

Parshat Mattot

United We Stand

Our Parsha contains 3 basic themes:

Ch.30 Making and breaking Vows

Ch.31 The War against Midyan¹

Ch.32 Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven²

In thinking about the inner connections of our Parshat Hashavua, a thought popped into my head. It is a connection of sorts, that seems central to the parsha, and certainly relevant to current events here in Israel (as well as the period of Bein Hametzarim – the "Three Weeks.")

Much of the Torah's discussion about the Midyan war is dedicated to the accounts and allocation of the spoils of that war. The people captured, the livestock and other objects taken from the vanquished enemy are carefully enumerated and then precisely divided, a fixed percentage donated to the Mishkan.

I don't know how you imagine the notion of war booty, but one might visualize the victorious troops returning home with a war-trophy, or filling their pockets with coins. Is the war booty a "fringe benefit" for the attack troops; those who enter into combat are remunerated with a financial "perk" as a reward for putting their lives on the line.

So let us analyse this a little.

THE FRONT LINE AND THE HOME FRONT

Our first observation relates to the equal sharing³ of the booty. In our Parsha we read:

¹ For a full article regarding the ethical issues behind the Spoils of War on this Parsha, see Rav Yoel Bin Nun's article in the volume (published by Yediot Acharonot – *Yahadut Kan V'achshav*) entitled, "*Potchim Shavua*")

² For an excellent analysis of the parsha see Rav Elchanan Samet – in his book, or on the VBM. See in Hebrew, <http://www.vbm-torah.org/hparsha-5/36matot-masei.htm> or in English: <http://www.vbm-torah.org/parsha.60/42mm.htm>.

"**26** 'Make a tally of all prey that was taken, both of man and livestock, you, and Eleazar the priest, and the heads of the fathers' houses of the congregation; **27** and divide the prey into two parts: between the men skilled in war, that went out to battle, and all the congregation.'" (31:26-7)

Here the Torah records a fundamental norm enforced by the army of Bnei Israel, namely the equal share of the spoils of war between the "home guard" and the front line. What is the ideological basis of this law? For sure, the principle behind this is that the spoils are far from the exclusive property of the fighting force. Certainly the gesture here is one of the unity of the ENTIRE nation. The Army may not split from the people they are fighting for. They could claim; "we put our lives on the line! What did you do?" But the Torah cautions us to remember that the nation is a unified whole. The cook is as important as the infantryman, the truck driver as vital, as the sharpshooter. The Front Line is inextricably linked to the Home Guard. (In a minute we shall examine why.)

THE DAVID PARALLEL

If we have discussed equity in the sharing of war booty, treating fighter and home-guard the same, we might want to draw our attention to another occasion in which the spoil is shared equally. Indeed, one might suggest that the war against Midyan sets a precedent for David HaMelech. In his battle against Amalek, we read the following episode:

9 So David went, he and the six hundred men that were with him, and came to Nahal Besor, where those that were left behind stayed. **10** But David pursued, he and four hundred men; for two hundred stayed behind, too faint to cross Nahal Besor....**20** And David took all the flocks and the herds, which they drove before those other cattle, and said: 'This is David's spoil.' **21** And David came to the two hundred men, who had been so faint that they could not follow David, who had remained at Nahal Besor; and they went forth to meet David, and the people that were with him; and when David came near to the people, he saluted them. **22** Then answered all the wicked men and base fellows, of those that went with David, and said: 'Because they failed to accompany us, we will not give them of the

³ Some will note that it is not truly equal because the nation, numbering 600,000 took half and the 12,000 troops took half. And yet, it is expressed as a half-half, I believe, deliberately.

spoil that we have recovered, except each man may take his own wife and his children...' **23** Then David said: 'Do not do so, my brothers, with that which the LORD has given us, who has protected our lives, and made us victorious against the force that attacked us. **24** And how may one listen to you in this matter? - **for it shall be equally shared; he that goes to battle, so shall be the share of he that watches the baggage.'** **25** And it was so from that day forward, that he made it a statute and an ordinance for Israel unto this day. (I Samuel ch.30)

THE CONNECTION WITH GAD AND REUVEN

I find this interesting when thinking about the story of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. A close look at Chapter 32 reveals that the entire story revolves around the responsibility of Gad and Reuven to volunteer for the army. (Frequently this story is taught focussing upon their rejection of Eretz Yisrael. And yet, it is not all about the Land.)

In the final "deal" between Moshe and Reuven-Gad, Moshe does not even suggest that Gad and Reuven cross the Jordan in order to settle there. He allows them to live outside the border of Canaan. He is willing to be flexible regarding the land. But where is he unwilling to compromise? - Gad and Reuven outline their request to remain in TransJordan. Moshe's initial reaction, an accusation filled with outrage, is:

"Will your brothers go to war while you sit here (at home)?"
(32:6)

He is shocked that these tribes expect to sit at their farms while their brothers fight a war. The point that he insists upon is their full participation in the army. As if to say; we cannot allow one sector of the People to be absolutely exempt from the military. How can you sit with your feet up on the couch as your brothers endanger their lives? That is the deepest point of Moshe's objection. And indeed in the final compromise, it is on this point that he stands his ground. His sole demand is that Reuven-Gad serve as the "Halutzim" – the Front Line troops in the conquest of Canaan.⁴

So, once again, we have the connection between the home front and the front line. There may not be a separation between the two. Apparently, they are inseparable.

One wonders why? Is this simply a statement of Jewish Unity: we fight together, as a nation, hence there is a demand of an equal share of the burden as well as an equal share in the rewards of battle? Or is something else afoot?

Part II - THE SPOILS OF WAR

Let us return to the topic of the war booty. Rav Yoel Bin Nun (see Note 1) has pointed out that an organized legal arrangement regarding the captured property of the vanquished enemy is crucial, and this for two reasons:

1. ETHICAL – There is a clear distinction between the manner in which an army will fight as opposed to thieves, pirates and bandits. Our army does not loot or engage in piracy. For a band of thieves, foremost amongst the fighter's mind is the gold and silver, the treasures that he will pocket after the fight. That is his aim, his motivation, his goal. The Jewish army fights to protect its people and land, its values and future. The aim must not be to plunder and amass wealth. Of course, the army may seize enemy assets from the battlefield, but the combat soldier may not occupy his mind with that. Even if he does take something, the quartermaster will requisition it from him to be added to the roster of the booty, to be divided fairly later.

2. TACTICAL – When the army begins to take the spoils of war, the battle is over; the chase ends and the binge begin. The army has no motivation to continue fighting. Once I view my friend filling his pockets, I will want to follow. The soldiers' attention will be absolutely interrupted if people are opportunistically despoiling the enemy villages. The advance, the war-effort, would simply grind to a halt. Without an official mechanism of distribution, the army will find itself unable of holding out in a campaign, over lengthy and difficult missions, because each man will run to grab his share of the spoil. This will essentially paralyse the army. (Examples can be found in Shmuel Aleph 14:3-32,36; 30:16.) Hence the official allotment of the spoils of war is not a side point to our national existence. It is an important area of legislation. The values that underlie the spoils of war have much to teach us.

THE NATURE OF THE SPOILS

What exactly are those values?

⁴ The word Halutzim appears also in chapter 31:3, 5. Connection??

Earlier, we spoke about the value of Unity of the nation. However the story we recorded earlier, about David, is informative in this regard and it will lead us in a new direction.

As we read that story carefully, we can discern a clash, a severe disagreement between David and his men. There are those who declare the booty as: 'This is David's spoil.' These are the people who do not want to share the profit that they have gained in combat. David sees things otherwise. He insists that the guards who have watched the bags, even if they did run out of energy and could not traverse the nahal – a steep ravine – these people must share equally with the attack force. But why? Here David explains his position in theological terms. Spoils belong to God, David says. The spoils are: "that which the LORD has given unto us"(30:23). Or putting it deeper, God has granted the victory. The spoil is the product of that victory. We have not earned the spoil, God has! It is His.

This is a deep debate indeed that goes to the very heart of whether God or man is at the centre of the battlefield.

If the rights to the spoils of war are gained by the daring of the infantry or the power of the cavalry, then it is quite reasonable to suggest that "those who guard the baggage" should have no share. If the issue is the fact that the soldiers in the front line have endangered their lives, and this is their payback, then it also makes no sense. But in the Jewish view, when we fight by sanction of God, the spoils belong to God. God grants them to ALL of Israel as a gift, and hence, they are not related to the effort invested in war, or the danger incurred, but rather, God who gave victory to the nation, allows the nation to gain from the spoils.

Maybe this also explains why David distributes the spoils further:

"26 And when David came to Ziklag, he sent of the spoil unto the elders of Judah, even to his friends, saying: 'Behold a present for you of **the spoil of the enemies of the LORD'; "**

David shares the spoils with the rest of the nation too.

IN OUR PARSHA

Note the conclusion of the war against Midyan in our parashat Hashavua:

48 And the officers... approached Moshe; 49 and they said unto Moshe: 'Thy servants have taken the sum of the men of war that are under our charge, and there is not a single casualty. 50 And we have brought God's offering... to make atonement for our lives before God.'

The astounding zero casualty statistic, points to the fact that this is God's war. It mandates a religious response. The Ramban (31:49) comments:

"God performed this great victory ... with not one soldier being killed of our forces ... and hence we want to bring an offering to the God that delivered us, to bring a penance for our lives which were spared from death."

The Rashbam goes in an even more interesting direction. He recalls the "parashat shekalim" (Shemot ch.30) that instructs us that if we need to count our people, we should count them via the half shekel "and let there be no plague when you are counted. (Shemot 30:12)"

Rashbam claims that the "God's offering" brought by the returning troops, "was vowed BEFORE we counted the troops (prior to battle – see 31:4-6) so that no plague would befall us. That is the reason that God commanded to give it to the service of the Tabernacle "as a memorial before the Lord. (31:54)"

IN CONCLUSION

We have discussed a number of theories regarding the war booty :

- SOCIAL - Equal distribution as a unifier of the nation.
- ETHICAL - The organised allocation of the spoils promotes and ethical army
- THEOLOGICAL - The fact that the spoil is an expression of God's victory on the battlefield.

However, we began with the theme of Unity. Both the war of Midyan and the story of Bnei Gad and Reuven teach is that we are a single organic nation, one indivisible collective. Even when our priorities clash, let us never forget this basic truth.

Shabbat Shalom.