

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Pinchas)

In 1801, Thomas Jefferson had finally had enough. For the better part of twenty five years Americans had been paying ransom and tribute to the Arab nations of the Barbary coast (Yemen, Morocco, Tunisia, and the Algiers, amongst others) to avoid having their ships taken and their sailors enslaved.

But by 1801, when Jefferson was inaugurated as President of the United States, America was paying ten percent of its national budget in payments to the Pirates. There were many, John Adams amongst them, who believed paying the Tribute was the best option. Still recovering from the American Revolution, with barely a navy to speak of, the Americans had attempted negotiations with the Pirates to no avail.

When asked by Jefferson (when still Ambassador to London) and Adams by what right the Barbary states preyed upon American shipping, enslaving both crews and passengers, Tripoli's Abd Al-Rahman responded that nations who had not accepted Islam were sinners and that the Koran mandated war and enslavement against them. So the newly inaugurated President went to war. It would take fifteen years, before the North African States finally accepted defeat, and America finally stopped paying tribute. Sometimes negotiations don't work, and you have to be willing to go to war.

In this week's portion of *Pinchas*, G-d commands Moshe to tell the Jewish people (Bamidbar (Numbers) 25:17) to: "Harass the Midianites, and smite them."

Rashi (ibid.) suggests we are meant to 'make them our enemy'. This is an unusual command for a people whose mission ultimately, is to be "A light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Why not negotiate for a lasting peace? Why must we harass them as an enemy?

It was Midian who, on the wicked prophet Balaam's advice sent their own daughters to seduce Jewish men, leading to a terrible plague that killed thousands of our people. Yet, the Torah interrupts this narrative with a number of seemingly unrelated topics (a census, the passionate story of the daughters of Tzlafchad who wish to inherit the land in their father's name, and the sacrifices) before finally getting back to the business of avenging the Jewish people against the Midianites in next week's portion (*Bamidbar* 31:2); why?

Further, it was not only the Midianites who were responsible for this reprehensible plot; Moab was equally complicit also plotting alongside Midian. Indeed, it was the King of Moab in last week's portion who leads the failed effort in last week's portion to curse the Jewish people, so why is it only Midian that the Jews are commanded to attack?

There is one fundamental difference between the Midianites and the Moabites: Moab wished to do battle with the Jewish people because they were afraid of us: "And Moab became frightened of the (Jewish) people for they were so numerous..." (ibid. 22; 3). There was a logic to their attack: they were afraid of the economic repercussions of such a large and numerous people so close to their borders. They did not hate us; they feared us.

The Torah however, gives us no reason for the Midianites' decision to join this attack; it seems they simply hated us, for no reason. Perhaps the Torah is teaching us, you can reason with fear, you cannot

negotiate with hatred. And hatred has to be something we as a Jewish people abhor; hatred, and those who hate, is the antithesis of everything good the Jewish people were ever meant to teach the world; you can't reason with hatred.

Judith White in the Harvard Business Review suggests it is possible to negotiate with people who are overly emotional. *"Once the conflict is identified and addressed, and parties are allowed to vent, emotion usually dissipates."* (June 2014: *Two kinds of people you should never negotiate with*).

And you can even negotiate with people who are being unreasonable:

"We often think people are being unreasonable when they don't agree with our logic and evidence. But more often, people who disagree with us are simply seeing different problems, and even different sets of facts, than we are. Even if you think the other party is being unreasonable, it's still possible to bridge the gap and close a deal." (ibid.)

But you can't negotiate with people who see the world in absolute terms of good and evil:

"What (such people) want is for evil people to be held accountable and punished, and because you are in a conflict with them, you may fall into that category. Walking away would deprive (them) of the opportunity to punish you." There is simply no reasoning with such people; you can only walk away. And if that option does not exist, then you have to be willing to fight.

Such was the case with Adolph Hitler and the evil he represented, in World War II; which was why the Allies insisted in absolute surrender; there could be no negotiating with evil; evil needed to be destroyed.

It seems, we find ourselves in similar circumstances today, with many suggesting we should negotiate with Iran to prevent a nuclear Middle East, or with Hamas and Hezbollah to achieve peace and quiet borders. Perhaps the Torah is suggesting that when our enemies hate us simply because of who we are, there is no point in negotiations; the world will not know peace until such evil is destroyed...

As we enter the traditional three weeks of mourning in the Jewish calendar leading up to Tisha B'Av and the anniversary of the destruction of both Temples and the resulting Jewish exiles, it behooves us to consider whether negotiations bring us closer to peace or to war. A sobering thought worth thinking about....

Shabbat shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman