



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Matot-Massei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 18, 2015

Matot-Massei

Is Revenge Kosher?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Matot-Massei > Is Revenge Kosher?

July 18, 2015

ABSTRACT

How should we perceive the nuclear agreement with Iran? What does the Torah teach us about confronting forces that threaten our lives? Should we ever give our enemies the benefit of the doubt?

There is nothing quite as delicious as some good old-fashioned payback. When someone wrongs you, a whopping helping of sweet revenge delivered via wronging them back can seem most satisfying.

It may be true that revenge is a dish best served cold but a dish best served it nevertheless is.

But here is the question: Are we allowed to take revenge?

Anyone who has opened the Torah to the Book of Leviticus knows that, *You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge.* The Torah emphatically prohibits acts of vengeance.

And yet we find something quite contrary, even seemingly conflicting, in this week’s Torah reading, which not only condones revenge but even commands it against a certain nation – Midian.

How can that be?

The answer lies in a beautiful understanding of the unity of the family of Israel, where tit-for-tat has no place. And it gives us insight in how to treat a country like Iran.

This message is further illustrated by a story about the inventor of the radar – who got caught in a radar speeding trap by the very technology he invented.

So much for payback.

IS REVENGE KOSHER?

LESSONS FROM NEGOTIATING WITH IRAN

1. Payback Time (Joke)

While checking his bags at the airport, a man became indignant with the employee who handled the luggage. For several minutes he belittled the curbside porter and criticized him. But surprisingly, the porter didn't seem troubled by this man's verbal abuse.

After the angry man entered the airport, a woman approached the luggage handler and asked, "How do you put up with such abuse?"

The porter said, "It's easy. That guy's going to New York, but I'm sending his bags to Khartoum."

2. Vengeful Thinking

There is nothing quite as delicious as some good old-fashioned payback. When someone wrongs you, a whopping helping of sweet revenge by wronging him/her back may seem most satisfying.

It may be true that revenge is a dish best served cold but a dish best served it nevertheless is.

But are we allowed to take revenge? In a word, NO.

As anyone who has opened the Torah to the Book of Leviticus knows, *You shall neither take revenge from nor bear a grudge.*¹ The Torah emphatically prohibits acts of revenge.

And yet we find something quite contrary, even seemingly conflicting, in this week's Torah reading, which not only condones revenge but even commands it against a certain nation – Midian.

Let's take a closer look.

¹ Leviticus 19:18.

3. Parshat Matot-Massei

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people."²

Yes, that is indeed a command to take revenge. But if revenge is defined as wrong and forbidden elsewhere, what is going on here?

There is, in fact, an audacious Midrash that questions this apparent contradiction:

Thus did Israel say before the Holy Blessed One: "Master of the Universe, You write in Your Torah, *You shall neither take revenge nor bear a grudge,*³ and yet You are vengeful and begrudging, as it states, *The Lord is a jealous and vengeful God and is full of wrath; the Lord avenges Himself upon His adversaries, and He bears a grudge against His enemies?*⁴

The Holy Blessed One responded: I wrote in the Torah, *You shall neither take revenge nor bear a grudge against the members of your people,* however, I am vengeful and begrudging only to the servants of falsehood, as it states, *Take revenge for the children of Israel against the Midianites.*⁵

Why is it prohibited to take revenge against a fellow Jew but a mitzvah to take revenge against Midian? This does not seem very egalitarian. The reason given by the Midrash is that the Midianites are the servants of falsehood and this is why God wants us to take revenge against them.

4. Twelve Thousand Warriors

Indeed, if we continue reading, we see how Moses carries out this command:

² Numbers 31:1-2.

³ Leviticus 19:18.

⁴ Nachum 1:2.

⁵ Bereishit Rabba 55:3.

So Moses spoke to the people, saying, "Prepare your men for the army so that they can go up against Midian and carry out the revenge of the Lord against Midian. A thousand from each tribe ... you shall send into the army." From the thousands of Israel one thousand were drafted from each tribe, [a total of] twelve thousand warriors armed for battle.⁶

But a question arises. Why was the conscription uniform, a thousand from each tribe? It is well known that some tribes were stronger than others. The tribe of Issachar, for instance, was made up of Torah scholars,⁷ while the tribes of Reuven and especially Gad were highly skilled warriors. Should not the larger and stronger tribes have sent more soldiers than the smaller and weaker tribes?

Additionally, those familiar with Jewish law know that the members of the tribe of Levi, made up of the Kohanim/priests and the Tabernacle singers/servants were exempt from fighting Israel's wars.⁸ And yet in the vengeful war against Midian, the verse states, *from all the tribes of Israel, even that of Levi.*⁹ We see this as well from the sum of *twelve thousand armed for battle*, twelve thousand and not eleven thousand, one thousand from each of the twelve tribes!

Why in this case was Levi, the servants of the Tabernacle, commanded to fight?

The question becomes even more perplexing when we factor in the reason Levi is normally exempt from fighting, which is described beautifully by Maimonides:¹⁰

Why did the Levites not receive a portion in the inheritance of Eretz Yisrael and in the spoils of war like their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister unto Him and to instruct people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments, as it states: They will teach Your judgments to Jacob and Your Torah to Israel.¹¹

⁶ Numbers 31:3-5.

⁷ See Rashi to Deuteronomy 33:18.

⁸ See Rambam, Hilchot Shemita, 13:10-13.

⁹ Rashi ad loc quoting the Sifrei.

¹⁰ Ibid 10.

¹¹ Deuteronomy 33:10.

Therefore they were set apart from the ways of the world. They do not wage war like the remainder of the Jewish people, nor do they receive an inheritance, nor do they acquire [material goods] for themselves through their physical power. Instead, they were God's legion, as it states: *God has blessed His legion*¹² and He provides for them, as it states: *"I am your portion and your inheritance."*¹³

Furthermore, the war with Midian was a war of vengeance, not of conquering the Land of Israel or of safety. So, why specifically in this case was Levi, *God's legion, set apart from the ways of the world*, enlisted to fight?

5. Who Is Midian?

For this to make sense, we must first understand who exactly Midian was, the evil that Midian perpetuated then, and the evil that Midian represents today.

Torah is not a story book. Nor is it a history lesson. Torah – from the word instruction, guide, direction (*ho'raah* in Hebrew) – is a blueprint for life. Every account, every detail and nuance, contains personal lessons. This includes the narrative about the war with Midian: This teaches us about a war that we must always wage – today as well – with the Midian archetype on our contemporary lives.

As with all things in Hebrew, the holy tongue, the name of Midian embodies its *modus operandi*. The etymology of the name Midian comes from the words *madun u'meiriva*, meaning "strife, disagreement and divisiveness." Thus Midian represents fragmentation between the people.

Broken down even further, the root of this word is *din*, literally meaning "dispute" or "quarrel," and referring to judgment in general between two opposing elements. Thus, on a basic level, Midian represents the definitions, differences, quarrels and separations between people.

¹² Ibid. 11.

¹³ Numbers 18:20.

The war with Midian is thus a healthy – the best possible – thing we can do when faced with fragmentation. As such – we must wage war and exact vengeance on the forces that seek to create divisiveness between us.

Revenge is unacceptable in regular circumstances. But when it comes to eliminating toxicity – the malignancy of discord and conflict – we must not remain passive but must fight it with a vengeance.

On a level of *din*, of judgment and differences, not only does vengeance make sense, it would seem to be the righteous thing. You get back exactly what you gave – if you try to destroy me with your destructive acrimony, I will wage total war against you.

God structured existence in a form of cause and effect. When a force – Midian – brings on *din*, a tit-for-tat world, well then it gets exactly that: one tit-for-tat better, one that exacts vengeance on it!

6. Tit-for-Tat (Optional Story)

Speaking of tit-for-tat, I am reminded of a story about the Scotsman, Sir Robert Watson-Watt, who is regarded as the father of radar for his work up to and during World War Two.

Some years after helping to invent the radar, Sir Robert Watson-Watt was caught in a radar trap and received a speeding ticket in Canada. In his autobiography, *The Pulse of Radar*,¹⁴ he describes the experience.

His wife was in the car, and she tried to pull the don't-you-know-who-you're-giving-a-ticket-to trick on the policeman. Of course, the officer has no idea who the driver was, nor, it turns out, did he even know what the radar was (he only knew what his “electronic speedometer” read out), and Watson Watt received a \$12.50 fine.

¹⁴The Pulse of Radar, p. 229.

To commemorate the event and its vengeful irony, Sir Robert wrote a poem titled, *A Rough Justice*. Here is how it begins:

Pity Sir Watson-Watt,
strange target of this radar plot
And thus, with others I can mention,
the victim of his own invention.
His magical all-seeing eye
enabled cloud-bound planes to fly
but now by some ironic twist
it spots the speeding motorist
and bites, no doubt with legal wit,
the hand that once created it.¹⁵

7. Back to Midian

Midian represents the tit-for-tat world. It represents fragmentations and divisions within Israel, the diametrically polar opposite of the oneness of God.¹⁶ And if you want to represent the opposite of God, of oneness and unity, then the opposite of God is exactly what you will get.

But, only God, the Master of Judgment, can command vengeance. No man may – or even can – dictate who deserves it. Humans are simply not capable of making an objective decision, especially when they have been hurt, about avenging a wrong. This is the realm of God and only of God. And that is why it states, *Vengeance is poised with Me*¹⁷ – with Me, God, and with no one else.

We are not allowed to engage in acts of vengeance because our role in this world is to perform acts of righteousness – to forgive others, to aim for unity and peace between brothers. Our subjectivity cannot be allowed to stoop to retribution and other forms of payback.

¹⁵ <http://www.microwaves101.com/encyclopedias/616-a-rough-justice>.

¹⁶ See Rashi to Numbers 31:3. At length: Heichaltzu 5659.

¹⁷ Deuteronomy 32:35.

We can only take revenge on those Midian elements that diametrically oppose this purpose of bringing unity and love into the world.

Which leads us to the big news of this week: the nuclear agreement with Iran.

8. Negotiating With Iran

The so-called P5+1 and the Islamic Republic of Iran announced a nuclear agreement this week.

Without getting into the threats that this deal poses to Israel and others, or whether or not this deal is good for the United States and other countries, whether or not this deal is good for the future of the world, making it safer and more secure, there is a lesson here to be learned from our Torah portion, from the way God and Israel handled the nation of Midian.

Briefly: When it comes to an enemy – or even a questionable enemy – of unity, freedom, co-existence and love – our very commitment to love requires a total rejection, to the point of exacting vengeance on anything antithetical to unity.

The Western world, many defined as social liberals, believes in the quality and equality of all humankind. We despise war, abhor violence, are allergic to forcing someone else's hand. We would rather negotiate with our adversaries than beat them down.

This in it of itself is highly admirable. Who desires to shame and humiliate other human beings?

The Torah, as we just learned, teaches that sometimes we have to do the difficult thing; sometimes we have to go against our nature and do exactly the things we abhor doing. Sometimes, instead of negotiating, appeasing, and placating our adversaries we have to ratchet up the pressure to bring true peace.

One who is kind to the cruel and the aggressive will end up being cruel to the kind. Or as Churchill put it: Appeasement of enemies is like feeding the crocodiles in the hope that you will be eaten last.

That is the only reason we demanded unconditional surrender from the destroyed Axis armies at the end of World War II. Why not allow them to save face and give them some semblance of dignity by calling only for conditional surrender? Because when it comes to a sworn enemy of peace, there is no room for negotiation.

The revenge on Midian teaches that sometimes to create everlasting peace in this world we first have to demonstrate an unwavering strength; sometimes to unite the universe we first have to isolate and reject the parts of the world that do not desire unity and peace.

We can only judge Iran by its actions. It states its “lofty” goal of pushing Israel into the sea; it is the world’s largest financier, exporter, and producer of terror – state sponsored terrorism; its leadership believes that the world can only reach perfection under the banner of Shiite Islam.

If all this were not true, then one could argue that despite the aggressive rhetoric of Iran’s leaders, we should give them the benefit of the doubt and try to curb their nuclear aspirations with negotiations. Why be aggressive with them, one could argue? Why exact vengeance?

But the facts on the ground clearly indicate that they are not to be trusted – which is why the coalition agreed to sanctions against Iran in the first place. So to suddenly become soft on Iran – with the wishful hope for the best – is not the path to peace.

The Torah’s approach to Midian teaches us that the way to true peace with a belligerent nation like Iran is to be strong and yes, to avenge – neutralize and vanquish – their support for terrorism and war against Israel, by not buckling and showing a weak hand.

The question has to be posed this way: Is the best way to stop Iran from gaining nuclear capability – which everyone agrees will radically disrupt the Middle East and the world (just ask the Saudis) – by signing an agreement, lifting the sanctions and relying on their promises, or through a committed war with a vengeance against their hostility and threats?

Revenge, as learned from our portion, isn't petty payback; revenge is tightening the screws, weakening the disadvantages so that you can achieve your goal and achieve the strongest possible result.

Knowing what we know from the Torah, perhaps there is a better way to uproot the tyranny of Iran.

We cannot control the decisions and meanderings of politicians. We can control the way we live our daily lives. Perhaps how we act is the surest way to influence the safety of Israel, the United States, and the world.

To better understand how you and I, more than anybody else, may be able to curb Iran's nuclear aspirations and desires to annihilate Israel, let us understand the mystical approach to Midian.

9. A Mystical Approach

In the mystical texts of Kabbalah, Midian is described as the subtle evil of disunity and animosity.¹⁸ When you love someone you begrudge that person nothing and never want to take revenge on your beloved, even if you perceive that your beloved has done something wrong.

It is indeed an unhealthy parent who takes revenge on a child, or a dysfunctional spouse who begrudges something to his or her better half.

Midian was all about animosity; it was all about unearthing the differences between family members and burying the underlying commonality.

This is a much more subtle evil than the evils perpetrated by the seven idolatrous Canaanite nations – such as murder, immorality and idolatry. This is why the exile following the first destruction of the Temple was (only) seventy years, because such clear-cut evil is quicker to root out. But the exile following the second destruction of the Temple is sadly ongoing, for animosity and disunity, a much more subtle evil, is more difficult to address and uproot. And this evil is represented by Midian.

¹⁸ Likkutei Torah, Matot; Heichaltzu 5659; Likkutei Sichot vol. 23, p. 210; ibid vol. 2, pp. 693.

We are all horrified by murder, but criticizing another Jew is for some, sadly, a “religious duty” we all adhere to.

Let us, instead, abhor such shattering behavior. If someone tries to fragment our family, let us fragment them.

And this is what the Midrash says in differentiating between revenge upon your own nation and revenge upon the servants of falsehood:

The former is prohibited because you are here not to judge, payback or bear a grudge, but to bring peace, light and harmony. The latter is necessary because in order to do so you have to eradicate Midian, the forces of divisiveness and fragmentation.

But this vengeance can only come from the Creator Himself. No man can dictate such a harsh decree.

10. Why Also Levi

This explains why the tribe of Levi, God’s legion, joined forces here; and why each of the tribes sent a uniform one thousand soldiers regardless of tribe strength or size. As the verse states, *from all the tribes*.

The war against Midian demonstrated the unity and equality of all of Israel. Every single tribe – no matter how large or small, weak or strong, priest or laborer – all fought against the divisiveness of Midian together.

And, because this was not a war of conquering land but of standing up for God’s oneness and unity, the tribe of Levi – God’s legion – had to represent and teach and herald this unity for all to see.

A war for land, security, or defense is technical; this war against Midian was spiritual and who better to lead the spiritual charge of unity than Levi?

11. Personal Lesson: Stop Fighting, Start Uniting!

As Maimonides clearly states, this ideal of serving God in unity, which Levi represents, applies to all of Israel:

Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek, he is sanctified as holy of holies. God will be His portion and heritage forever and will provide what is sufficient for him in this world like He provides for the priests and the Levites. And thus David declared: *God is the lot of my portion; You are my cup, You support my lot.*¹⁹ Blessed be the Merciful One who provides assistance.

Levi was exempt from fighting in battle, as was anyone dedicated to being in God's legion. Except if that war was about unifying Israel and standing up against divisiveness and animosity.

The difference between Israel and Midian is exactly this: love versus animosity. When you love someone, that someone can do no wrong; when you harbor hatred towards someone, that someone can do no right.

Israel represents family and families must remain unified. Exile is what happens when a family forgets it's a family and one member dislikes another.

This is why every Jew in this room must ask him or herself: What can I do today to unite my family, to unite the Jewish people? Then, after you ask the question, answer it emphatically and act on it.

When it comes to Midian divisiveness we cannot afford to be complacent and passive. We need to fight against all forms of divisiveness with a vengeance.

Is there someone you quarrel with?

¹⁹ Psalms 16:5.

If so, call that person after Shabbat and take them out to dinner. Someone you can't stand? Well, too bad, if that someone is your sibling, your family.

If we act like a family to each other, never being vengeful or begrudging anyone anything, then surely God will do the same for us, His children, the children of Israel.

Surely then Iran and any other entity battling the children of Israel will be null and void.

12. Kids at War (Joke)

The mother ran into the bedroom when she heard her seven-year-old son scream. She found his two-year-old sister pulling his hair. She gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "There, there, your little sister didn't mean it. She doesn't know that it hurts." The big brother nodded his acknowledgment, and the mother left the room.

As she started down the hall, the little girl screamed. Rushing back in, she asked, "What happened?"

The little boy replied, "She knows now."

13. I'll Show You (Conclusion)

We often think that we have to teach the world a lesson - that we will show them how it works.

The best revenge is the kind that changes the world. Putting aside our differences with the world for a moment, the real challenge we face today is how we act among ourselves. What can we do to foster unity within the Jewish people? The answer is the opposite of revenge. A perceived wrong must be answered with a definitive right.

If we all responded tit-for-tat to every interaction the world would be a dark place indeed. I shudder to imagine God responding tit-for-tat to our actions. The key attribute here is empathy, compassion, not judgement – *rachamim* not *din*.

Israel transcends differences; while Midian creates them.

Thus within Israel revenge is prohibited, but when it comes to Midian, it is commanded.

And this, as we enter the sad Nine Days, at the conclusion of the Three Weeks, between the confines, *bein hameitzarim*, remembering the destruction of the Temple caused by indiscriminate animosity, we can practice indiscriminate love and rebuild the house of peace and holiness.

May it be immediately!

Shabbat Shalom!