

**My Least Favourite Biblical Verse**  
**Beth Shalom Cambridge**  
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Given this wonderful occasion of a pre-wedding *Ufruf*, I would have preferred to be able to speak about biblical material regarding the joys of marriage, the continuity of generations, the affirmation of the life force even in difficult times. I confess, however, that I feel driven to address a very different theme that occupies a central place in the first of this year's double-*parashot*, a theme that is extremely disturbing.

A few months ago, BBC4's 'Sunday: Religious News' programme featured a segment entitled: "Name your least favourite biblical verse". The verses cited were not verses difficult to understand, but verses that religiously committed individuals considered to be the most morally problematic. Had I been asked for my choice, it would have been a verse in our *parashat Mattot*.

If I believed that the entire Torah was a verbatim record of God's literal revelation to Moses on Mount Sinai, the entire 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Numbers would represent one of the most difficult challenges for me. Let me review it for you. The chapter begins attributing to God a command to Moses for an expedition of vengeance against the Midianite nation; this is said to be an obligation that must be completed before his death (Num. 31:1–2). In response, Moses instructs his people to mobilize 12,000 elite soldiers, in order to "wreak God's vengeance on Midian" (31:3). The soldiers are to be accompanied into battle by the son of the High Priest and the sacred vessels of the tabernacle. To use anachronistic terms, this is to be a *milhemet mitzvah*, a *jihad*, a "holy war".

The military expedition was stunningly successful: "They took the field against Midian, as the Lord had commanded Moses, and slew every male" (31:7). Then they burned to the ground all the Midianite towns and encampments, and took captive the women, children, flocks and herds (31:9–11). Proud of their victory, the Israelite warriors return to their camp to report to Moses, their commander-in-chief.

At this point, Moses unexpectedly lashes out at them in anger. Why? Because the Israelites had taken no male prisoners but "slew every male"? That's *not* the reason. Here come what I believe may be the most chilling three-word phrase in the Bible: *החיותם כל נקבה*, "You have left all the women alive!?!". (31:15). He is referring here to the Midianite women, some of whom had seduced the Israelites into idolatrous practices (cf. Num. 25:1–5). Moses then gives new instructions: kill all the male children, kill every married woman, allow only the young female virgins to survive (31:17–18). Following this, some 30 verses are devoted to a detailed accounting of the booty taken—as if this inventory of property were more important than the civilians who were massacred.

Thomas Paine, the radical Enlightenment freethinker, described this chapter in *The Age of Reason* as being "too horrid for humanity to read or for decency to

hear”—and it is difficult to refute his characterization. Even former Chief Rabbi Joseph H. Hertz, who tries in his Torah commentary to explain every rule and every narrative as reflecting the very highest level of moral standards, confesses that he is at a loss here. “The war against the Midianites presents peculiar difficulties,” he wrote. “We are no longer acquainted with the circumstances that justified the ruthlessness with which it was waged, and therefore we cannot satisfactorily meet the various objections that have been raised in that connection. Perhaps the recollection of what took place after the Indian Mutiny, when Great Britain was in the same temper, may throw light on the question.”<sup>1</sup>

But, as Louis Rabinowitz noted in a sermon he delivered while he was Chief Rabbi of South Africa, Hertz’s reference to atrocities committed by British soldiers in 1857, in response to attacks against British civilians in India, mis-represents the biblical narrative by blaming the Israelite soldiers for being carried away by their desire for revenge. The worst atrocities in this chapter came not at the initiative of the soldiers, but at the command of Moses, claiming to speak for God. And so Rabinowitz said in his sermon on this *parashah* that this chapter “is one of the most painful in the whole Bible. The ruthless savagery with which it was fulfilled is difficult, if not impossible, to justify; and the responsibility rests on the shoulders of Moses himself. The details of execution are left entirely to him.”<sup>2</sup>

Rabinowitz notes that this savage command to kill all the Midianite male children and married women is especially puzzling because these people were Moses’ own family: his wife and father-in-law were Midianites. Indeed this serves Rabinowitz as the basis for a psychological explanation—though by no means a defence—of the behaviour attributed to Moses. He had to protect himself against the accusation of favouritism, and he therefore could not order a less rigorous punishment for the Midianites than he did for the Israelites following the Golden Calf scandal (see Exod. 32:27). In this reading, Moses was so concerned with his reputation for impartiality in judgment that he acted with ruthless extremism. Fortunately we have the Book of Deuteronomy left to salvage Moses’ reputation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, there have Jewish authors who have defended the fanaticism of this passage. I have found in a large volume of sermons delivered by a leading rabbi of Salonika, the following passage spoken in the summer of 1568: “Among the lowest and most repulsive personal qualities in the world—in the judgment both of reason and of religion—is the quality of cruelty and vengeance. . . . Nevertheless, there are times when cruelty is merciful, and when compassion is cruel, as we find with the great cruelty done toward the Midianites in this *parashah*. Would that Israel would always act in this way. For all the evil that befalls us occurs when Israel, out of compassion, fails to follow the word of God that no one should be left alive.”<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately, this is not the only instance of such a chilling narrative in the Bible. In the last chapter of the book of Judges, we find the Israelite armies given the following instruction (which seems to be an echo of our Numbers 31 passage, though here it is not attributed to God): “Go and put the inhabitants of Jabesh-Gilead to the sword, women, and children included. This is what you are to do: Proscribe every man, and every woman who has carnally known a man” (Jud 21: 10–11). And this was an *Israelite* population, all but annihilated simply because they failed to partici-

pate in a vow taken by all the tribes at the shrine of Mizpeh to participate in an act of punitive warfare against the tribe of Benjamin (Jud 20:1–2, 8–9).

The simple truth is that these passages are unjustifiable, indefensible, horrifying. In our parashah, the Torah attributes to God and Moses incitement to genocide, long before the term or even the concept existed. This is part of our *Tanakh*, part of our Torah, our sacred tradition, and we need to confront such material rather than conveniently ignore it and pretend it is not there, until reminded by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and others who seem to think they discovered the problematic texts of the Bible and present them as the essence of all religion.

We should remember this chapter from our *parashah* when we are tempted to claim glibly that, unlike the sacred writings of other religions, the Torah’s “ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace” (*derakheha darkhei no’am ve-khol netivoteh shalom*, as we sang not long ago as part of our Torah service. With all that is ennobling and life-affirming in the Torah, there is also material that has been used to justify the political ideology of Meir Kahane, the murderous rampage of Baruch Goldstein, the cynical assassination by Yigal Amir, the alleged indifference to civilian life apparently demonstrated by some IDF soldiers in Gaza.

No religious tradition, including our own, is immune to the virus of fanaticism. Alongside the inspiring, life-affirming, peace-exalting verses that we love to quote, there are passages in the Torah from which we must register an unambiguous dissent, and affirm our belief that behaviour inspired by such passages, whether in the past or in the present, is wrong.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Pentateuch and Haftorahs*, ed. by J. H. Hertz, second edition (London Soncino Press, 1994), p. 704.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Rabinowitz, *Sparks from the Anvil*, pp. 181–85.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon Levi, *Divrei Shelomo*, p. 147b–c.