

A Muse: Matot 2008

“And every armed man among you shall cross the Jordan before Hashem, and then you shall return – then you shall be vindicated from Hashem and from Israel, and this Land shall be a heritage for you before Hashem”.(Numbers 32:21)

Martin Buber aptly put it when he said the distance between the God who commanded Moses to destroy the Midianites and to conquer the land and the God that I can believe in is about three thousand years. The text, in discussing the preemptive war against the Midianites, emphasizes that it was Pinchas who would lead on not Joshua. It was the same Pinchas, the zealot whom we encountered a few weeks ago at the end of Parshat Balak who brutally and without conscience drove a spear through the Israeli and Midianite woman who were consorting. This was to be a war run by religious zealots and not by masters of military strategy.

This week's portion has three basic themes all of which are earmarked by zealotry: The laws regarding vows; the wholesale killing of the Midianites and their women and the division of their property as revenge for seducing Israel into worshiping Baal Peor; and the settlement of Gad Rueven and half of Menashe on the eastern bank of the Jordan in exchange for their commitment to participate in the wars for conquering the land.

Notably interesting about the zealotry in this week's portion as in other references in the Tanach, is not only the fact that the zealotry was done in the name of God. Other cultures of the same period shared this same value, ascribing lack of tolerance and hostility to diversity as the wish of their Gods. This was a time where the norm was zealotry and its attribution to God. What is amazing, however, is that today, hundreds of years after the onset of modern biblical criticism, hundreds of years after the enlightenment there are still Jews who believe in the values espoused in the text as applicable today as it was yesterday. To them, the notion of “Torah Mesinai” trumps modern Biblical thought, common sense, good will and respect for diversity and free will.

If this is so, then how is it that these same fundamentalist Jews can summarily discount the beliefs of the Muslim jihadists who too believe in accepting the murderous commands and expectations of their God as valid today as it was thousands of years ago? Our reply has been that our ways are tempered by justice. But who defines justice? For Muslims it is the shariya, for Jews it is halacha. Imagine if we lived in a theocracy!