

MORASHAH
THE RABBINIC FELLOWSHIP OF THE UTJ
 811 Palisade Ave., Teaneck, NJ 07666
www.utj.org 201.801.0707

Rabbi Jeffrey Miller

Parashat HaShavuah Series

Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei

God has but one more task for *Moshe Rabeinu* before the mantle of leadership is to pass to Joshua:

"Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people."
 (Numbers 31:2)

In his magnum opus on the *Chumash*, Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040 –1105), better known as RASHI, directed the reader to the Biblical story that caused God such consternation. Back in *Parashat Chukat*, the *Torah* related how *Bnai Yisrael*, nearing the end of their forty-year journey in the Sinai, were directed by God to pass through the land of Moab peacefully. A reassuring message was sent by Moshe to Moab, but Moab was not convinced that the Israelites' intent was really peaceful. Therefore, Moab waged (what they believed was) a justified, pre-emptive war against *Bnai Yisrael*. RASHI, quoting a *Midrash* in *Sifre*, explained that the Moabites' conclusion may have been factually wrong, but it was still rational, since it was based on legitimate fears. Therefore, there was no need to "take revenge"; the battle was over and the time for amends was at hand.

The Midianites' conduct, however, was quite different. According to the same *Midrash*, the Midianites "were angered over a dispute that did not concern them". In other words, they joined the Moabite war against the Israelites even though they had no horse in that race. God therefore commanded that the Israelites must punish the Midianites – beyond merely defeating them in battle – for their senseless hatred of Israel.

As is often his style, RASHI suggests an alternative explanation why God spared the Moabites. Referring (this time) to a statement in the *Talmud* (Baba Kama 38b), RASHI noted that God protected Moab "[b]ecause of the two good doves [virtuous proselytes] whom I have [in mind] to bring forth from them, [namely] Ruth the Moabitess and Naamah the Ammonitess. Ruth, of course, was the great-grandmother of King David and Naamah was a wife of King Solomon.

This alternative explanation raises several theological problems. Firstly, students of RASHI will no doubt recall the story of Yishmael, Abraham's oldest son, who, with his

Rabbi Miller retired from the pulpit rabbinate to pursue a career in law. He lives in North Woodmere, NY with his wife Enid.

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

All *Divrei Torah* can be found at <http://www.utj.org/Torah/HaShavuah>

mother Hagar, was dying of thirst in the desert (Gen. 21:17). RASHI there cited a *Midrash* from the *Talmud* (Rosh Hashana 17b) that the Heavenly Angels objected to God's decision to save the boy. "Since Yishmael's descendents would one day kill Jews", the Angels reasoned, "wouldn't it be prudent to let him die now so as to avoid the future suffering of the Jews?"

God scolded the Twilight Zone-like approach of the Ministering Angels, holding that Yishmael could be judged only in the present moment, and in that capacity, he was innocent and thus deserved God's mercy.

The two *Midrashim* (concerning Yishmael and Moab respectively) are inconsistent. If Yishmael was to be judged 'in the moment', so too should Moab 'in their moment', and in that context, Moab was certainly as guilty as Midian for waging war on the Israelites. Why then didn't the Moabites deserve God's wrath regardless of any future righteous offspring? Further, certainly God could have rearranged His plans for the future to accommodate both the punishment of Moab and the future lives of Ruth and Naamah.

These three seemingly inconsistent opinions brought down by RASHI (*Sifre*, *Talmud* R.H., and *Talmud* B.K.) can actually be melded into a unified philosophy of national struggle:

1. We must strive to understand our adversary and to reconcile disputes amicably;
2. We are duty bound to make every effort to ascertain whether our 'enemy' may really be just a neighbor with legitimate concerns and fears;
3. We are generally not privy to God's plans for the future. Therefore, we must approach our friends 'in the moment' and give them every benefit of the doubt;
4. Some wars are just wrong and must be avoided;
5. Sadly, it is sometimes necessary to go to war. When war is unavoidable, we must fight to win.
6. But we must always remember that today's battlefield enemy might be tomorrow's ally, and may perhaps even produce a messenger of peace.

(For the motivated reader, try to reconcile the above analysis with RASHI on Exodus 2:12, in *Parashat Shemot*.)

Shabbat Shalom!

The Union for Traditional Judaism is a trans-denominational organization dedicated to bringing the message of open-minded Halakhic Judaism to the widest possible audience.

All *Divrei Torah* can be found at <http://www.utj.org/Torah/HaShavuah>