

Two Approaches to Vengeance

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Almost a decade ago, our Torah Study group spent a year studying the weekly Torah portion through the lens of Jack Miles's book, *God, A Biography*.

Philosophers hold that since God is perfect, God must be unchanging. Being perfect, God already is everything that God could or should be.

But *God, A Biography* takes a very different approach, one that I found much closer to the way that we, as Jews, have read the Bible.

Miles notes that when God first encounters massive human evil in the time of Noah, God destroys the world. But then God regrets this action and promises never to repeat it. God learns and goes on to try other strategies—as when God chooses Abraham to bring blessing to the world. The tension which results from God's growth, God's maturing religious consciousness as expressed in the Biblical text, is found in our Torah portion this week.

The portion begins with instructions to take vengeance against the Midianites who had lead the people into idolatry. The zealot Pinchas was put in charge of the campaign (Numbers 31:6), and they slew every male. At first, they spared every female and all of the children, but this was not sufficient for the vengeance, so all of the female seducers were to be killed as well.

Contrast this difficult passage with the section that we read this morning, one that describes the cities of refuge. Laws were developed to limit vengeance and to prevent cycles of violence following accidental death.

The stories related to Pinchas exist in our tradition, but they are tempered. Last week's Torah portion took its name from Pinchas, the man of vengeance, but when it became time to choose a successor to Moses, Pinchas was passed over, and Joshua, a much milder and more tolerant leader, was chosen.

The desire for vengeance is a natural human emotion. "I have been hurt," we cry out, "and you will not really understand my hurt until I hurt you in the same way."

But perhaps foreseeing where such thinking will lead, God grows, in Miles's view, to hold a bigger picture in mind, one that looks at a broader landscape than the individual and considers the impact for the community.

In discussing the Midianite revenge text, the great rabbis of the Talmud and Midrash focus on the community's need to purify itself after taking vengeance as described in the Biblical text. They note that God will later say "vengeance is mine" (Deuteronomy 32:35). The great rabbis understand this not as God saying God will be vengeful, but as a way of limiting human vengeance. It is no longer our right to operate in that sphere—we must restrain ourselves and leave it to God to even out these injustices.

Further, what the rabbis learn from this story are laws about accepting others into our community. What about the Midianite children, who are raised among the Israelites after this incident, one rabbi asks? In this context, Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, a mystic and something of a zealot himself, teaches: a child adopted into a Jewish family is a fit mate even for a Kohen, though Biblical law prohibits a Kohen from marrying a convert (*Kiddushin* 78a). There is no vengeance against the child, no stain passed on.

When someone hurts us as an individual or as a community, the desire to get even, to hurt them back, is often overwhelming. But just as God eventually realizes where such vengeance will lead, so should we.

Remember *Fiddler on the Roof*, when a villager says to Tevye: "An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth," and he responds, "Very good—that way the whole world will be blind and toothless."

The great Rav Kook, the first chief rabbi of Israel, asks: if we knew from the start that an eye for an eye was always about compensation, why then was it included in the Torah? He explained: an individual who hurts another needs to understand the gravity of his offense, but in practice, this kind of vengeance cannot be taken.

Judaism comes down not on the side of justice, but on the side of loving kindness.