

# THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE IDOL OF MICAH AND THE CONCUBINE AT GIBEAH: A RABBINIC VIEW

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The Book of Judges ends with two strange narratives, the story of the idol of Micah (Judg. 17-18) and the story of the concubine of Gibeah (Judg. 19-21). Both of these episodes emphasize that *there was no king in Israel* (Judg. 18:1, 19:1) indicating that these events occurred because of a lack of leadership in Israel. There is a striking difference between these two episodes: the Israelites tolerated the idol of Micah, yet they went to war to punish the Benjamites for raping and murdering the concubine of Gibeah. In the idol of Micah episode, the Danites steal the idol, conquer a city and set up an idolatrous temple, but are not attacked by their fellow Israelites. In fact, the text does not report any negative repercussions of their actions (Judg. 18:26-31). On the other hand, the outrage of the concubine at Gibeah led to a civil war, Israel against the entire tribe of Benjamin. How are we to understand the different reactions of the Israelites to these two sins?

Another unusual element in the concubine narrative is that initially the Israelites could not defeat the tribe of Benjamin. On the first day of battle, 22,000 Israelites died (Judg. 20:21). On the second day of battle, 18,000 Israelites died (ibid. 20:25). Only on the third day of battle did the remaining Israelite warriors kill 25,000 of the tribe of Benjamin (Judg. 20:46). What was the reason for the initial inability of the Israelites to defeat the tribe of Benjamin, and why did this situation change on the third day?

According to the simple understanding of the text, these questions are plainly answered. The idol of Micah is seen not as a heinous sin deserving of severe punishment, but rather as an example of the syncretic religion of some early Israelites, who combined worship of the true God with the trappings of idolatry. The entire episode seems to focus on how ridiculous the whole enterprise was, beginning with Micah's mother cursing him for stealing from

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her, then turning around and blessing him (Judg. 17:2), to the appointment of a random Levite as priest (Judg. 17:10) and the helplessness of Micah when his ritual objects are looted (Judg. 18:24-26). The inability of the Israelites to conquer the tribe of Benjamin is explained in the text as due to the expert marksmen of the tribe of Benjamin (Judg 20:16). Furthermore, the two stories seem disconnected chronologically. The episode of the idol of Micah seems to take place at an earlier time, when the Israelites are still conquering their territory; whereas, in the concubine of Gibeah story, the tribes are all settled in their different areas.

This is not the rabbinic view. The Sages regarded the two episodes as being connected and in close chronological proximity to each other. Furthermore, the idol of Micah was considered insidious rather than ludicrous. These concerns led to another way of viewing these two narratives, as interconnected and forming a complete story of sin and punishment.

The Zohar explains that only sinners died in the battles against the Benjamites:

And if it happens that a sinful Israelite falls into the hand of another Israelite sinner, this is so that they may both be punished and purified by their punishment. Said R. Eleazar: "Whence do you derive all of this? – From the incident of the concubine in Gibeah. For although the sinners there were Israelites, God was unwilling that other sinners of Israel should be the instruments for punishing them, and therefore numbers of them fell time after time until all the sinners in the attacking army had perished, and there were left only those more righteous ones who could more appropriately execute the work . . . Sinners of Israel are not made the agents of the King to punish other sinners of Israel . . . This we may illustrate by the following parable. Certain men having offended against the king, an officer was ordered to arrest and punish them. One clever fellow among them went and mingled with the officer's men. The officer, however, detected him and said: "Who said you could join us? Are you not one of those who have offended against the king? You shall be punished first" (Soncino Zohar, Vayikra, section 3, 37a).

What was the sin of the Israelites at the time? In aggadic style, TB *Sanhedrin* 103b relates a conversation between God and His ministering angels concerning the idol of Micah and the affair of the concubine at Gibeah:

R. Nathan said: From Gerev to Shiloh is a distance of three miles, and the smoke of the altar and that of Micah's image intermingled. The ministering angels wished to thrust Micah away, but the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, "Let him alone, because his bread is available for wayfarers." And it was on this account [Rashi: Micah's idol, which Israel didn't object to] that the people involved in the affair of the concubine at Gibeah were punished [Rashi: That the Benjamites killed 40,000]. For the Holy One, blessed be He, said to them, "You did not protest for My honor, yet you protest for the honor of a woman."

The Rabbis here seem to view God as tolerant of idolatry as long as there is no accompanying immorality, and in fact Micah is portrayed in Judges 17 and 18 as welcoming travelers. Once the episode of the concubine took place and the Israelites reacted by waging war against the tribe of Benjamin, the fact that idolatry was tolerated by the Israelites could not be ignored by God and punishment had to be meted out. This is what the Zohar is referring to: the Israelites who died in battle against Benjamin were those held accountable for tolerating the idol of Micah. This is also Rashi's understanding of the Israelites' initial losses in the battle against Benjamin: a purging of the sinners in their midst, those who tolerated idolatry (Rashi on Judg. 20:21).

The Talmud (TB *Shevu'ot* 35b) records a curious dispute as to whether the Divine Names mentioned in connection with the Gibeah narrative are to be understood as referring to God or to idolatry. R. Eliezer explains that some are secular (they refer not to God, but to idols) and some are sacred. The prayers and inquiries at the beginning of Judges 20 were addressed by the Israelites to false gods, which explains why they kept on being defeated in battle. It was only after they inquired of the true God that they prevailed. In light of the other rabbinic statements that we have seen, it is clear that the deity approached by the Israelites was the idol of Micah. As long as they did not repent of that false worship they could not defeat the tribe of Benjamin.

According to rabbinic opinion, as expressed in the Talmud, Zohar and Rashi's commentary to Judges, the two stories of the idol of Micah and the

concubine of Gibeah are interrelated, The death of the Israelites in battle against the tribe of Benjamin was in fact their punishment for the sin of the idol of Micah.