



## 5 ways

to explore the biblical text

Overleaf we explored a surprising element in the text concerning the *absence* of any comment about Moses' Midianite wife. Here, let's identify some other puzzling 'clues' or 'irritations' in the text which invite our prayerful reflection and spirited discussion.

### 1. A tragic irony.

Moses gives the order for the male Midianite children to be put to death; yet Moses himself is a child survivor of a similar massacre in Exodus 1:22 at the order of Pharaoh.

### 2. A surprising name.

Were you taken aback to see Balaam named (31:8) as one of the slain? Wasn't he the seer who blessed Israel in Num.24? Why would he be executed? A clue is offered in 31:16.

### 3. A hopeful absence.

Moses gives the order to kill women and children. But is the order carried out? The text doesn't actually say.

### 4. A significant phrase.

The Lord tells Moses to take revenge against the Midianites in 31:2, then adds, "*After that you'll be gathered to your people.*" This biblical idiom refers to Moses' death. The battle with the Midianites will be Moses' final battle before he dies.

### 5. A contradiction.

Revenge is taken against the Midianites. Yet the offenders (described in Num. 25:1-3) are of the *Moabite* tribe, with the exception of the one Midianite woman named in 25:6. In interpreting this contradiction, the sages take note of Num. 22:4.

# Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.

## Why reflect on Torah?

This week's Torah reflection, on Numbers 31, plunges us into a shocking biblical scene. In retaliation for a sinful incident (Ch 25), Moses orders the massacre of Midianite men, women and children. How are we to understand such violence as part of God's inspired Word? All too briefly here, let's consider the following:

First, biblical attitudes to life and death, sexuality and sin, reward and punishment, reflect a foreign culture millennia old. While we are encouraged to 'enter the story,' a certain degree of historical perspective is presumed!

Second, the ancient form of Judaism reflected in this story cannot be equated with contemporary Judaism. Any temptation to cite this text as an indication of Christian superiority over Judaism is offensive to Jews and contrary to Church teaching.

Thirdly, as the Jewish sages teach us, the Word of God offers not a saccharine panacea but a robust invitation to *question* and *wrestle* with the text, uncovering dilemmas and struggles that resonate in our own human lives. To be shocked and disturbed by the bible is a starting point for deep reflection.



Numbers 30:2—32:42

Matot: 'tribes'



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## Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar  
of Torah readings:

### Numbers 30:2—32:42

Our focus today is the revenge against the Midianites in Numbers 31:1-18. It may be helpful to read this passage twice; the first time to simply absorb the shock of the violence of the story and to recall its historical context (see cover page of this leaflet). Then read it again seeking insight at a deeper level. Our reflections in this issue will be guided by a contemporary Jewish Torah commentator, Richard Friedman.

## Tasting Torah

Friedman points out that the revenge in Numbers 31 is a response to a *ritual* crime. Earlier, in chapter 25, the Israelite men succumbed to apostasy as their flirtation with foreign women led them to embrace the god Baal-peor (25:1-5). This crisis reaches breaking point in an incident described in 25:6-9 where an Israelite man and a Midianite woman flaunt their relationship and enter a *kubbah* ('tent'), possibly a reference to a cultic area and may even refer to the Tabernacle. In the Torah the punishment for ritual crime, i.e., transgressing sacred boundaries and defiling sacred places/objects, is especially severe.

## Touching Torah

It is difficult for us to comprehend the violence and hysteria of the response described in these ancient texts, yet even today our own instinctive reactions offer some clue. To take a simple example: as a Catholic, imagine the gasps of a Mass congregation if the consecrated chalice was accidentally knocked over on the altar. (How different to spilling a glass of wine at home!) Multiply this reaction a thousandfold, minus the benefit of social and psychological developments over millennia, and we have some glimpse into ancient perspectives. Today, as then, sacred symbols and gestures strike a deep chord in the human psyche. No wonder the most volatile, emotive debates in religious communities are often about liturgy!

## Depthing Torah

After adjusting our mindset to the world of the Torah, let's place ourselves inside this biblical story. Amidst all the violent activity against the Midianites (including a chilling reference to war 'booty' in 31:11), do you notice the one deafening silence? Moses' wife, Zipporah, is a Midianite! Yet the text makes no reference to her or to Moses' beloved father-in-law, Jethro the Midianite priest, whom we met in Exodus 18. Says Friedman:

*"The lack of any comment about Moses' thoughts and feelings here is the most powerful silence since the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac, in which we are told nothing of Abraham's heart. The Torah's way is to leave these things unspoken, and thus to leave us to ponder them."*

## Doing Torah

Gather in *havrutah* to ponder this disturbing silence in the text. Presumably Zipporah was not executed, yet what tensions might surround her presence? Can we imagine the conversations between Moses and Zipporah? How might she be treated in light of these incidents? What is the 'gossip' in the Israelite camp? Where is the name of Jethro in all this? Where lie the loyalties of Moses' and Zipporah's two sons? Do your reflections shed light on other aspects of the narrative? E.g., might Moses' rage (31:14) arise from his own personal pain of juggling the complexities of his public and domestic life?



## Faith & Life

Consider the strong emotions (anger, rage, joy, ecstasy) evoked by actions that impact upon religious experience. E.g., the horror of child sexual abuse is magnified when the perpetrator is a religious figure.

Consider too that, while this biblical story is ancient, we do not have to look far to find modern cultures perpetrating mass violence and genocide. E.g., the Armenian genocide, the Shoah, tribal massacres in Rwanda...

Can the disturbing episode in our Torah portion speak to you, your community, your world today? How so?

Bibliography: Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (San Francisco, 2001); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001). Scripture: Friedman's translation.