

Parashat Matot

One of the most curious and perplexing aspects of the whole story of incident at Ba'al P'or, of Bilam and Balak is the Torah's apparent and paradoxical distinctions and confluences between Moabites and Midyanites. This is evident from the very first paragraph of Parashat Balak. As we read, "Now Balak the son of Tzippor saw all that Israel had done to the Emori. Moav was very afraid of the people, because there were so many of them; Moav was overcome with dread because of the people of Israel. So Moav said to the leaders of Midyan, 'This horde will lick up everything around us, the way an ox licks up grass in the field.'" It's easy to be confused. Just who are the Midyanites and who are the Moavites? Are they different people or one and the same? The confusion is perpetuated in the next verse where we read that "Balak the son of Tzippor was king of Moav at that time." Moreover, in calling upon Bilam to help him we are further told that he dispatched "the leaders of Moav and Midyan, taking payment for divining" and came to Bilam and spoke to him the words of Balak. Bilam said to them, "'stay here tonight, and I will bring you back whatever answer Adonai tells me.' So the princes of Moav stayed with Bilam." Hold on... I thought princes of Moav *and* Midyan went to Bilam, but here we are told that only the princes of Moav stayed the night! So what happened to the princes of Midyan? Or are they one and the same people? Interestingly once Bilam heads off to Balak references to the Midyanites dry up altogether. Thus "So Bilam got up in the morning, saddled his donkey and went with prices of Moav." In Bmidbar 22:36 we read that "When Balak heard that Bilam had come, he went out to meet him in the city of Moav at the Arnon border." And moreover in Bmidbar 24 Bilam prophesied that "Israel [would] crush the corners of Moav and destroy all descendants of Shet." Following this curse, we learn in Bmidbar 25:1 that: "Israel stayed at Sheetim, and there the people began whoring with the women of Moav." That seems clear enough, according to 25:1 it was the women of Moav that interloped with the Israelite men. However, in 25:6 we are then told that "a man from Israel came by, bringing to his family a woman from Midyan" and in verse 16 Adonai tells Moshe to "treat the Midyanim as enemies and attack them." Bmidbar 31 picks up the narrative. "Adonai said to Moshe, 'On behalf of the people of Israel, take vengeance on the Midyanim.'" What follows is an account of a genocidal war against Midyan in which all the Midyanite men are killed in battle but the Midyanite women and children are spared. "They fought against Midyan, as Adonai had ordered Moshe, and killed every male. They killed the kings of Midyan along with the others who were slain - Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Hur and Reva, the five kings of Midyan. They also killed Bilam the son of B'or with the sword. The people of Israel took captive the women of Midyan and their little ones, and they took as booty all their cattle, flocks and other goods." When Moshe discovered that the women were still alive he declared that all the virgins among them were to be spared but the rest, including all the male children, were to be executed." How were the virgins distinguished from the rest? The Midrash proposes a lie detector test, "'Every female child you shall stand before the holy crown (the gold frontlet of the High Priest) and cross-examine her. And whoever has slept with a man, her face will pale; and whoever has not slept with a man, her face will blush like a fire, and you shall spare.'" The virgins that were thus spared were kept as wives or concubines by the Israelite men and thus became part of the lineage of the Jewish

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people. And yet, somewhat paradoxically we also read that Moshe later prohibited mixed marriages with Moavites, "No Amoni or Moavi may enter the assembly of Adonai, nor may any of his descendants down to the tenth generation ever enter the assembly of Adonai, because they did not supply you with food and water when you were on the road after leaving Egypt, and because they hired Bilam the son of B'or from P'tor in Aram-Naharayim to put a curse on you. But Adonai your God would not listen to Bilam; rather, Adonai your God turned the curse into a blessing for you; because Adonai your God loved you. So you are never to seek their peace or well being, as long as you live." Confused yet? If the Moavites are really Midyanim and vice-versa then how can Moshe forbid Moavites from being part of the Jewish people when tens of thousands of Midyanite women spared from the war have already become the wives and concubines of Israelite men? Moreover, as Bmidbar 31:40 demonstrates a small number of these had been dedicated to Adonai's service in and around the Mishkan. Indeed, given all of this how do we further explain that Moshe himself was married to Tzipporah the Midyanite daughter of Yitro 'the priest of Midyan' and that his own children, Gershom and Eliezer, were therefore under his own ban? Moreover, how do we explain the fact that a whole book in the compendium of sacred writings which we call the Tanakh celebrates not only the faith of a young Moavite woman called Rut, but her marriage to Boaz, an Israelite man, and that she even became the great grandmother of Israel's greatest king and thereby also a key ancestor of the Messiah? We obviously have much to chew on!

In beginning to chew we should first note that few have proposed that Moav and Midyan are one and the same people. To the contrary, the predominant Talmudic explanation of the identity of the Moavites and Midyanites is that these were two separate peoples who, fearing the threat of Israel, joined together to wage war. This approach is epitomised by the following Talmudic statement: "It is like the case of two dogs that were fighting with one another. A wolf attacked one of them. The other thought: If I do not come to his aid the wolf will kill him today and tomorrow he will attack me. For a similar reason Moab joined with Midian." The interchangeability of Moav with Midyan in the text is therefore, according to this view, because these two peoples were operating as one against the Jewish people. Rashi in the wrote that the king of Moav consulted the Midyanites because he knew Moshe spent a period of his life in Midyan, and he wanted to learn more about the leader of the Israelites. The elders of Midyan chose to not only advise the king of Moav, but joined forces with him in the campaign to seduce the Israelite men. While on the one hand this explanation makes it easier to read the text without raising source related questions it has some issues, the first being that if both Moavites and Midyanites worked hand in glove - and as we have seen the Torah notes that both Moavite and Midyanite princes were involved and that both the women of Moav and Midyan 'whored' with the Israelite men, why is vengeance only meted out against Midyan? Why were the Midyanites apparently to be wiped out while Moavites were merely forbidden from becoming part of the Jewish people, especially when Balak, the instigator of the whole episode is identified as a king of Moav? If they acted hand in glove why the disparity in divine judgement? The explanation given in one Talmudic story, that

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God told Moshe to spare Moav and attack only Midyan because He wanted to preserve the land of Moav for the birth of Rut, the virtuous ancestor of King David, is perhaps a little too far fetched. However, according to modern scholars this whole narrative concerning Moav and Midyan is evidence of the existence of different Israelite source traditions that were edited together sometime in and around the Babylonian exile. The fact that the Torah was potentially expertly compiled from up to four or five different sources in fact helps to explain many apparent anomalies in our texts. From simple explanations such as why Moshe's father-in-law is attributed in the Torah with three names, Yitro, Hovav and Reuel is thus not because these were three separate individuals or because he actually had three different names but because this how he is referred to in three different source traditions. The evidence that the Torah is compiled from separate sources, so we are told, is right there before our eyes if we would but look a little closer. This would explain why Bresheet 1 and 2 give different accounts of the Creation act; why the flood narrative has animals coming in two by two and yet also in pairs of seven; why a raven is sent out and also a dove; why the first four books, though ostensibly written by Moshe, are not delivered in the first person and why Devarim, reports Moshe's words from "the other side of the Jordan" and why the Torah refers to historical events that belonged to the much later period of the kings. Indeed, it is indisputable that the Torah itself is aware of and cites other source materials such as the Book of the Wars of The Lord in B'midbar 21:14-15. With the benefit of modern literary analysis scholars such as Richard Freedman have been able to identify the various different source traditions that make up any given text of the Torah. Indeed, he suggests that the various, apparently interchangeable, references to Moavites and Midyanites in our present parashah are further evidence of this expert interweaving, perhaps by Yirmeyahu or Ezra, of different ancient Israelite sources into one readable narrative. According Freedman the narrative of Ba'al P'or begins with one source tradition (called 'J' the Yahwist, reflecting the predilection of this source to use the Tetragrammaton) in which the Moavites are the ones acting against Israel, then switches to another (called 'P' due to it being written by Aharonic Priests) in which the Midyanites are the ones at fault and the Moavites are not even mentioned. Significantly, this Priestly text often exhibits lukewarmness and even occasional antipathy toward Moshe owing to apparent contemporary tensions between Cohanim who were descended from Aharon and some Levitical priests who were descended from Moshe. In the present text it is notable that the 'J' source refers to Moav throughout and ends the narrative with Moshe taking dramatic steps to punish Israel's sinners, commanding 'Each man, kill his men who were joined to Ba'al P'or'. The 'P' source by way of contrast refers not to Moavites but to Midyanites and has Pinchas, an Aharonic priest, stopping the plague by killing Cozbi, the *Midyanite* Princess. Subtle criticism of Moshe's actions, or apparent inactions, it is suggested, is evident in 'P's identification of Midyanites over Moavites since Moshe's wife was a Midyanite and therefore the ancestor of the competing group of priests descended from Moshe. In other words, if Freedman is right, then the retelling of the story of Ba'al P'or in the different sources, and not just this story, was very much coloured by the sectarian politics late in the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah.

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As fascinating as this is, whichever way we look at the text we are still left with profound questions. First, on a personal level, we must ask how Moshe felt about all that was taking place. After all, Moshe had been afforded sanctuary by Midyanites when he fled from Pharaoh and he had married into the Midyanites when Tziporah became his wife and Yitro, the 'priest of Midyan', became his father in law and two 'Midyanite' sons were born to him. How did Moshe feel about the Moavites and Midyanites under Balak seeking Israel's destruction? How did he feel about the Midyanite women who sought to seduce Israelite men and cause them to commit idolatry? And how did he feel about Hashem's instructions to annihilate them? Did he feel betrayed? Does this account for his draconian instructions to kill all the women and children? Is this the reaction of a bitter man? And what about the ban on Moavites? How did he feel about that when his own family would, depending on the provenance of these people, have been prohibited? Indeed, what do we make of this ban when according to one source, Yitro didn't depart the Israelite camp but continued to serve as Israel's 'eyes and ears' in the desert and his descendants are noted as having a portion in the Land? So many questions to ponder, many of them, perhaps, unsolvable! At the very least the portion challenges our black and white notions of people. It is easy to stereotype and condemn whole peoples or religions while failing to see the complexity, difference and honourable humanity that lies within. Fear causes us to speak in generalisations and stereotypes. During the war it was said that the only good German or Japanese was a dead one, as if all Germans and Japanese were equally evil and therefore deserving of genocide. Mass Observation reports show that popular feeling in this country as the war neared its end, especially as the horrors of the concentration camps became more apparent, was that the whole German people should be annihilated. All were responsible; all were guilty. But what about all the Sophie Scholls in Germany and the Chiune Sugiharas in Japan who resisted the Nazis and helped save thousands of Jews? The complexities of identity in our portion, which tells us that we Jews are part Moavite or Midyanite, teach us that we should beware of sweeping generalisations because the reality is that we are in them and they in us. Thus today we witness the great irony of many contemporary Americans, children of immigrants, negatively stereotyping present day immigrants and seeking to halt their influx. Neither are we in this country innocent in this regard as citizens of a nation whose empire once covered a quarter of the earth but who may now resent the presence here of those who seek to come to this country from that empire. Parashat Mattot asks many questions. Though we do not necessarily find answers in the portion we find a riposte to Devarim's stereotypical ban on Moavites and Midyanites in the Book of Rut. For here we learn that not all Midyanites or Moavites are the same, and that we must take people on an individual basis. While Devarim finds fault with and bans all Moavites the Book of Rut simply disagrees.