

Mattot-Masei 7/30/22

So, no one signed up to do a drash on this parasha.

I really don't mind because, hey, I'm a rabbi, and I like doing drashot occasionally!

I couldn't help but wonder if it was the content of this double parasha

That led folks to want to avoid discussing it. It's a hard one.

Let's be honest. Matot-Masei contains some topics that most of us would prefer to skip over and not discuss because they are kind of uncomfortable.

But that's what's in our Torah today, so here we go.

Let's get uncomfortable and see what happens.

Our reading detailed the apportionment and boundaries of the land of Canaan,

As well as towns for Levites and cities of refuge for the accidental manslayer.

But before we get there, we read about the conquest of the land of Canaan:

"When you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall dispossess all the inhabitants of the land, you shall destroy their idols... and take possession of the land and settle in it." (Num 33:51-53)

And then earlier in our parasha, we read about the genocidal holy war against Midian. God instructs Israel to take vengeance on Midian for the incident at Baal Peor in which the Midianite women seduce the Israelite men into idolatrous practice. Moses becomes angry with the Israelites for sparing the Midianite women and instructs them to kill the women and children too.

It's shocking and horrifying to us as modern readers of the Torah, and again, it's no surprise that no one signed up for the drash on this parasha.

Conquest of land and genocidal wars of vengeance aren't exactly popular topics.

But here they are in our Torah, so what are we going to do?

On the one hand, we find some relief in the fact that

bible scholars argue against the historicity of the Torah's telling of these incidents.

Modern commentators like Gunther Plaut, Jacob Milgrom, and [Yair Hoffman](#) point out the quirks and contradictions in the texts that indicate that

The Midianites weren't wiped out, as they show up again a short time thereafter

And other texts describe the Canaanites as not evicted from the land but continuing to live alongside the Israelites.

The numbers described in the booty seem ahistorical and there are discrepancies between various biblical accounts in Joshua and Judges.

The historical facts aren't completely clear, but scholars argue that the Torah's telling of the war and conquest can be read not as a report of what happened, but a later "reconstruction of events long past" (Plaut) or "A fictitious story of a holy war against sacrilege" with a historical kernel but details "not to be taken literally" (Milgrom, Excursus 67) or

As a later "midrash to illustrate certain...religious themes" (Gray.Milgrom p. 490)

Whew! Right?

There are certainly other things we can feel guilty about, but it seems

We don't need to make a Pilgrimage of Penance like the Pope this week, who went to Canada to try to apologize to the Indigenous peoples for the Catholic Church's harm and horrific treatment of them and their culture.

It's hard to make amends for that kind of damage anyway.

But here's the thing about this biblical holy war:

It's still in the Torah.

And there are lots of narratives in the Torah that aren't historical fact - the creation the world, the garden of Eden, the exodus from Egypt, the giving of Torah at Sinai to name but a few biggies, yet they create our world view and shape our values as Jews because they are IN the TORAH, our sacred and foundational text.

So even if the war against the Midianites and the conquest of the land didn't happen as the Torah says it did,

It's still IN THE TORAH! And it's ethically problematic for us today.

Robert Alter, in his commentary, says it like this, noting that the massacre of the Midianites is "bloodcurdling" and that most commentators resort to "strained apologetics" when they get to this part of the Torah. (Num 31:17)

"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 [doesn't

make us feel better]. It is painfully evident that this is an instance in which the biblical outlook sadly failed to transcend its historical contexts.”

So, how do we reconcile this violent and disturbing part of our sacred tradition? - as it says later in our very parasha regarding killing: blood pollutes the land and we're not to pollute and defile this land (Num 35:33-34)?

You can ask this same question about all of the ethically problematic parts of the Torah, and believe me, most of our Amitim students do, as well as quite a few of our adults!

The problem arises when we read the Torah and forget about the 2000 years of interpretive tradition between then and now.

Our Torah was written in an ancient historical context, and our values and understanding of the world have evolved since then.

And Torah has evolved since then too.

We don't practice biblical Judaism.

We practice rabbinic Judaism and we read the Torah through the lens of the 2000 years of thought that has evolved since biblical times.

The truth is - when we look at the disturbing parts of the Torah,

We see that troubling parts, like our parasha's holy war against the Midianites, never became our "Big Jewish Ideas"

(to use a phrase I learned from Rachel Brodie, z"l)

that formed our values and worldview.

Our Big Jewish Ideas are quite the opposite -

Compassion, caring, Chesed, Rachamim, Tzedek, justice, and peace.

We have to read these parts because they are in the Torah but we don't focus on them

(and certainly no one ever signs up to do a drash on them!).

The only remnant of this kind of "wiping out" of a people that plays an active role in our Jewish practice and imagination is the command to wipe out the memory of Amalek. And how do we do that?

By booing Haman and making noise on Purim while joking around and wearing funny costumes. And we then celebrate by giving mishloach manot and gifts to the poor and it's clear that THAT is the Jewish way to wipe out evil people, Not by some kind of actual holy war where anyone gets hurt.

Or some of our commentators, particularly the hasidic masters, read Amalek as a part of ourselves and turn the idea of wiping out Amalek into a mussar teaching about wiping out negative qualities within ourselves.

Okay, so we've got this ethically problematic part of the Torah, but on the one hand - it's not historically factual. And while it might have made sense in its troubling historical context, it never became an enduring part of our Jewish value system in thought or practice.

But on the other hand, we do have to acknowledge it's in our Torah and not just skip over the unpleasant parts.

Facing the shadow side of ourselves is where we are going this time of year.

We just entered the 9 days before Tisha B'av,

and we're headed towards Elul and the Yamim Noraim.

One thing that DID make it into our "Big Jewish Ideas"

is to take an honest look at ourselves,

To see where we've missed the mark and caused harm so that we can repair it.

The theology around Tisha B'av asks us to see how our own actions have led to destruction, and we begin the process of Teshuva that will be our focus for the next 2 months by looking closely at the parts we'd like to skip over and pretend aren't there because they cause us shame and discomfort.

So, we've got this problematic, uncomfortable part of the Torah.

On the one hand, it's not so historical and it certainly has not been emphasized by 2000 years of Jewish thought, values, and practice.

But on the other hand, it's there in our Torah -

Perhaps as an invitation to get honest about the parts within us that we're not so proud of, and

Perhaps as permission to acknowledge and even feel uncomfortable with the shadowy parts of our stories that we might prefer to skip over. But by acknowledging them, we can start to make amends and rectify wrongs.