

This week's *Parasha Chukat* is probably most noted for the regulations concerning the "red heifer", the sin of Moses and Aaron in providing water for the children of Israel, and the deaths of Miriam and Aaron. Toward the end of the parasha, we read of the war between the children of Israel and Og, the king of Bashan:

They defeated him and his sons and all his people, until no remnant was left of him, and they took possession of his country.<sup>1</sup>

"... and all his people, until no remnant was left of him...." This phrase reflects an ancient practice of identifying a nation with its king; thus it seems to imply total destruction, not only of the army, but of the entire people, including women, children, and the aged.

Our sacred literature has multiple incidents of bloodshed that may strike a modern sensibility as cruel, immoral, and contrary to Jewish law. How are we to reconcile these events with the statement we read as we place the Torah back in the ark?

דְּרָכֶיהָ דְּרֵי-נֶעֱם, וְכָל-נִתְיֹבֹתֶיהָ שְׁלוֹם.

Its ways are pleasant and all its paths are peace. *Proverbs 3:17*

In the next two weeks, we will read of Pinchas' response to an act of sexual immorality by violent execution of the offenders, without the warnings and without the trial ordinarily required by Torah law, and God's blessing of Pinchas. Some of our sages found this very troubling; the Talmud tells us that had Pinchas asked the rabbinical court if the law permitted his actions, he would have been told that the law permitted them "but we don't follow that law."

The book of Joshua describes some of Joshua's battles during the conquest of the Promised Land as follows:

Joshua ... took Hazor ... And they smote all the souls there with the sword, utterly destroying them; there was none left that breathed ... every man they smote with the edge of the sword, until they had destroyed them, leaving none that breathed. As the Lord commanded Moses His servant, so did Moses command Joshua; and so did Joshua; he left nothing undone of all that the Lord commanded Moses.<sup>2</sup>

The Haggadah has a passage you probably know well, concerning the plague on Egypt's firstborns – a passage that interleaves quotes from the Torah with commentary:

"And I will pass through the land of Egypt," I, and not an angel. "And I will strike down the firstborn in the land of Egypt," I, and not an angel of fire. "And I will execute judgment against all the gods of Egypt," I, and not a messenger. "I am He, and not another."

Let me return to my earlier question: How should we understand the Torah, whose "ways are pleasant and all its paths are peace," as seeming to approve these seemingly unnecessary or overzealous acts of bloodshed? I don't claim to have a completely satisfactory answer, but I'd like to consider how two great

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<sup>1</sup> Num. 21:35 – p. 892 in the *Etz Hayim*

<sup>2</sup> *Joshua* 11:10-15

modern Jewish thinkers - Elie Wiesel, author, scholar, and human rights activist; and Martin Buber, scholar and philosopher - wrestled with what seems to be Scriptural approval of these massacres.

Elie Wiesel wrote concerning the Haggadah passage quoted above:

What a curious passage. Why does God boast of killing innocent children, be they Egyptian? Why does He mention it so often? Is He proud of it? One may study Midrashic and Talmudic sources in search of an answer. In vain. And yet there must be one. Is He teaching us an essential lesson? That He alone may kill? And that no one has the right to imitate Him?<sup>3</sup>

Rabbi Gordon Tucker, Vice Chancellor for Religious Life and Engagement at JTSA, tells the following story:

... Martin Buber told about a conversation he had with a deeply observant Jew. They were discussing the story of the prophet Samuel telling King Saul that he has lost God's favor for not having completely annihilated Amalek. Buber said that he was unable to accept this as a message from God. His interlocutor challenged him with a fiery glance and said "What do you believe then?" And Buber said "I believe that Samuel has misunderstood God." And then the story continues in this perhaps unexpected way:

*The angry countenance opposite me became transformed, as if a hand had passed over it, soothing it . . . "Well," said the man with a positively gentle, tender clarity, "I think so too."* ("Autobiographical Fragments," *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*)<sup>4</sup>

I like Elie Wiesel's questions: "Is He teaching us an essential lesson? That He alone may kill? And that no one has the right to imitate Him?" And I think we can learn from Martin Buber: if the prophet Samuel was capable of misunderstanding God, then perhaps other authors and compilers of Scripture had the same shortcoming. Our sacred literature teaches us how to live our lives. Surely these incidents of dubious bloodshed should be understood as negative lessons from *Torah Shlemah*, the Torah of peace and perfection.

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<sup>3</sup> *A Passover Haggadah as Commented upon by Elie Wiesel*, Simon & Schuster Inc., New York, 1993, p. 51

<sup>4</sup> Rabbi Tucker's essay is at [ww.jtsa.edu/contempt-for-god%E2%80%99s-word](http://ww.jtsa.edu/contempt-for-god%E2%80%99s-word) as of 6/17/2021