



August 3, 2024



*With  
Rabbi Hillel Eisenberg*



ב"ה

Parshas Matos-Masei

28th of Tammuz 5784

### **War, Stun Guns and the Jewish Approach to Mercy**

If one were to look at the Torah with a bird's-eye view, he would find that it seems to contain an unexpectedly strange attachment to violence. In the very second parshah of the Torah, humanity at large was acting below Hashem's standards, and it prompted Him to exterminate the entire human race with the mabul (Great Flood). Men, women, and children. All dead. Just a few parshiyos later, the city of Sodom was acting in ways not approved of by Heaven, and the city was completely burnt in a sulfur firestorm. Again, men, women and children dead. Next, we read about how Chamor, the prince of Shechem, went ahead and violated Dina. The men of the city were cunningly told to circumcise, and then while recovering in bed they were all slaughtered. Every single one of them. Then we read about how the sons of Yaakov plotted, and nearly executed, the murder of their own brother Yosef. Not exactly a book of butterflies and cupcakes.

And the violence doesn't stop there. We were given the commandment to hunt down descendants of Amalek and annihilate them (Devarim 25:17). We were charged with eradicating the seven Canaanite nations inhabiting Israel, an effective ethnic cleansing of the previous dwellers of the land. And finally, in this parshah, we were instructed to wage a vengeful war on the Midianites and kill all men, women and children.

Aren't the Jewish people supposed to be merciful? Don't we pride ourselves in our kindheartedness and humanity? Isn't a Jew's ability to show mercy one of the three foundational traits that sets us apart? Why do we seem to take a very militant approach in dealing with our enemies? Aren't we people of the book, not people of the sword?

Hashem commanded us to kill every last Midianite male, including the male infants. All females with the physical ability to have intercourse were likewise killed. The Gemara (Yevamos 60) explains how it was possible to determine which female children were able to physically cohabit: They would march a girl in front of the Kohen's breastplate, and if the girl did in fact have the ability to cohabit, her face would turn green.

Can you imagine the scene? The girl is screaming on top of her lungs. Crying and pleading to be spared. We march her to the Kohen. Her face turns green and we grab her and chop off her head!

How does our claim to be the beacons of mercy and morality explain this? Doesn't this sound eerily similar to jihadists that attack us relentlessly? How does our claim to be flag-bearers of peace and harmony not utterly clash with the Torah's seemingly frequent promotion of violence?

#### **Expressing Violence Out of Mercy**

A deeper exploration of these commandments, beyond their superficial understanding, not only offers us a significantly less violent interpretation of the Torah; it offers us a refreshing glimpse of the Torah's unparalleled mercy.

Let's begin at the beginning. We believe that the world was created in order for Hashem to bestow goodness on us. In turn, we are charged with spreading morality and harmony throughout the world, thus ensuring that Hashem's definition of goodness is actualized the world over, in its fullest form.

After creation, the conditions of morality in the world slowly deteriorated, until sixteen hundred years later, Hashem had enough. The general society of the world, and its barbaric tribes, were living lives of lawlessness and moral bankruptcy. Morality had broken down to an incredibly gruesome extent. So much so, that the absolute most merciful thing Hashem could have done for the future inhabitants of the world was to wipe out the current humanity and start over. Much like we understand that killing a terrorist enroute to stab an innocent mother holding a baby is merciful, so too Hashem showed only mercy by extracting the evil, thus saving the billions of future people from being contaminated by this immoral way of life.

Then came Sodom. Sodom was not merely a city bereft of morals. It was a city that threatened and intimidated others into following its morally bent way of life. Hence, being that Hashem's ultimate goodness is manifested only in accordance with His rules of morality, the Sodomites, who grossly abandoned that way of life, had to be eliminated. Not because Hashem was trying to be cruel to the Sodomites; rather because he was having mercy on the rest of the world.

The Rambam in Hilchos Melachim (9:14) writes that when Shimon and Levi got up and killed out the city of Shechem, they were not acting as gruesome jihadists. The city in its entirety had watched as their prince violated the helpless Dina, and not only did they do nothing to stop it, they celebrated it as an opportunity to make a pact with the family of Yaakov. The people in the city were demonstrating a complete disinterest in a life of laws or proper conduct. Shimon and Levi knew that not only was this an awful way to live, this was a cancerous way of life that can spread to others and wreak havoc in the world. Showing mercy on those who violate others, and their sympathizers, is in essence showing cruelty to the scores of victims they will one day prey upon. Shimon and Levi could not tolerate such behavior. They were too merciful for that.

When the Torah commands us to wage war on the Midianites and the Canaanites and the Amalekites, it is not an ethnic cleansing crusade. We are not against those particular nations per se, says Rav Shamshon Rephael Hirsch; rather we are against what they promulgate. We are only against the immoral and unethical habits that they celebrate. Hence, we don't just grab our spears and pogrom the city. According to the Rambam, we are required by law to first ask for peace before every war. We are required to attempt to inspire our enemies to change their ways. Even Rashi, who maintains that we are not required to ask our enemies for peace, only holds this in a war mandated by Hashem (milchamos mitzvah), but when it comes to a war that we choose to wage on our own (milchamos rishus), Rashi agrees that we are required to do so.

So uninterested in bloody warfare were we, that we would never surround an opponent on all four sides when waging war. We would always leave a side open for the enemy to retreat and change their ways. This is something that's almost unheard of in the history of ancient military tactics.

When attacking the Midianites in parshas Matos, it is abundantly clear that the Torah had only one prerogative: removing adulterous behavior from that part of the world. Thousands upon thousands of Jews were scandalously seduced by Midianite women who wanted only to revel in watching Jews sin. They used adultery as a weapon to spit in Hashem's face, and Hashem would have none of it. Not because He wanted revenge, not because He is violent. On the contrary, precisely because the world is a better place without adultery, He tasked us with weeding it out. If that meant killing any girl who was able to continue the Midianite mentality of adultery, then so be it.

The biggest proof that Hashem's sole interest in waging these battles is the complete eradication of immorality from the world, is the fact that He gives us Jews the very same warning He gives the other nations of the world. If we act in a morally corrupt way, we too will feel Hashem's wrath. This is demonstrated by the law of ir hanidachas (a wayward city), which must be razed to the ground. We are charged with destroying a city filled with Jews, if those Jews have lost their moral way. Those Jews can be our siblings, relatives, or friends. It makes no difference who they are; Hashem commands us to destroy it.

Sounds cruel? It's interesting to note that one of the only times Hashem mentions mercy in the Torah is in His promise that those that wage war against the ir hanidachas will not subsequently become cruel people, and will be rewarded with heightened mercy of others (Re'eh 13:18). By demonstrating the ultimate mercy by weeding out the wayward city, Hashem rewards those individuals in kind with lives of nothing but mercy.

Hashem requires us to carry on lives of love and compassion even while waging war on enemies. Failure to do so is met with Hashem's wrath. Dovid was not granted the rights to build the Bais Hamikdash, because despite only waging wars that were mandated by Hashem, he, on his lofty level, did not display enough internal mercy while fighting these wars. (Divrei Hayamim/Chronicles 1:22, 8; Radak.)

The Torah is the blueprint to a moral, ethical and merciful world. These three ingredients fill the world with goodness. We are tasked with promulgating them as well as weeding out those that don't. Not out of love of violence, but out of sheer mercy for humanity.

No nation in world history can claim to be as merciful as the Jewish people. The numerical value of the Hebrew word for mercy, rachem, and the name of our forefather, Avraham, are the same: 248. Mercy runs in our blood. While nations of the past were steeped in immorality of the worst degree, the Jewish people by and large were holding Hashem's torch high, and shining its light to the rest of the world.

### **A Brief History of Cruelty**

One need not look very hard to find examples of history's muddied morality and cruelty. For a sad majority of world history, only up to several decades ago, handicapped people were not only dealt with unkindly, they were often burnt, hung and strangled to death. Huge numbers of countries throughout world history, including the majority of sophisticated and developed ones, believed that infanticide, the killing of unwanted babies, was morally okay. Both Aristotle and Plato believed in it. Between the years 1500 and 1700 alone, an estimated 8-20 million women suffering from mental handicaps were put to death. The Egyptians built their cities while throwing babies into the Nile. The ancient Chinese empire built the Great Wall of China while mixing prisoners and enemies into the very cement of the wall. The Romans entertained themselves in their Coliseum watching innocent people get killed by bears and lions.

Child sacrifice, perhaps history's most grotesque example of its immorality and ethical decay, was found all over the world. The Teotihuacan, Mayan, Toltec, Aztec, Olmec, Chimu and Inca tribes all practiced child sacrifice on a disturbingly large scale. Archeologists in 2005 discovered mass graves of 1- and 2-year-old children who had been sacrificed at the base of temples in Comalcalco. The Skidi band of the Pawnee tribe, as recently as the mid 1800's, conducted Morning Star ceremonies in which a young girl was kidnapped, placed on an elaborate scaffold, and when the morning sun was due to rise, the girl's chest was cut open while the onlooking men shot her with arrows.

Writings of Plato mention the Carthaginians performing child sacrifice, as well as child sacrifices taking place all over Africa (Plato, Minos 315). On an expedition to Knossos, the largest Bronze Age archeological site on Crete and possibly Europe's oldest city, archeologists discovered a mass grave of sacrificed children.

This is not something that exists exclusively in history books. Modern day Uganda, Mozambique, and Mali all continue the practice of ritual killing. In the city of Kampala, businessmen pay huge sums of money to a “healer” who abducts a child, murders it and then places the body underneath the foundation of their building as a good luck charm to their gods. Utterly despicable.

### **The Torah’s Definition**

The Torah abhors such behavior. The Torah states unequivocally that we are never to give over our children to Moloch (an ancient god whose worshippers offered their firstborns as sacrifices). The Torah does not elaborate; it does not need to, for such behavior is the very antithesis of the Torah.

The Torah brought mercy into the world. It introduced humanity to novel concepts like having a fair trial or being kind to one’s slave. It taught the world the proper way to treat women, foreigners, children, handicapped people, the elderly, widows, the deaf and the blind.

The Torah goes to tremendous lengths to ensure that we remain the most merciful human beings on earth. We are required to take care and visit the sick (unlike lots of ancient, and not so ancient, cultures that would simply kill the sick and mentally ill). The Torah tells us numerous times to go out of our way to feed the poor and needy.

The Torah even requires the utmost mercy on animals. We are forbidden to cause any undue pain to an animal. We can’t slaughter a cow the same day her calf was slaughtered, which the Chinuch explains is because of the undue pain caused to the animal and the insensitivity it would foster in us. We cannot take the eggs of a bird while the mother bird is watching, which many commentators explain is because of the pain it would cause to the mother bird.

The Torah’s absolute insistence that we lead merciful lives is what created a nation that is completely fueled by mercy. We have organizations that help those in financial trouble, and those that help struggling teenagers, ones that help those going through postpartum depression, and those that help couples struggling

with infertility. We have organizations that help people with flat tires, and organizations that help families who lost a relative. If there is a need for something, chances are there is an organization that is out to fill it.

Jews were the largest percentage of donors of plasma during the Covid epidemic. Israel is often the first country to send humanitarian aid to a country suffering from a disaster, even if that country is an enemy to Israel (such as sending aid to Syria during its civil war). Eli Beer, the man behind United Hatzalah, has helped hundreds of countries in quickening their emergency medical response time, effectively saving millions upon millions of lives every year.

And this is all in addition to the thousands of individuals who, without fanfare or attention, take it upon themselves to visit the sick, encourage prisoners, cheer up the elderly or raise money for every cause under the sun. Not to mention the hundreds of groups of people who have taken it upon themselves to pray and shed tears for those suffering. One can only look at the Jewish people and be in sheer awe of the mercy that flows through their collective veins.

Jews are never charged by Hashem to be cruel. It's precisely our commitment to mercy that propels us to on occasion weed out those that promulgate cruelty.

### **The Bizarre History of Shechita**

The history of shechita (Jewish ritual slaughter) is a dramatic example of the Jewish people's steadfast commitment to mercy at all costs.

In September of 1893, the country of Switzerland became the first government to formally introduce a legislative ban on shechita of animals. Arguing that it was immensely cruel and insensitive to the animal, the Swiss were out to ban it entirely. Thus began a long and systemic crusade to label Jews as a cruel and merciless people, who revel in the pain and blood of animals.

Spreading like wildfire, the anti-shechita tactic became quite popular in Europe, as the perfect pretext for attacking Jews on the grounds of being cruel. This continued with bans in the Kingdom of Saxony, in Bavaria

in February of 1894, in the Landtag of Schwartzburg-Sonderhausen in July 1897, and in the German Reichstag in 1899.

On April 21, 1933, the Nazis outlawed shechita in the entire country. Theodor Fritsch explained and promoted the Nazi position in his book *Handbuch der Judenfrage*, which published 39 editions and 200,000 copies by the year 1935. In it he wrote, "The Jew denies the existence of cruelty in shechita. Considering that the Jew has no mercy for human beings, it is unsurprising that he possesses no pity for the animal."

One of the greatest ironies in all of human history was the fact that the Nazis were fanatic animal lovers. Utterly obsessed with animal welfare, Germany had the strictest and most far-reaching animal protection regulations in Europe. A German caught abusing an animal would be sent to a concentration camp as punishment! As Joseph Goebbels wrote in his diary, Adolph Hitler was a vegetarian and a passionate animal lover. He also said that Hitler was planning, after German victory in the war, to ban animal slaughterhouses altogether. The Nazi ban on shechita in 1933 effectively halted the consumption of meat for the Jews in Germany.

Scores of Jewish people protested and campaigned that shechita was in fact a humane method of killing animals for beef. These complaints fell unsurprisingly on deaf ears. The Germans required knocking the animal unconscious before butchering it, a method prohibited by Torah law. The Jews looked to neighboring countries to import meat, but the Germans banned all meat from Poland, Lithuania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania. They were stuck.

The German Jews attempted to find a new method that would satisfy both Jewish halacha and German law. Because the German legislation did not ban shechita outright, but only required the animal to be rendered insensible prior to shechita, the German Jews experimented with various stunning methods that would not make the animal a treifa (a halachically terminally ill animal, which is forbidden to eat). They experimented with electrical shocks and nitrogen inhalation, which were both found to be unsatisfactory by the leading German rabbis of that time.



One day, a breakthrough was discovered by a man named Bruno Kisch, a professor of experimental pathology at Cologne University. He used an intravenous injection of Eunacron, which both rendered the animal unconscious and caused no harm to the animal. The method went through extensive testing and seemed likely to get the support of the halachic authorities.

Ecstatic, the German Jews called together the rabbis to discuss this method and hopefully allow its widespread usage throughout Germany, ending the poor Jews' dearth of meat.

Alas, in November of 1938, as the date of the meeting was drawing near, an outbreak of violence occurred near the homes of the meeting attendees, "gently" discouraging the meeting from taking place. The Nazis were not interested in finding the most humane way to slaughter beef. They were looking to slaughter Jews. Cutting off their meat supply was a step in the direction of slaughtering six million Jews. A bunch of rabbis and a sympathizing scientist would not be allowed to get in their way.

Six million deaths later, the atrocities of the Holocaust eventually came to an end. Although the Nazi political party crumbled, some prewar ideologies survived the Nazi defeat. One of them was the anti-shechita-Jews-are-cruel-to-animals idea. In modern day Denmark, shechita is only allowed in the presence of a state licensed veterinary, as well as in Ireland, the Netherlands, Finland, and Spain. To this day, religious slaughter is banned entirely in Switzerland, Norway, and Sweden, on the basis of cruelty to animals.

As the shechita debate throughout Europe raged on, constantly being used as a club on the Jews' heads, there were individuals who were fed up and decided to put it through a test to show the world once and for all. The Department of Veterinary Medicine in the University of Bari gathered together in Valenzono, Italy and performed a test referred to as the *Elisa Test*, which was able to determine the exact plasma cortisol levels in an animal while going through the shechita process. They would hook up an animal to a device and it would essentially determine how much pain the animal was feeling and for how long. What they discovered shocked the world: The traditional stun gun slaughter process caused more pain to the animal than did the Jewish way

of shechita. Finally, the world had tangible evidence that an animal experiences less pain, for a shorter time, with shechita than with any other method.

This shocked all but the Jews. For the Jew knows that there is no more humane way of life than following the life described by the Torah. It was, is, and will forever be the ultimate authority on defining mercy. Even the Torah's command to wage war is not a crusade using violence as a way to shove our religion down the throat of others. It is a charge to ensure that universal mercy is what reigns supreme.

The difference between Jewish ritual slaughter and the world's method is a mere few seconds of pain. And yet the Torah, in the strongest manner, forbids us to use their slaughter methods. Why? Because for us, a few seconds of pain is too much pain, and being the most merciful people on earth, no amount of pain is ever overlooked. Call us outdated. Call us cruel. The world will one day see who are the only merciful ones left standing.

In 2022, the FBI published its annual crime report. The city with at least 100,000 inhabitants that experienced the least violent crime was Lakewood, NJ, the city with the highest concentration of Torah Jews in the United States. Coincidence? I doubt it.