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Holy War
31: 13-18

Holy war DIG: What is a holy war to you? What is the difference between a holy war and a regular war? Why was it a bad thing that little Midianites would grow up to be big Midianites? Why were the young girls spared, but not the rest? How has ADONAI shown you mercy?

REFLECT: Does the fact that all these men, women, and young boys were all killed bother you? Why? Why not? What makes it acceptable? After the slaughter of 1,200 Israelis and foreigners on October 7th, 2024, is Isra'el's response a holy war? Why? Why not?

The triumphant army returns with the spoils of war and captive women and children.



Ha'Shem's vengeance (31:13-17): Moshe, Eleazar the high priest and all the community leaders went to meet the soldiers and the prisoners of war

outside the camp. The returning army, requiring purification from corpse contamination, could not enter **the camp**. This requirement follows the mitzvah of **Numbers 5:1-4** and **Deuteronomy 23:10-15**. In contrast to a settlement, the war camp always needed to be in a state of purity to allow for the holy **Presence of God** to rest there (**to see link click Fs – Purification by Fire**).

The taking of **women** captives was permitted in any war with non-Canaanites **(Deuteronomy 20:14;** see **Genesis 34:28-29)**, but in this instance the sight of **the Midianite women** aroused **Moshe's wrath**. **They** were responsible for the apostasy and plague that **killed 24,000 Israelites** at **Ba'al-Peor** (see **Ea – Taking a stand for God**).[709] **Moshe was angry with the army officers, the commanders of thousands and the leaders of the elite units from each tribe coming in from the battlefield** because this was **a holy war**, so **he asked them, "You let the women live? Why, these are the ones who – because of Balaam's advice (Revelation 2:14) – caused the people of Isra'el to rebel, breaking faith with ADONAI in the Peor incident, so that the plague broke out among ADONAI's community!** So, **Moses** ordered: **Kill every woman who has slept with an Israelite man, and also kill all the boys.** Why **kill all the males**, regardless of age? Because in biblical times, **the male** line determined nationality. **All the Midianite men** in the Transjordan had already been **killed** (see **Fq – Report of the battle**), and by **killing all the boys**, **all five clans of the Midianites (31:8)** would be wiped out.

Did **the Israelite** soldiers do something wrong? Why was **Moshe angry**? **The holy war** mitzvot laid out most fully in **Deuteronomy 20** seems to form some of the background here in **Numbers 31**. Some **holy war** texts in the TaNaKh assure us that everything and everyone in an enemy town was to be destroyed. But, **the Israelite** commanders apparently obeyed the general **holy war** instructions from **Deuteronomy 20** (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Dp – Regulations for a Holy War**) here in **Numbers 31**. At this time the mitzvah was probably verbal, but would be written down later in **Deuteronomy**. **Moses** was angry because the war against **Midian** was a special case of **holy war**. **The women** of **Midian** had seduced **the Israelite men** into sexual relations and apostasy, guided by the counsel of **Balaam (Revelation 2:14)**. Thus, a compromise was reached and a special arrangement was made: **Isra'el** needed to kill **all the Midianite women** and **boys** (see **Fp – The War Against Midian**). **They** were apparently viewed as potential warriors and thus enemies that would need to be **killed**. The execution of **Moshe's** instruction is not recorded. **But you may keep for yourselves all the**

women, children, livestock, and other plunder. You may enjoy the plunder from your enemies that the LORD your God has given you (Deuteronomy 20:14).[710]

ADONAI's mercy (31:18): However, **ADONAI** showed **His** mercy when **He** said to **Moses,** "**But the** prepubescent **young girls** who were virgins**, keep alive for yourselves."** This was done because **women** did not determine national identity and shows how Gentile women taken in war could be incorporated into the nation of **Isra'el**. Those **girls** who were kept alive would have had to be rather young. Though the lives of those **girls** were to be preserved, **their** mothers would have to be **killed**.[711] **Those** given to **the Levites** became servants to help around the Tabernacle **(Exodus 38:8 and First Samuel 2:22)**. **They** would have been subject to the mitzvot of the fair treatment of slaves/servants (see the commentary on **Deuteronomy Ed – Treat Fugitive Slaves Kindly**); if eventually given to the sons in marriage, they were subject to the mitzvot of captured women (see **Deuteronomy Dr – When You Go Out to War**). The most important issue in approaching texts such as this is not to concentrate on the suffering and pain of **the God-**rejecting **Midianites**, but to focus on the holiness of **the LORD** that it celebrates. In the midst of **His** terrible wrath, **God** demonstrates **His** mercy.[712]

Holy war: It is important to see that **the holy war** is portrayed as only a temporary measure in the Bible, confined to the time of the conquest of Canaan. No later texts in the prophets or elsewhere ever urge **Isra'el** to take up **holy war** again. In fact, the goal of **the holy war** against Canaan, to eliminate all the inhabitants so that they would not tempt **Isra'el** to follow their gods, was never achieved (see the commentary on **Joshua Aq – The Angel of ADONAI at Bokim**). **The holy war** of violence was a strategy that failed in its attempt to define a clear boundary between **the Israelites** and the godless Canaanites. **Isra'el** continued to struggle throughout **her** history to discern when to welcome and when to resist the culture and the peoples of other nations. **Isra'el** continued to fight battles against the enemies of **God's** will, but it became more and more a battle of words, persuasion, obedience, and education through devotion to **God's Word**.[713] **Joshua** would declare: **Only be strong and very bold in taking care to follow all the Torah which Moshe my servant ordered you to follow; do not turn from it either to the right or to the left; then you will succeed wherever you go. Yes, keep this book of the Torah on your lips, and meditate on it day and night, so that you will take care to act according to everything written in it. Then your undertakings will prosper, and you will succeed. Haven't I**

ordered you, 'Be strong, be bold'? So don't be afraid or downhearted, because ADONAI your God is with you wherever you go" (Joshua 1:7-9).

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **Your** awesome wisdom and love, and that even in **Your** wrath **You** demonstrate mercy. Thank you that though **Isra'el** is **Your first born** (**Exodus 4:22), You** welcome those from other nations who choose **You** as the one they love and follow. **You** included in **Messiah's** line, several women from other nations who chose to love and follow **You**. **Ruth**, **the Moabitess**, chose to leave her home, come to follow **You** and she became the great-grandmother of King David **(Ruth 1:21-22),** from whom Messiah came **(Matthew 1:1). Tamar** from Timnah, a Canaanite city, bore Judah sons Perez and Zerah, in the line of **Messiah (Matthew 1:3).***

You** are not a **God** who plays favorites with some people/nations and excludes other people/nations. **You** do not hate **the Midianites** or any nation simply because **they** are Gentiles. **You** are Holy and cannot tolerate it when a nation makes sin its god. **You** call all to come to you to drink **(Isaiah 55:1).** When someone comes to **You** to love and to follow **You** – then they find rest for their souls**. Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls (Matthew 11:28-29).** It is not the nation of origin that is the ticket to heaven, but it is the heart of love that opens heaven's door due to **Your** righteousness **(First Corinthians 5:21).

*Thank **You** that **You** are a Holy **God** who calls for a Holy War when needed, to protect **Your** people from the sinful corruption of other nations. **You** are omniscient and know when to open the door to people from all nations who love **You**, and when **You** should take out habitually evil people who will not change. It brings great shalom to know that **You** protect **Your** children from sin's evil grasp and also open the door to all who love **You**. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*