

The Women of Midian

- Basil Herring.

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But first the story of another Jewish woman, and how she survived the Nazis. You may have seen the obituary, about a year ago of Alexander Bielski, the legendary Jewish partisan who fought the Germans with great effectiveness in the forests of Novogradok, Poland. But it is not his story that interests me, so much as that of his wife Sonia. This is what the obituary said: She first saw her husband to be under a tree, a tall powerfully built man glistening with brass and bandolier. She was immediately smitten, and so was he, but when Mr. Bielski tried to get the 18 year old to go to bed with him, going so far as to ply her with vodka, she said, the legendary resistance leader learned something about Jewish resistance. "I refused," she said, "but I offered to make a contract. If he would rescue my parents from Novogradok, I would go with him." Within 4 days her parents were safe in the woods, and Mr. Bielski had claimed his prize. Five days later the Nazis massacred thousands of Jews in Novogradok. NY Times 8/23/95 Let us now contrast this story of flesh denied, and pleasure postponed, in the service of a higher cause, with that of Hannah Arendt.

In 1924, Martin Heidegger was a popular professor of philosophy, married with children, who captivated his students with genius and style. When she became one of his students, she fell instantly in love with him, and for 4 years they carried on a secret affair, on campus and off, until he abandoned her for other interests. In the years thereafter she married, in 1941 emigrated to the US, while Heidegger went on to become a leading Nazi who defended Hitler, publicly called for the exclusion of Jews from German life, fired Jewish teachers from the university where he was rector, and became an enthusiastic supporter of the Nazis and all they represented. So much so, that after the war, he was publicly branded as a Nazi, and all his academic positions and teaching responsibilities were removed by the Allied occupiers of Germany.

What was the response of Hannah Arendt? During the war years and shortly thereafter she wrote critically of Heidegger and his connection to Hitler, and until recently it was thought that their relationship had terminated in 1928. But last year Elzbieta Ettinger published newly-discovered

correspondence that occurred between Arendt and Heidegger, an exchange which puts much of Arendt's celebrated later writings, especially those relating to Jews and Judaism, in a whole new light. For from these letters it is clear that long after her lover had been unmasked and branded as a Nazi, starting in 1950 and until she died, she continued to love and defend him with passion. She practically became his agent and publicist, overseeing the dissemination of his writings, and whitewashing his Nazi past by way of outright distortions of the earlier record. Among others, she came to echo and reinforce Heidegger's post-war argument that responsibility for the horrors of Nazism were not specific to Germany, and that Germany bore no special responsibility, insofar as all of Western civilization had similarly strayed from the truth. And in 1963, Arendt, published her landmark volume entitled, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which gained notoriety in Jewish circles, in particular for her argument that the behavior of the leaders of the Jewish Councils (Judenrat) under the Nazis was comparable to that of the Nazis themselves, for, as she put it, they collaborated with their killers, as part of what she called "the moral collapse in respectable European society, not only among the persecutors, but also among the victims." As for Eichmann, she claimed, his evil was merely "banal," or a commonplace, as she insisted that he harbored no evil intention, but merely a desire to do his job, functioning as a thoughtless cog in an impersonal killing machine.

At the time she wrote these words, there was, as would be expected, an outcry among Jews. How, it was asked, could Arendt so falsify history, and so debase the victims by putting them at moral equivalence with their executioners? Why would she be so ready to grant the Germans the satisfaction of seeing Jews also implicated in the dark events of the Nazi era? At the time, there were no answers to these questions. But in light of what we now know of Arendt's ongoing relationship with Heidegger, the whole thing makes sense. As Professor Richard Wolin of Rice University put it in *The New Republic*,

In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Arendt appears to have been raising herself above those Eastern European Jewish ghetto dwellers who, in her view, willingly cooperated in being collectively led to the slaughter. She after all exemplified higher European traditions, and she had studied with, and loved, the great tribune of the time, Heidegger. Could the offensive passages of the book have been meant somehow to absolve Heidegger of his crimes by showing that his victims also were guilty? TNR Oct. 9th 1995

I believe that the answer to this question is "yes." The story of the life and passions of Hannah Arendt is the story of how a woman, gifted intellectually, allowed herself to be seduced by her passions and her love for a man. It is a living, if scandalous, moral that teaches us and posterity that no individual, no matter how smart, and no group, no matter how strong, can be sure that in its earnest search for truth, goodness, or happiness, it will not be beguiled or corrupted by carnal temptation and emotional attachment into betraying its very *raison d'être*, and its national identity. If Hannah Arendt, who was so shamelessly exploited, then jilted and betrayed, could end up as she did defending the very "lowlife" who stood shoulder to shoulder with those who very nearly destroyed her German homeland and her Jewish people, what of all the rest of us? If she could blatantly and falsely accuse her fellow Jews of collaboration in their own demise, in order, as it now seems likely, to exonerate her paramour who was vastly more guilty of collaboration in their mass deaths, all because of her misguided passions and intellectual dalliances, then who among us can be safe from that and worse? When the flesh calls, how easily we sell our birthright, how soon we forget all that made us what we are and might become!

Now it is with this as background, that we can take up the moral implications of Moses' treatment of the women of Midian, a subject which requires careful analysis and response. You will recall, I am sure, that in the wake of the combined Moabite and Midianite campaign to defeat the Israelites by sending their women to seduce the men of Israel, as a result of which 24,000 Israelites died by divine plague, God commands Moshe to wreak vengeance on the Midianite nation. So Moses conscripts 12,000 soldiers, and they go to war, are victorious, killing all the men they encounter. In accordance with common practice, they bring back the usual spoils of battle, including the hapless women of Midian. Moshe meets them upon their return, sees what they have done, and explodes in anger, saying
Have you left the women alive? They were the very ones who, at Bilaam's suggestion, caused the Israelites to betray God in worshipping Peor, causing a plague in the congregation of God. Kill all the male children, and every woman who has lain with a man! Nu. 31: 15-17

Superficially read, Moshe's words appear barbaric and indefensible. To the modern sensibility the verses bear an uncomfortable resemblance to some of the worst war crimes of the 20th century, so familiar to us from the recent annals of war-torn Bosnia, or genocidal Rwanda. Can it be, *h.as ve'h.alilah*, that Moshe, the man of God, paragon and embodiment of the high moral ground, is urging his hesitating men to commit the indiscriminate murder of innocent victims of war, like some ancient equivalent, *lehavdil*, of a modern day accused war criminal named Karadzic? The answer, I would submit, is absolutely no. For if we read these verses carefully, we can understand what Moshe is saying. We can assume that when the Israelite army was victorious, and they were confronted with what to do with the Midianite women, there were those who argued as follows: "Why punish these women, they are not per se responsible, they were only cogs in a wheel, part of a larger group, following the instructions of parents and trend-setters, all those who dictated the fashions and behaviors and social conventions of their time and place. Why even Bilaam, the great intellectual and profound thinker, was part of the conspiracy, what do you want from these poor uneducated women? We should be lenient with them, after all, even the Israelite "victims" were consenting adults and willing accomplices."

In was in response to this argument, that Moshe here says, "true these women did not initiate the seduction of the Israelite men. It was Bilaam who suggested it, and these women merely went along with the social conventions of their peers. But it is for that very reason that they must be punished and killed, so that no man or women should ever be able to claim that they acted under orders, or simply followed instructions, or take refuge under a pretext that it was socially sanctioned. We are each of us responsible for our own actions before man and God; we can never claim leniency on the grounds that others were no better than we were, or that the great ideologues justified the crimes of which we stand accused. When all is said and done, says Moshe are "*hein heinah hayu livnei Yisrael bidvar Bilam*," these are themselves the very ones who carried out the crimes at the instigation of Bilam, albeit lowly functionaries, yet for that very reason the indispensable implementers of their masters' damnable plans." As *H.azal* would put it, *ein shaliah li'dvar aveirah*: "there is no proxy when it comes to a transgression or crime!" You commit it—you are responsible for its consequences! As Rashi says here, quoting the *Sifri Zuta*, before each Midianite woman was put to death, she was positively identified together with the identity of the particular man with whom she had consorted. It was therefore not the indiscriminate or capricious murder of innocents in the least, not an ethnic cleansing, but rather a

careful accounting of crimes committed, and of personal guilt affirmed, punishment that fit the crime, and an indelible lesson for all of posterity as to the parameters of individual responsibility before God. Just as the Israelite men themselves were held fully accountable to die at the hand of God's plague, no more and no less was the punishment of these ancient embodiments of the spirit of Mata Hari, femmes fatales in the truest sense.

But it was not just that the Midianites had plotted to kill and destroy the Israelites. It was much more than that. Listen to the Yalkut Shimoni (#795) on this episode:

When God commands Moshe here, He says "wreak the vengeance of the Children of Israel on the Midianites," but when Moshe instructs the soldiers he says "attack the Midianites to avenge God. This because Moshe argued and said, "dear God, it is true that we are the ones who were attacked, but we were only attacked because we serve You. Were we uncircumcized, or idolaters, or denied the commandments, they would not hate us so. They attack us therefore because of Your Torah and mitzvot!"

For this reason, says the midrash, Midian, and not Moav, was singled out for attack: Moav only wanted to kill the Israelites to prevent Israel from attacking Moav; Midian on the other hand was not threatened, but rather attacked Israel on ideological and religious grounds, to wipe out the Torah, mizvot, and faith which Israel embodied. It was not the Jews, but the Jewish spirit, and the unique Jewish way of life of Torah and Mitzvah, which was at stake, and which had to be defended, if need be, to the death!

How sad that the modern history of the Jewish people should be so replete with examples of Jewish men and women who have failed to understand the lessons and imperatives that flow from this episode in the wilderness East of the River Jordan. People like a Hannah Arendt, who, for all of their towering intellects, and prodigious accomplishments in the worlds of science, art and culture, or for that matter business and the professions, who have betrayed their people and its spiritual legacy, seduced either physically or spiritually, or both, into the embrace of foreign cultures so inimical to the well-being of the Jewish people and the Jewish idea. People who in fact, albeit unknowingly, echo the damning words found in this morning's haftarah, those ancient Israelites who brazenly declared to Jeremiah, "lo, ki ahavti zarim, ve'ahreihem elekh—no, I love strangers, and after them will I go!" How tragic for them and for us, that so many of our fellow Jews even today, even here, should be trapped into a betrayal of the imperatives of Jewish survival and Jewish life, and rather than accept responsibility for their own actions or those of their new-found loves, do what they can to justify and defend their errors, by self-righteously accusing their fellow Jews who are fully committed to Jewish life, of being too provincial, too ghettoized, altogether too Jewish. Would that they rather used their bodies and spirits, not to speak of their prodigious talents and energies, to strengthen the Jewish people, save Jewish lives, and live by the eternal tenets of God's Torah.

Rather than the sorry story of a Hannah Arendt, rather the inspired example of a Sonia Bielski, the woman who used her body, her passion, and her wits to ensure not just the survival of her family, but in standing side by side with her brave husband, fought to the death against the modern day Midianite people, those Germans and Poles who plotted, and God knows almost succeeded, in destroying the body and soul of the Jewish people.

May it be God's well, that in our own time we, as well as Jews all over the world find the inner

strength and fortitude to be able to withstand the blandishments and enticements, physical, cultural, and spiritual, that would lead to our abandonment of all that Jews have held dear, and in so doing to defeat once and for all, the spirit of Midian, in its many embodiments, and to see the arrival of Mashiach Zidkeinu, to redeem us, and all of mankind, bimheirah beyameinu, amen!