Men are bound by their vows, but for women, unless they are widowed or divorced, the male relative who has authority over her (father, betrothed, husband) may veto any vow she makes. At least there is a caveat: He must annul her vow on the day he hears it, or it will be binding upon her. In addition, if the man does force the woman to annul her vow, he will “bear her iniquity” i.e., become obligated before HaShem. The laws concerning vows are but one of the many limitations on women’s autonomy. Another is the right to her own body. When Moses commands the troops to kill every male child and every sexually active woman, he adds, “And all the young girls who have no experience of intimate relations with a man, you may keep alive for yourselves.” (30:18) The rules governing the treatment of women taken captive in war that will be elaborated later in Parashah Ki Tetzei are equally galling for us today. Although rape is prohibited and captive women are given time to acclimate, they may be married and disposed of according to the whims of their captors, i.e., husbands. The only stipulation is that they may not be sold into slavery. Indeed, these two narratives show how much there is to grapple with in our sacred writings, especially when we realize that in war and in peace, women have always been dominated by men, and supported all too often by carefully selected words of scripture. This is precisely the quandary of our sacred writings. On the one hand, the Torah’s teachings are revolutionary in their profound respect for all of life, from the Shabbat laws that ensure a day of rest for all humans and animals and the *shmitah* and harvest laws for land and crops, to the laws of kashrut and those concerning prevention of disease and ensuring the rights of widows, orphans, and other less fortunate people. Indeed, compared to women in the surrounding cultures Israelite women still enjoyed many unique rights and privileges. And the war against Midian notwithstanding, the Torah does impose strict limitations on behavior during warfare. On the other hand, many narratives, such as this infamous war against Midian, perpetuate ancient patterns of injustice and violence. Squaring that circle remains a daunting task. It begins with acknowledging both the context in which such objectionable texts were written as well as our deplorable human potential for violence that shows no sign of abating. Like the proverbial elephant in the room, these texts cannot be wished, or explained away. Now, millennia removed from their source and in vastly different times and places, we have learned to approach their entirety with understanding and flexibility, deriving lessons from them that not only show us how far we have come since their origin, but also how far we still have to go in order to achieve the ideals that make our Torah so unique and enduring. The extremes of good and evil in our Torah narratives illustrate the extremes of human behavior, offering us examples to emulate and examples to reject and challenge. Inspired by the former, we can transform our righteous indignation over the latter into positive action. Justice and the inviolable sanctity of life are the fundamental principles of our Torah, against which all of its negative narratives must be measured. We humans don’t always live up to them, but in all but the most extremely fundamentalist branches of Judaism, *halacha*, interpretation of Torah law, is continually updated to show us the way forward. There are no easy answers, but in the words of Rabbi Tarfon (Pirke Avot 3:2), “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.” Let’s continue the work.

Shabbat shalom!