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This War Needs Everybody

Translated by Rabbi Zusya Kreitenberg

General Editor: Rabbi Eliezer Robbins | **Senior Editor:** Rabbi Lazer Danzinger

Content Editor: Rabbi Zalmy Avtzon

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1.

TWO WARS

In our *parshah*, the Torah recounts two wars waged by the Jewish people. Regarding the first, the war against Midian,¹ the Torah describes how the war unfolded. Regarding the second, the looming war to conquer the Land of Israel, the Torah describes how the tribes of Gad and Reuven accepted the responsibility to be “armed for combat before Hashem for the war.”²

These two wars had very different objectives: Hashem said about the war against Midian:³ “Take revenge for the Jewish people against the Midianites.” The war’s objective was to kill “every male”⁴ as vengeance for what the Midianites did to the Jewish people.⁵ The Torah does not say that the Jewish people waged war to settle the Midianite cities. Indeed, the Jewish people did the complete opposite:⁶ “They burned all the cities of the Midianite habitations and all their edifices.” The Jewish people only captured⁷ the “Midianite women and their young children..., and all the wealth they took as spoils.”

In contrast, concerning the war waged by the tribes of Gad and Reuven against the inhabitants of the land of Israel, although for them (the tribes of Gad and Reuven), the war was only so that⁸ “He drives out His enemies before Him” and they did not settle there themselves (they settled on the “east of the Jordan”),⁹ still, the war’s objective was to settle, to establish a settlement — to

¹ *Bamidbar* 31:2.

² *Bamidbar* 32:27.

³ *Bamidbar* 31:2.

⁴ *Bamidbar* 31:7.

⁵ See Rashi on *Bamidbar* 31:2; 25:17-18.

⁶ *Bamidbar* 31:10.

⁷ *Bamidbar* 31:9.

⁸ *Bamidbar* 32:21.

⁹ {*Bamidbar* 32:19.}

conquer the land.¹⁰ As the leaders of these two tribes declared,¹¹ “We will then arm ourselves quickly, before the children of Israel, until we have **brought them to their place.**” Moreover,¹² “We shall not return to our homes until each of the children of Israel **has taken possession** of his inheritance.”

2.

A PECULIAR RAMBAM

Based on this understanding that the military objective of the war against Midian was not **conquest** — possession¹³ and settlement of their land — a difficulty that *Raavad* raises with Rambam is resolved :

Concerning the law¹⁴ that “the entire tribe of Levi is warned not to take an inheritance in the land of Canaan... that they should not share in the spoils when its cities are conquered,” Rambam states:¹⁵

It appears to me that the above applies only to the land promised to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. Their descendants inherited and divided it among themselves. However, in other lands conquered by any king of Israel, the *kohanim* and the *leviim* enjoyed the same rights as the Jewish people and shared in any spoils.

¹⁰ Although the Jews were commanded (and held accountable) to annihilate the Seven Nations — “Do not leave **any** person alive. Rather annihilate them are you to annihilate them” (*Devarim* 20:16-17) — the verse explicitly states there (v. 18) that this command was not related to the conquest of the land, but rather “So that they do not teach you to emulate their abominations.” In contrast, the war against the Seven Nations {in general} was not **aimed** at exterminating them, but rather, at territorial conquest. This is also evident from the fact that they were offered peaceful surrender, and Yehoshua sent three letters: “Whoever desires to flee, shall flee... Whoever desires to peacefully surrender may do so” (*Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 6, par. 5, and sources cited there; see beg. of that ch. and par. 4). And the Girgashi nation arose and left {by their own accord} (Jerusalem Talmud, *Sheviis* 6:1; *Vayikra Rabbah*, ch. 17, par. 6; Rashi on *Shemos* 33:2 and 34:11; et al). See also footnotes 25 and 29 {in the original *sichah*} below.

In contrast, we don’t find that an offer of peace was made to Midian. Further analysis is needed regarding Rambam’s wording in “*Hilchos Melachim*,” beg. of ch. 6: “War should not be waged against **any nation** until they are offered the opportunity to surrender peacefully ...” See also Section 3 in the text below.

¹¹ *Bamidbar* 32:17.

¹² *Bamidbar* 32:18.

¹³ For through conquest, one acquires land halachically (see *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” end of ch. 4; Alter Rebbe’s *Shulchan Aruch*, “*Hilchos Hefker VeHasagas Gevul*,” par. 3).

¹⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 10.

¹⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 11.

Raavad demurs:¹⁶ “{How can this be the case?} After all, the *kohanim* and *leviim* did not share in the spoils of Midian together with the rest of the Jewish people, only in the portion separated for Hashem according to His command.” From {the Torah’s description of} the division of the spoils from Midian, it is apparent that also when it came to the conquest of “other lands,” the *kohanim* and *leviim* did not enjoy the same rights “as the entire Jewish people” and did not receive (inheritance of the land or) a portion of the spoils.

The *Kessef Mishneh* refutes this question:¹⁷

Our teacher {Rambam} thinks that, on the contrary, this episode serves as proof for his position. As we see, in the promised land, the *kohanim* and *leviim* did not share in the spoils, yet they shared in the spoils of Midian {albeit a far more restricted share than the other Jews}. This shows that since no covenantal promise was made concerning Midian, Midian was not included in the prohibition that “the *kohanim* should not share in the spoils.” The same law applies to other lands that were not promised. And the *kohanim* and the *leviim* did not take an equal portion of spoils from Midian as other Jews only because of a Scriptural decree, a temporary injunction.

However, this refutation {of *Raavad’s* question by *Kessef Mishneh*} warrants closer examination. After all, the share taken by the Jewish people from Midian was not a portion of the spoils, but rather (as **Rambam**¹⁸ calls it) “a tax levy”!

However, in light of what has been explained above, that in Midian¹⁹ “the Jewish people did not possess the Midianite land; they killed the Midianites only to take revenge,” it becomes apparent that this war was unrelated to the wars in “other lands” about which Rambam says: “*kohanim* and *leviim* were like the rest of Israel regarding those lands and their spoils.” Rambam is discussing a type of war, whose goal and execution resembled a war in which the king **conquers** the **land**. In contrast, the war against Midian was categorically different. The

¹⁶ {*Raavad* gloss on *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 11.}

¹⁷ {*Kessef Mishneh* commentary on *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 11.}

¹⁸ Rambam’s *Sefer HaMitzvos*, “*shoresh* 3.”

¹⁹ *Ramban* on *Bamidbar* 31:23.

objective was not the conquest of Midian's territory but vengeance: "Take revenge for the Jewish people against the Midianites."

3.

THE PROBLEM

However, we can still raise the following question. Rambam rules:²⁰

When a city is besieged to capture it, it should not be encircled on all four sides, only on three. A side should be left for the inhabitants to flee and for all those who desire to escape with their lives, as it says,²¹ "**They mounted an attack against Midian** as Hashem had commanded Moshe." According to tradition, He commanded the Jewish people to array the siege as described.

The simple reading of the text suggests that Rambam's view is that the war with Midian also resembled the act of besieging "a city... to **capture** it," that is, to conquer the city.

Furthermore, if the objective was to kill the Midianites only as vengeance, why does Rambam say that "a corridor should be left for the inhabitants to flee and for all those who desire to escape with their lives"?

The above actually accords with what the Rogatchover explains.²² He says that the two viewpoints cited in *Sifri*²³ on how the attack against the Midianites was mounted — whether the Jews surrounded them from four sides or only from three — is predicated on a difference of opinion as to whether this was a regular war or a war of revenge. During a regular war, an enemy city may certainly be surrounded only on three sides.

Still, even concerning a war of revenge, when the mission is "to kill them," consideration must be given to whether the fourth side should be left open. The

²⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, "Hilchos Melachim," ch. 6, par. 7.

²¹ *Bamidbar* 31:7.

²² *Tzafnas Panayach al HaTorah*, *Bamidbar* 31:6.

²³ *Sifri* on *Bamidbar* 31:7.

purpose of leaving it open would not be to enable the city's inhabitants to flee but so that²⁴ “they should not be galvanized to battle us.” Because, when given no other options, the besieged may become emboldened, which can, Heaven forbid, lead to more casualties among the Jewish people.

[On this basis, we could have explained this to be the intent behind Rambam's nuanced wording: The clause, “**a place** should be left for the inhabitants **to flee**,” applies to a war of revenge, as was the case in the war with Midian. And the clause, “and for all those who desire **to escape with their lives**,” applies to other wars when the objective was not to kill the enemy.]

However, the fact that Rambam also applies the halachah, “When a siege is placed around a city to capture it, it should not be surrounded,” to the war with Midian, and derives the entire law (“it should not be surrounded...”) from the war with Midian, implies that even the war with Midian shares (somewhat of) a common denominator with other wars, the objective of which was to conquer the city.

On this basis, *Raavad's* original question returns: If the war with Midian was comparable to the wars fought with “other lands conquered by any king of Israel” (which is what Rambam discusses), why do we find that “they (the *kohanim* and *leviim*) did not share in the spoils of Midian with the rest of the Jewish people”?

4.

CLARIFYING RAMBAM

We can posit that Rambam maintains that the war with Midian fell into both categories and had both military objectives: It was a war for “the revenge of the children of Israel,” and simultaneously, it **resembled** a war of conquest, similar to the wars with other lands conquered by a king.

²⁴ *Ramban*, “Book of Mitzvos,” Addendum to Positive Mitzvos, positive commandment 5.

True, according to the simple understanding of Scripture, there is no indication that they settled the land of Midian. However, Scripture does tell us,²⁵ “The children of Israel took the Midianite women and their young children captive, and they plundered all their beasts, livestock, and all their possessions. They took all the spoils and all the plunder of man and beast.” (Moshe only later complained,²⁶ “Did you allow all the females to live?!” and only ordered,²⁷ “Kill every male child”). This order was unlike the one given for the war with Amalek. At that time, the Jews were commanded,²⁸ “You shall utterly destroy all that is his, and you shall not pity him; you shall slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.” Rambam sees these commands as proof that it was a war to take revenge but not a war to annihilate the Midianites; at any rate, it **resembled** a war of conquest.

Therefore, concerning the law as to whether a city must be surrounded on only three sides or all four since in the war with Midian, the directive was not to kill **all** of the inhabitants of the land, Rambam rules that the law is, “It should not be surrounded on all four sides, only on three.” From this, Rambam derives the law (and how much more so) regarding other wars that are waged entirely for the purpose of conquest: “When a siege is placed around a city **to capture it.**”

On the other hand, the war with Midian was (also and) **primarily** a war of revenge²⁹ — “Kill every male..., and every woman who can lie intimately with a man” — and it was not intended for the sake of conquest, to acquire their possessions, both land and movable properties, spoils.

Accordingly, the spoils from the war with Midian cannot be compared to those of “other lands conquered by a king.” Indeed, in those other lands, the *kohanim* and the *leviim* had the same rights and shared the spoils with all the Jewish people. In the case of Midian, however, the tribe of Levi was given just a tax levy.

²⁵ *Bamidbar* 31:9,11.

²⁶ *Bamidbar* 31:15.

²⁷ *Bamidbar* 31:17.

²⁸ *Shmuel I* 15:3.

²⁹ *Bamidbar* 31:17.

Still, we must clarify: If the war with Midian was fought primarily to exact revenge, why did even a tax levy need to be separated (to be given to Elazar the *kohen* and the *leviim*)?

5.

ANOTHER QUESTION

This will be understood by prefacing with another feature found exclusively with the war against Midian:

Regarding the verse,³⁰ “From all the tribes of Israel you shall draft into the army,” Rabbi Akiva teaches,³¹ “The verse comes to include the tribe of Levi” — that the tribe of Levi also participated in the war against Midian. The Rogatchover Gaon clarifies³² that herein lies the dispute in *Sifri* as to whether the tribe of Levi also participated in the war against Midian, which depends {on the two opinions on the nature of this battle}: “For they do not go out to war, as Rambam says, but they do go out to take revenge.”

This calls for clarification: Rambam states³³ that the tribe of Levi did not participate in warfare because “they were sequestered from the ways of the world (and thus), they do not wage war as do all other tribes.” If so, why, in a war of revenge {e.g., the war with Midian}, did the tribe of Levi also participate?

³⁰ *Bamidbar* 31:4.

³¹ *Sifri* on *Bamidbar* 31:4.

³² *Tzafnas Panayach Al HaTorah* on *Bamidbar* 31:6.

³³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 12.

6.

THE ROLE OF THE TRIBE OF LEVI

We can posit the following explanation:

The members of the tribe of Levi³⁴ “were sequestered **to serve Hashem and minister unto Him** and to instruct people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments..., therefore, they were sequestered from the ways of **the world...**; they are **Hashem’s Legion.**” Accordingly, the tribe of Levi apparently could participate in a war whose objective was *not* to conquer the land since only war for the purpose of conquest was **the way of the world**. And in a war connected with Hashem, the tribe of Levi, as “Hashem’s Legion,” also had to participate.

To elaborate, the war against Midian was fought “to carry out the revenge of **Hashem** against Midian”. The defining characteristic and concept behind this war was that Midian stood against the Holy One, against Hashem.

Therefore, the tribe of Levi (also) needed to be involved with (and participate in) the war against Midian. After all, this responsibility fell within the purview and role of “Hashem’s Legion” to execute “**the vengeance of Hashem.**”

On this basis, we understand why, regarding the war with Midian, there was the command,³⁵ “You shall levy a tax for Hashem.... and give it to Elazar the *kohen* as a gift to Hashem,” and subsequently,³⁶ “You shall take one part out of fifty..., and you shall give them to the *leviim*”: This demonstrates that the war was unlike all other wars (fought to acquire the spoils and plunder). Instead, it was a war to carry out “the revenge of Hashem.” Therefore, the Jewish people

³⁴ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemitah VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 12.

³⁵ *Bamidbar* 31:28, 29.

³⁶{*Bamidbar* 31:30.}

also had to separate (elevate)³⁷ from³⁸ “the plunder of the captive people and animals” and give Elazar the *kohen* and the *leviim*, being “Hashem’s Legion.”

7.

FURTHER EXAMINING RAMBAM

This still requires clarification:

Rambam records the law, “they do not wage war,” directly following the above-mentioned law that they don’t share in the land or the spoils, unlike other lands. This is his wording:

Why did the *leviim* not receive a portion in the inheritance of the land of Israel or the spoils with their brethren? Because they were designated to serve Hashem, minister unto Him, and instruct people about His just paths and righteous judgments.... Therefore, they were sequestered from worldly matters. They do not wage war like the rest of the nation. Nor do they inherit {a portion in the Land} or acquire things through their physical force.

The continuation of Rambam’s wording implies that both laws — “they do not wage war” and “nor do they inherit...” — are interdependent. (This is evident from the concluding words, where Rambam links them: “Therefore, they were excluded... they do not wage war... nor do they inherit...”). On this basis, it should turn out that the *kohanim* and *leviim* may (and must) also participate in wars to conquer other lands. After all, “the *kohanim* and the *leviim* enjoy the same rights in those lands and their spoils, **as all the Jewish people.**” But seemingly, discretionary wars with other countries were not to avenge Hashem but to conquer them. So why was the tribe of Levi involved in these wars?

To clarify this subject, we must first clarify Rambam’s nuanced and apparently lengthy wording: “The above applies only regarding the land for which a covenantal promise was made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov; their descendants inherited it, and it was divided among them.” For seemingly, why

³⁷ See *Zohar*, vol. 3, 188b.

³⁸ *Bamidbar* 31:26.

are all these details and identifying signs important? If Rambam had merely said “in the land of Canaan,” as he **himself** said in the previous halachah, we would have known which land he meant. And even if he wanted to link the land of Israel with the **Patriarchs**, since “their descendants inherited it” (as their descendants), he could have said “in the land that was given to Avraham” (as we find similar wording in *Mishneh Torah*).³⁹ What novelty does Rambam introduce by specifying, “for which a covenantal promise was made with Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov,” and adding, “their descendants inherited it, and it was divided among them”?

The suggested explanation is the following: Rambam’s wording emphasizes the reason behind the difference between the conquest of the promised land and other lands conquered by a king, as explained below.

8.

A COVENANT FOR LAND

The land of Israel was set apart from other lands much before (the war) because “a **covenantal** promise⁴⁰ was made to Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.” Since then, it became a land that was connected and consolidated with those who would receive the land.

After all, this is the point of a covenant. The parties pass between the parts of a **single** entity. Both parties pass through the **inside** of one body to become one.⁴¹

Put differently, the land becomes one with **Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov**. It practically became the Jewish people’s through inheritance, as it says, “**their descendants inherited it**,⁴² and it was divided among them.”

³⁹ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Terumos*,” ch. 1, par. 2.

⁴⁰ {In the Hebrew original, “*bris*”; lit., “a covenant.”}

⁴¹ See Rashi on *Bereishis* 15:10; *Devarim* 29:11; *Likkutei Torah*, “*Nitzavim*,” 44b.

⁴² Inheritance is just a transfer from one domain to another.

There was no need to create something new in the land of Israel.⁴³ And this self-same land was **divided for them**. The seven years of **conquest** were insufficient; seven years of **division** was necessary because the land was given to the Jewish people to **settle** — “you shall clear out the land and settle in it.”⁴⁴

Consequently, the tribe of Levi, being **sequestered** from worldly matters, was excused from this war.

In contrast, “other lands that will be conquered by a king of Israel,” although these lands were also treated⁴⁵ “like the land of Israel that Yehoshua conquered in every regard,” their conquest was not integral to the Jewish people. The king⁴⁶ “wages war with other nations” (not so that the Jewish people should have land on earth, an inheritance [a field or vineyard] to settle, but) “to **expand** the borders of Israel and to increase its greatness and reputation” (which is Hashem’s greatness and reputation).⁴⁷ Thus, a war in these lands was also associated with the tribe of Levi as part of their role (as “Hashem’s Legion”).

9.

THE LESSON

The lesson for every person in their Divine service:

Rambam **rules** that **according to Jewish law**.⁴⁸

Not only the tribe of Levi, but **each and every person...**, whose spirit moves him, and whose mind prompts him to sequester himself and stand before Hashem to serve minister to Him... [whereupon] he is sanctified as the Holy of

⁴³ For an extensive discussion, see *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 15, p. 103ff., which explains that the ownership of the Land of Israel has been in effect since the time of the Patriarchs. See also *Likkutei Sichos*, *ibid.*, p. 204ff.

⁴⁴ *Bamidbar* 33:53.

⁴⁵ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 5, par. 6; see *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Terumos*,” ch. 1, par. 2.

⁴⁶ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 5, par. 1.

⁴⁷ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Melachim*,” ch. 4, par. 10; and see an extensive discussion of this concept in *Likkutei Sichos*, vol. 18, p. 279.

⁴⁸ See *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Shemita VeYovel*,” ch. 13, par. 13.

Holies. Hashem will be His portion and heritage... just as He provides for the needs of the *kohanim* and the *leviim*.

A Jew whose spirit inspires him to deport himself at the spiritual level of the tribe of Levi may think to himself: Since he is sequestered from the ways of the world, etc., and stands before Hashem to minister unto Him, what relevance at all does the surrounding world have to him? We tell him that on the contrary, since he is like the tribe of Levi, he is connected — and moreover, **uniquely** connected — to take part in the *avodah* of “the revenge of Hashem against Midian” to overcome and eliminate those who are against Hashem.

This translates into a person’s Divine service, in particular, to completely nullify and negate the separation and unwarranted hatred that may exist among the Jewish people, Heaven forbid, which instigated the Temple’s destruction, and exile,⁴⁹ including this final exile.

As part of “Hashem’s Legion,” he must propagate and instill the love for a fellow Jew, the gratuitous love between all Jews. This must be done to the extent that this love is permanently “settled” within all the Jewish people. In turn, this internalized love connects every Jew with One Hashem.

Furthermore, a person may believe that activism among Jews and engaging in activities about Judaism — Torah study and mitzvos — suffices.

However, the lesson conveyed here is that the *kohanim* and *leviim* must also participate in the *avodah*⁵⁰ to integrate “all other lands” into the boundaries of Israel. Meaning, one must integrate elements of the world that may not inherently be essential to Judaism — the borders of Israel must be **expanded**, utilizing elements of the world for *avodah* and magnifying the greatness and reputation of Hashem.

Through the above, we bring about the termination of exile (by nullifying the **sole** cause of our exile — “Because of our sins, we were exiled from our

⁴⁹ Yoma 9b.

⁵⁰ {Divine service.}

Land”),⁵¹ and we will immediately be redeemed — with the true and complete Redemption. Then, the Jewish people will reclaim the entirety of the land of Israel according to its divinely established borders. Moreover, the borders will also be **expanded**,⁵² as it says, “Hashem will **expand** your borders.” This expansion will include the lands of Keini, Kenizi, and Kadmoni.⁵³ Additionally, in the future, the land of Israel will spread worldwide,⁵⁴ with the arrival of our righteous Mashiach. Soon, in actuality.

— From a talk delivered on Shabbos *parshas Matos Massei*, 5723 (1963)

⁵¹ {*Siddur*, “*Musaf* for festivals.”}

⁵² *Devarim* 12:20; 19:8.

⁵³ *Mishneh Torah*, “*Hilchos Rotzeach*,” ch. 8, par. 4, citing *Sifri* on *Devarim* 19:8; see also *Sifri* on *Devarim* 12:20; Rashi and Ramban on *Devarim* 19:8; Rashi on *Bereishis* 9:10.

⁵⁴ *Pesikta Rabbasi*, “*Shabbos VeRosh Chodesh*”; *Yalkut Shimoni*, “*Yeshayahu*,” sec. 503.