

## Potomac Torah Study Center

Vol. 11 #43, August 2-3, 2024; 27-28 Tammuz 5784; Matot-Masei; Mevarchim HaHodesh

**NOTE: Devrei Torah presented weekly in Loving Memory of Rabbi Leonard S. Cahan z"l, Rabbi Emeritus of Congregation Har Shalom, who started me on my road to learning more than 50 years ago and was our family Rebbe and close friend until his untimely death.**

---

**Devrei Torah are now Available for Download (normally by noon on Fridays) at [www.PotomacTorah.org](http://www.PotomacTorah.org). Thanks to Bill Landau for hosting the Devrei Torah archives.**

---

**Hamas continues to manipulate the media while pretending to negotiate with Israel. Hersh Polin Goldberg, cousin of very close friends of ours and a U.S. citizen, remains a captive. Concerns are increasing that fewer than half of the hostages may still be alive. We continue our prayers for the hostages and all our people stuck in Gaza. May Hashem enable us and our people in Israel to wipe out the evil of Hamas, protect us from violence by Hezbollah and other anti-Semites around the world, and restore peace for our people quickly and successfully.**

---

**All Jews and people who stand for proper values express our relief at the long overdue release of Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, a Jewish Russian born American whom Putin had enslaved in prison in Russia for approximately 17 months.**

---

In most years, we read Matot and Masei together shortly before Rosh Hodesh Av – because our tradition is to read parshat Devarim on the Shabbat before Tisha B'Av. Matot-Masei then becomes the final (combined) parsha in Sefer Bemidbar. This sefer, which starts with great hope (census before B'Nai Yisrael resume the final march into Canaan), ends on a positive note. Moshe reviews the journeys since the first generation left Egypt, presents orders for cities of refuge, and rules that the daughters of Tzelaḥad must marry within their tribe (Menashe) so their father's land will remain within Menashe.

During the middle chapters of Sefer Bemidbar, most of the generation of the Exodus die – but those who die because of sins do so for personal transgressions, not because of disunity among the people. Much earlier in the Torah, Yaakov's sons from Leah throw Yosef (a son from Rachel) into a pit and create conditions that result in him being sold into slavery in Egypt. This episode arises from animosity between the Leah and Rachel sides of the family. The episodes in the middle portion of Bemidbar never result in disunity of factions at that level, according to every commentator I have read. Even in the episode of Korach and Reuven, and the episode of the Meraglim, those who follow Korach and Reuven do not fight with the other Jews, and those who want to return to Egypt following the majority report, separate into groups with disagreements but no fighting or open hatred of their fellow Jews. Those who sin in their choices die as a result – but not because of creating hatred among B'Nai Yisrael. Rabbi Yitz Etshalom, in his Devar Torah (attached by email), observes that the unity and sense of a common destiny, with mutual responsibility for fellow Jews, is the reason why these episodes do not threaten the second generation from meriting to enter and take over Canaan.

Reb Yitz contrasts the sins in the middle sections of the sefer with the threat that Moshe immediately understands from the request of Reuven and Gad to settle on the east side of the Jordan River. If some of the people settle outside the

traditional boundaries of Israel, the remaining tribes who must fight for their land will feel abandoned, and the result will be a split that will threaten the ability of the people to enter and merit owning the land that Hashem had promised. Reuven and Gad immediately recognize this concern, approach close to Moshe, and explain that they will take a short time to settle their families and animals, and then go forward to serve in the front lines until the people capture all of the land that Hashem has promised.

The negotiation resolves most of Moshe's concerns. However, Moshe reinforces the negotiation by adding half of Menashe to stay on the east side of the Jordan with Reuven and Gad. Moshe specifically puts the daughters of Tzelafchad (from Menashe, Rachel's side of the family) on the east bank. The reason for his selection arises at the end of the parsha, when Moshe orders that the daughters must marry within the tribe of Menashe. Since most of the tribe is west of the Jordan River, the women's husbands' families will live across the river from the wives' land. These family ties further guarantee that the families of Menashe will be crossing the river often and thereby help link the tribes on the two sides.

Masei is appropriate for the Nine Days, because of our tradition that sinat chinam is responsible for the destruction of the Second Temple approximately two thousand years ago. Moshe hopes to help repair past splits between and Leah and Rachel sides of B'Nai Yisrael, which Yehudah and Yosef start to heal when Yosef realizes that Yehudah and the rest of the Leah side of the family are willing to offer themselves into slavery if he will permit the rest of them to take Benyamin back to their father.

Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander finds hope in the situation now in Israel with the country addressing issues that have split the people for far too long. One significant issue is including the Haredi youth in serving the country (adding some physical service to their prayers and learning) along with the rest of the people. Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks' moving memorial to his Rebbe, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, zecher tzaddik livracha, contributes to this mood. Rav Rabinovitch was very proud that all his students at Yeshivat Birkat Moshe, where he taught for thirty-seven years, served in the IDF. Hopefully the various factions in the Israeli Rabbinate, who have not been able to fill the Chief Rabbi position(s) for many months, will observe the major lessons of Tisha B'Av and find a way to come closer to each other – speedily in our days.

My beloved Rebbe, Rabbi Leonard Cahan, z"l, would have agreed with Rabbi Brander about the importance of Israelis working across factions to come closer together and to find ways to include all Israelis in the obligation to participate in defending Israel. May we follow the example of the daughters of Tzelafchad in working for a better Israel rather than the examples of those whose priorities seem to be backward. In doing so, may we help improve the world.

Shabbat Shalom,

Hannah and Alan

---

**Much of the inspiration for my weekly Dvar Torah message comes from the insights of Rabbi David Fohrman and his team of scholars at [www.alephbeta.org](http://www.alephbeta.org). Please join me in supporting this wonderful organization, which has increased its scholarly work during and since the pandemic, despite many of its supporters having to cut back on their donations.**

---

**Please daven for a Refuah Shlemah for Hersh ben Perel Chana (Hersh Polin, hostage to terrorists in Gaza); Moshe Aaron ben Leah Beilah (badly wounded in battle in Gaza but slowly recovering), Hershel Tzvi ben Chana, Reuven ben Basha Chaya Zlata Lana, Yoram Ben Shoshana, Leib Dovid ben Etel, Avraham ben Gavriela, Mordechai ben Chaya, David Moshe ben Raizel; Zvi ben Sara Chaya, Reuven ben Masha, Meir ben Sara, Oscar ben Simcha; Chai Frumel bat Leah, Rena bat Ilsa, Riva Golda bat Leah, Sarah Feige bat Chaya, Sharon bat Sarah, Kayla bat Ester, and Malka bat Simcha, and all our fellow Jews in danger in and near Israel. Please contact me for any additions or subtractions. Thank you.**

Shabbat Shalom

Hannah & Alan

---

## **Parshat Matot-Masei: The Long & Winding Road**

By Rabbi Dr. Katriel (Kenneth) Brander \* © 5784 (2024)

President and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone

*Dedicated in memory of Israel's murdered and fallen, the refuah shlayma of the wounded, the return of those being held hostage in Gaza, and the safety of our brave IDF soldiers.*

The Torah, the spiritual roadmap for the Jewish people, speaks to us not only through its content, but by way of its form, too. The reams of parchment, the carefully crafted letters, the amount of spaces between sections, the way the ink and scrolls of parchment are crafted – all these, and the traditions around them, come to teach us spiritual messages. The same holds true for the number of lines of text appearing in a Torah scroll. The Talmud states: *“Regarding the lines in a Torah scroll, a reason was given: they correspond to the journeys, which are forty-two”* (Sofrim 2:6). It is this week's Torah portion that lists those 42 journeys, or legs of travel across the desert, referred to in the Talmud..

Yet when codified in Jewish law, the number of lines per parchment in the Torah scroll is a matter of debate, dating back to the medieval period. R. Jacob ben Asher in his magnum opus the *Arba'ah Turim Tur* (YD 275) records two positions: Maimonides' *Hilchot Sefer Torah* 7:10, who advocates for 48, and R' Judah ben Barzillai of Barcelona, who suggested the number 42. Aside from aesthetic appearance or logistical convenience, what might these numbers be coming to tell us? Furthermore, how does Maimonides advocate a position against the Talmud?

R' Yehoshua Falk, in his commentary to Tur entitled *“Perisha”* (275:14) suggests that there are multiple ways to count the stops along the journey towards the promised land. As Rashi (s.v. Eleh Mas'ei, Bamidbar 33:1) notes, counting up the stops recorded in the Torah indicates that there were 42 legs to the trip – making 42 a fitting number of lines to include in a Torah scroll. For the Torah is our guide through our journeys in the world, and its 42-line pages remind us that just as God led us in the desert, God leads us along all our journeys.

But what, then, is the significance of 48? Here, R' Falk offers an astounding explanation. While Parshat Mas'ei records a total of 42 stops along the journey, here the Torah only records the journey forwards. Yet a careful read of the verses in Bamidbar and Devarim leads Chazal's *Yerushalmi Sotah* 1:10, cited by Rashi Devarim 10:6, to conclude that the Jewish people, fearing the Canaanite attack on the camp following the death of Aharon, retreated back towards Egypt. A full account of the journey to the land of Israel, then, amounted not to 42 stops, but 48.

What might be seen as a minute, fairly inconsequential detail of the laws of writing a Torah scroll actually reflects a crucial message for us, especially as we face the three weeks and the upcoming fast day of Tish'a B'Av. Maimonides' view, as understood by the Perisha, insists that when considering the journey to the promised land, we include in our collective memory the setbacks along the way. The Torah is not merely a map or a guidebook; for if so there would be no reason for the journeys to be enumerated in our parsha. The Torah is our spiritual Waze – aware of our capacity to go astray and capable of rerouting us when we've lost our way. In the journey of life, we have so much to learn from the way forward, yet a great deal to learn from the setbacks and challenges as well. If we learn from these setbacks, then they cease to be setbacks. Rather they become detours through which we achieve focus, and ultimately help us reach our goals and destinations.

This past year has certainly showcased the importance of learning from the moments that go awry. For all that has been lost and damaged in our physical lives and in our national consciousness, great heroism and solidarity have also been demonstrated across the board. Major national questions that have been swept under the rug for decades are finally

coming to light, and the brokenness that has befallen us has been translated into resilience and a desire for change. Our country's and our society's failures do not justify retreat, but the reality we face calls for course corrections, to redeem our fate and sanctify our lives through lessons learned. And as this week's parsha reminds us, we need to embrace those course corrections and remain committed to our journey. Then our long and winding road is always propelling us forward. \* Ohr Torah Stone is a modern Orthodox group of 32 institutions and programs. Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founding Director, and Rabbi Dr. Brander is President and Rosh HaYeshiva. For more information or to support Ohr Torah Stone, contact [ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org](mailto:ohrtorahstone@otsyny.org) or 212-935-8672. Donations to 49 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street #701, New York, NY 10036.

---

## **Masei: A Fresh Look – at Life**

By Rabbi Label Lam © 5765 (2005)

*They journeyed from Rephidim and encamped in the Wilderness of Sinai. They journeyed from the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in Kivros HaTaava. (Bamidbar 33:16-17)*

Why does the Torah bother to tell us, for each of the 42 journeys, where they traveled from? It's always the prior destination.

The Talmud (Shabbos 9A) tells us that Rabbah would begin his Torah lessons with a joke. Part of the reason for this practice was to ready the students to learn something new. To hear a new idea one must be willing to shed some old assumptions. A good joke has that quality of being able to challenge our ordinary perceptions of reality. As we try to make sense out of life or a given scene, we tend to fill in the details with facts based upon our prior experiences. Some of that old baggage may actually run interference with the ability to understand the new. Then we are surprised. Our conceptual boxes are suddenly burst, our paradigms shattered, and in need of adjustment. We are now ready to learn.

A farmer came to the big city to be fitted for his first suit so he could be in fashion -- step at a family wedding. He came to a tailor with a fine reputation who took careful note of the man's measurements and specifications before selecting a worthy bolt of cloth. The farmer returned on the day of the big family event to pick up his new custom made suit. The tailor confidently handed it to him and pointed him to the dressing room.

The poor farmer was could hardly squeeze his first leg in and then only with great effort again his second leg. He was ready to shout out with frustration when he found himself completely distorting his body only to be able to clasp the suit pants closed. The jacket was equally a disaster. Hardly able to breathe, the farmer shouted gruffly to the tailor, "What did you do to me? I have nothing to wear to the wedding tonight! You have ruined me!" Alarmed at first, the tailor took a good look, chuckled, and replied, "Foolish farmer! Before you try on a new suit you must first remove your overalls!"

Someone coming for a first Shabbos, or going to Israel for the very first time, or encountering a Rebbe has no idea what goodness lies ahead. No amount of words could prepare that person. Similarly, someone transitioning from work to home has to make an astronaut-like adjustment to adapt to an environment with a completely different set of values. He may be the big boss there, but it won't work here. When leaving the parental home for marriage, the Torah admonishes early on, "*Therefore a man should leave his mother and father and cling to his wife...*" (Breishis 2:24) (He is not expected to literally abandon his parents but rather to rid himself of his selfish and dependant attitude.

The best one might do to adjust to the new is to be ready to shed any old and inapplicable assumptions of the past. Then, with the old coat of paint removed, one is more mentally and emotionally available for a new coat, with a fresh look – at life.

<https://torah.org/torah-portion/dvartorah-5765-masei/>

---

## Matot: You and Your Shulkhan Arukh Are Going to Treif Up My Kitchen!

by Rabbi Dov Linzer, Rosh HaYeshiva, Yeshivat Chovevei Torah © 2014

[Rabbi Linzer's Halachic discussion will not be available until after my deadline this week. With permission, I am reprinting his Halachic discussion relevant to Matot – first printed in 2014.]

A story is told that when Rav Soloveitchik's wife Tonya, z"l, was hospitalized due to an illness, he and Haym had the run of the house. Following the technical laws of kashrut, they proceeded to eat cold milkhig food on fleishig dishes. When Tonya returned from the hospital, she was apoplectic. The Rav explained that he was doing nothing more than following the halakha of the Shulkhan Arukh, to which Tonya replied: "*You and your Shulkhan Arukh are going to treif up my kitchen!*"

This story gets to the heart of what keeping separate dishes is all about. Most classically, it is treated as a concern that any flavor that might have seeped into the walls of the dish will transfer to the food currently in it – if there is no heat to transfer the taste, it shouldn't be a problem. Alternatively, however, it may be about maintaining a strict division, of keeping like with like, of keeping the status and identity of things well defined – milkhig food gets milkhig dishes, fleishig food gets fleishig dishes. This latter approach is often thought of as one that more reflects the understanding of the laity, one that does not reflect the true halachic concerns. The matter, however, is not so simple.

When the people come back from the war against the Midianites in this week's parasha, they bring with them the booty of war, including vessels and clothing. Elazar instructs them in what must be done with these items:

Everything that goes through fire, you shall make it go through the fire, and it shall be clean: nevertheless it shall be purified with the sprinkling water; and all that does not go through fire you shall make go through the water (Bamidbar 31:23).

The simple sense of these verses is that this is a purification process, since the people have just come in contact with dead bodies, and this is presumably the meaning of the "*sprinkling water*," that is, they must be sprinkled with the ashes of the red heifer. This is certainly true regarding the purification of clothes mentioned in the following verse. However, this would not explain why the vessels in this verse must also be passed through fire or water. Rather than conclude that the Torah is introducing a new purification process, the Rabbis understand that a different issue is at play.

These cooking vessels, say the Rabbis, must not only be purified due to contact with the dead but purged of the non-kosher tastes that they have absorbed. Thus, vessels used directly over the fire, such as a spit, must be purified or kashered, as we would say, by putting it over a fire, and similarly vessels used with boiling water, such as a pot, must be kashered with boiling water. This is the principle of *ki'bolo kakh polto*, just as it absorbed the taste, so it expels it.

But maybe not. Maybe this whole process is not primarily about removing problematic absorbed taste. Maybe it is about changing the identity of the vessel, taking a treif vessel and redefining it, through this ritual, as a kosher one.

What is the evidence for this? First, this verse appears in the context of ritual purification, which is all about effecting a change of status. Second, note that the Rabbis also learn from this verse that there is a mitzvah to immerse even brand new vessels purchased from non-Jews, the mitzvah of tevilat keilim. This is most easily understood as a ritual to change the status of the vessel – from a non-Jewish vessel to a Jewish one. The juxtaposition in the verse of this requirement to kashering one suggests that the two are serving a similar function – change of status. Reflecting and reinforcing this is the Mishna in *Avoda Zara* (75b) which deals with kashering and toveling vessels all in the same discussion. Taken together, it seems like we are dealing with issues of status and not necessarily absorbed taste.

Other halakhot and Talmudic discussions support this approach. When we kasher a vessel, we only look at its primary use – on the fire, with boiling water, etc. – and not at all the ways it might have absorbed the taste of food. After we do the kashering, we have the custom of immersing the vessel in cold water, akin to a purification process (and what is done with a chatat, see Vayikra 6:21). Perhaps more significant is the fact that the requirement to kasher these dishes from Midian may not fit the general rules of absorbed taste, either because the taste would have already been spoiled, lifgam

(Pesachim 44b), or as the 13th century Rav Aharon HaLevi (Ra'ah) points out, because there would not be enough of it to be considered the true taste of the original food (Chezkat HaBayit on Torat HaBayit 4:1, 11a).

If this isn't about the taste of the absorbed food, what is it about? Ra'ah states, in the name of his teacher Ramban, that the prohibition to use vessels that were used with non-kosher food is because of what they are. Don't use treif vessels. Whatever is in their walls doesn't matter, if they were used to cook treif food, they are treif. In this way, kashering vessels is a form of purifying them, of changing their status and transforming them.

So who was right? Was it the Rav or was it Tonya? Is it the vessel, or is it what is in it? The truth is that both of these approaches exist within halakha, and an ongoing dialectical tension exists between them.

And so it should be. For while Rebbe Yehudah haNasi famously teaches, *"Do not look at the vessel, but at what is inside it,"* the reality is that we are always looking at the vessel, and this is not necessarily a bad thing (Pirkei Avot 4:20). We need to organize our reality. We need to assign labels, to categorize, to understand where one thing stands in relation to others. And the way a thing or a person appears, the identity they project, helps us do this in an efficient and effective way. There is a reason doctors go around wearing white coats and stethoscopes. It is true that this might lead to us dismissing someone who is not wearing that white coat or to giving too much weight to one who is, even if she is not such an expert, but it is better than the alternative – not having any idea who is who and how to navigate our way.

Tonya was right. Eating cold cheese off of a fleishig plate might be halakhically permissible. But blurring the boundaries and mixing categories is also a sure way to treif up the kitchen.

This approach is also central to the halakhic system, or any legal system for that matter. Halakha mostly operates with formalistic categories. Certain concrete, objective, quantifiable criteria are assessed, and that dictates what category something is in and what halakhot obtain. What halakha doesn't do, except in rare cases, is look at the full context, the circumstances relevant to an individual or thing, and apply one law to the whole as a category rather than apply a different law for each facet of the case. This is the principle of *lo plug* – we don't make distinctions. It would be highly inefficient, if not impossible, to have a legal system that operated on principles and not on formal categories. Looking at the vessel is absolutely necessary.

But if Tonya was right, so was Rebbe Yehudah haNassi. For a system that only looks at status and identity, that places labels on people and things and makes decisions on that basis, will lead to cases of error and injustice, to marginalization and exclusion. The woman in the white coat may not be a doctor, and even if she is, she may not know what she is talking about. If we are able, we need to stretch ourselves and go past the quick, easy categorization and its conclusions. We need to do our research, find out what truly is contained in the vessel.

Similarly with halakha. While a non-formalist approach undermines the halakhic system, an overly formalist approach can be blind to real people and real human suffering. There are times that we have to push ourselves and find ways to look at not just the category, but the real live person that is in it. There are ways that halakha accommodates this – concepts such as *sha'at ha'dechak*, an exigency where exceptions can be made, or times when we don't say *lo plug*, where situations are evaluated on a case-by-case basis. And then there are times when, like the laws of kosher vessels, the two exist in an ongoing dialectic relationship, where the particular circumstances and context can influence how the formal categories are defined.

In the end, we must find a way to keep our kitchens kosher, and we must find a way to know and care what each and every vessel contains.

Shabbat shalom!

## From Hafara to Hatarat: How the Sages Reclaimed the Concept of Voiding Vows

By Rabbanit Myriam Ackermann-Sommer \*

This week, Parashat Matot-Masei famously introduces us to the figure of the woman who makes vows and specifies the patriarchal restrictions that apply to these vows.

It is immediately clear that these restrictions are themselves limited. They are the prerogative of the woman's father when she is a minor and of her husband after she gets engaged. They can only annul her vow on the day that they hear of it (vv. 4-6), which, as the Gemara will specify in BT Nedarim, refers to the remainder of the day (this could be no more than a few hours!) Moreover, if a woman's vow was accepted by her father (silence here counts as acceptance, see v. 15), and she later marries a man, the husband can only void the vow when he first hears it (vv. 7-9). The vows of a woman who is a widow or a divorcee are, so to say, invulnerable (v. 10). In the following verses, it is made clear that Hashem is merciful towards a woman who took a vow that was then annulled by her husband. Based on v. 14, the Sages (see Mishna Nedarim 11:1) make it very clear that the husband can only nullify vows that *"afflict the soul,"* those that involve *innui nefesh*. The Gemara (Nedarim 79b) adds another category: vows *beino leveina*, *"between him and her."* Even then, he can only void the aspect that directly affects him. The Sifrei Bamidbar 155 asserts that the same conditions apply to a father (if his daughter is still a minor).

A close reading of BT Nedarim reveals that use of hafarat nedarim by a father or a husband was increasingly restricted, based on the Chachamim's understanding of Parashat Matot. The Sages came up with a more comprehensive solution — a better one, I believe — of freeing men and women alike from their vows — the institution of hatarat nedarim, which linguistically refers to the possibility of freeing people from their vows rather than aggressively destroying them (the hafara mechanism). The main difference is that, in hatarat nedarim, the Sages would basically help people free themselves from their vows through rational means, helping them finding a *peticha*, literally an *"exit,"* which may be translated as "loophole" in this context. For example, in BT Nedarim 21b-22a, the case of a mother who disinherited her daughter through a *neder* is reported. She then consulted the Sages to try to obtain the annulment of this extreme commitment. Trying to find a *peticha*, they ask the mother: *"When you made this vow, did you think about what the neighbors would say about your daughter?"* Wouldn't it be clear to them that the child had committed very shameful actions to be shunned by her mother in this way? The mother admits that, no, she hadn't realized the deleterious consequences of this hasty commitment and is freed from her vows.

But why did the Sages make it easier to resort to hatarat nedarim, while simultaneously limiting the parameters of the only option that was clearly laid out in the Torah, hafarat nedarim?

Let us take a step back to delve into the meaning of vows. Vows are commitments contracted by means of a ritual formula. One can take a vow to deny oneself any benefit from a person or object by making the entity concerned by the vow similar to a sacrificial offering (*konam* or *korban*), a *kadosh*, *"sacred"* or *"holy"* object. The best translation of *kadosh* in this context would be *"separated, distanced from oneself."* However, while a sacrifice usually designates an object that we distance ourselves from in order to *"draw closer"* (*korban*) to Hashem, the vow creates a separation between oneself and others (people and objects alike) that only spells tension, strife and frustration. It drives a wedge between husbands and wives, fathers and daughters, and so on and so forth. Because of the extreme legal and social consequences of the *neder*, and because of its symbolic violence (since it involves depriving oneself or others of contact or pleasure in a way that is not warranted by the Torah at all), the Sages have generalized, within their means, recourse to the annulment of vows, particularly when it comes to saving human relationships. While hafarat nedarim seemed purely arbitrary on the part of the father or the husband, and relied on the paternalistic assumption that they knew better what their wives and daughters should vow or not, without needing any justification before voiding the vow, hatarat nedarim introduces rationality and introspection in the process of getting rid of one's vow. It presupposes that women and men make mistakes and heat of the moment decisions that will impact them and their friends and family negatively, and that both sexes will need to have some of their vows annulled. There is something about hatarat nedarim that makes me think of therapy, since the Chachamim merely guide the vow-taker to a better understanding of what was wrong with the vow in the first place, considering all its ramifications and unintended consequences. Only a system that values self-understanding over outside interventions can take us from the status of children who need rebuke (as the *bnei Israel* often did in the desert) to a more mature and responsible *am kadosh*, a holy people in words and actions.

\* Paris, France. BA in English with a minor in Hebrew (Sorbonne, 2016) in 2016 while completing an undergraduate degree in Humanities at the École Normale Supérieure, a selective French college. Her husband is Rabbi Emile Ackermann.

<https://library.yctarah.org/2024/08/matotmasei5784/>

---

## **Hazak: Thoughts for Matot/Masei**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

Many years ago, my beloved teacher Rabbi Meyer Simcha Feldblum gave me advice based on a rabbinic teaching. That advice continues to be relevant.

The Talmud cites the opinion of Rabbi Nathan, who taught: when the priest ground the incense in the Temple, the one superintending would say: *"grind it very fine, very fine grind it,"* because the voice is good for preparing the spices. The question is: what does a voice have to do with grinding spices? The answer: when the priest is grinding the spices, he may not feel that he is making any progress. It seems like rote work that does not improve the spices. A voice of encouragement reminds the priest: you are making progress, your work is not in vain. Keep grinding, you will see positive results from your labors.

The lesson goes beyond the priest grinding spices. It relates to all of us. We work hard to advance our lives and our ideas and ideals; but it often can feel frustrating. No matter how hard we labor, it often seems that we are not making real progress. We can come to feel that our efforts are futile and unproductive. But then someone comes along and says: hazak uvarukh, you are doing something important, you have impacted positively on us. The voice is good! The words of encouragement re-energize us; we go back to our "grinding" work with a new feeling of purpose. Our work isn't in vain after all.

Words of encouragement have a profound impact. When positive words are accompanied by supportive and loving actions, then we have ingredients for happiness and progress. Critics and fault-finders are readily available. But genuine friends and supporters are the ones who validate and enhance life.

Just as we need to hear voices of encouragement for our own strivings, we also need to be the voices of encouragement to those who are doing good and important work. Just as a nasty comment can undermine someone's feeling of self-worth, so a positive comment can provide the encouragement a person needs to move ahead in a positive way.

This week's Torah reading brings us to the end of the book of Bemidbar. It is customary in many congregations for congregants to call out at the conclusion of the Parasha: Hazak ve-nit-hazak, Be strong, and let us strengthen ourselves. As we've reached this milestone, may we merit to continue onward in our studies and in our lives. This communal custom is a way to demonstrate solidarity with others, to encourage all of us to be strong and determined to move forward.

Unfortunately, our world has no shortage of people — Jews as well as non-Jews — who cast aspersions on the Jewish People, on the Jewish Homeland, on Jewish ideas and ideals. To the nay-sayers, we reply proudly and confidently: hazak ve-nit-hazak, we are strong and we will strengthen each other. We will keep working faithfully and steadily for the values that we cherish. We will not be discouraged. We will be strong...and we will strengthen others.

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3261>

---

## **Journeys and Beyond: Thoughts for Matot/Masei**

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel \*

In John Steinbeck's story, "The Leader of the People," an old man is fixated on his past role leading a wagon train across America in the 19th century. He endlessly repeats stories of his adventures, much to the annoyance of his son-in-law. His daughter is more sympathetic; she understands that the meaning of her father's life was bound to his journey across the



country. His heart must have sunk when he first caught sight of the Pacific Ocean; the goal had been reached. There was nowhere further to go. The highlight of his life was in the past.

A lesson: the journey itself is ultimately more valuable — in certain ways — than achieving the goal. As long as the journey continues, there is excitement, anticipation, hope.

This week's Torah reading concludes the first four books of the Bible. Fittingly, the last parasha is entitled Masei — journeys. In a sense, the entire first four books of the Torah describe a journey, beginning with the history of humanity, the emergence of the People of Israel and its unique relationship with God, and the experiences from slavery to redemption to forty years wandering in the wilderness. With parashat Masei, they are reaching the conclusion of their journey as they ready themselves to enter the Promised Land. The last book of the Torah, Devarim, is essentially Moses's recap of the history and laws as recorded in the first four books.

It is noteworthy that the Torah is centered on the role of the journey; it does not include new chapters about the Israelites actually entering the Promised Land. In our religious tradition, we celebrate the redemption from Egypt on Pessah, the Revelation at Sinai on Shavuoth, and God's providence over Israel in the wilderness on Succoth. We don't have a festival celebrating the day Israel entered the Promised Land.

Tractate *Berakhot* ends with a passage declaring that Torah scholars have no peace, not in this world and not in the next world. They are constantly involved in facing new challenges; they go "*mehayil el hayil*," from one battle to the next, from strength to strength. They thrive because they stay in process, moving from one goal to the next. The message is true for all who wish to live productive forward-looking lives: keep moving, keep engaged. When you reach one goal, immediately set out on your way to a new goal.

The old man in Steinbeck's story hit a psychological block and couldn't get beyond it. He had achieved something great in the past but he didn't go "from strength to strength." The journey of his life was in the past, and now he was simply marking time remembering and retelling stories of the old times.

The Torah teaches us not to fall into that situation. We are to see life as a journey with an unfolding road ahead. When we reach one goal, we should then look ahead to our next goal. Once we stop this process, our lives stagnate and regress into the past.

\* Founder and Director, Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals.

**The Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals has experienced a significant drop in donations during and since the pandemic. The Institute needs our help to maintain and strengthen our Institute. Each gift, large or small, is a vote for an intellectually vibrant, compassionate, inclusive Orthodox Judaism. You may contribute on our website [jewishideas.org](http://jewishideas.org) or you may send your check to Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals, 2 West 70th Street, New York, NY 10023. Ed.: Please join me in helping the Institute for Jewish Ideas and Ideals during its current fund raising period. Thank you.**

<https://www.jewishideas.org/node/3140>

---

## Parshas Matos – A Dollar and a Dream

By Rabbi Mordechai Rhine \* © 2014

The stakes were high. The tribes of Reuvein and Gad believed that the land already conquered was best for them to pasture their enormous herds. Yet, Moshe was concerned that if they took the land already conquered, the rest of the people would be demoralized. They would think that Reuvein and Gad were afraid of conquering the remaining lands. A

deal was made that these tribes would be the vanguard for the additional conquest. Only then did Moshe agree to their request.

The commentaries observe that there are many lessons that can be learned from this story. We learn the laws of conditional transactions from the way Moshe structured the deal with these tribes. Also, we learn about how dear the Land of Israel is, because we are told that when the tribes saw the Land, they regretted their decision to take the land that was outside of Eretz Yisroel proper.

However, sometimes in life it is the secondary lessons which deserve the most attention.

In the course of the dialogue, the tribes declared their intent, *"We will build enclosures for our flock, and cities for our children."* When Moshe replied, he reversed the order. Moshe said, *"Build cities for your children, and enclosures for your flock."* In doing so, Moshe tried to guide them in a sense of priorities. Perhaps the reason these tribes were so excited to get the land that was outside Eretz Yisroel proper was because they had misordered their priorities. Living in Eretz Yisroel proper would have been better for raising their families, for their children. Their choice to settle where they were, might have been because they put their livestock first. Moshe deliberately corrects them in his reply and declares, *"Build cities for your children,"* first, and then, *"enclosures for your flock."*

I once heard of a woman who was training to be a nurse and became pregnant halfway into the coursework. She was ready to have an abortion so that she could continue her career plans, but was advised to first speak with Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. She met with Rabbi Auerbach, who listened intently to her description of her problem and her proposed solution. She simply couldn't let the pregnancy get in the way of her career. Probing to the essence of her situation, Rabbi Auerbach asked her why she felt her career was so important. She replied with confidence that nursing appealed to her because it gave her the opportunity to save lives. Rabbi Auerbach smiled engagingly and waited for the impact of her own answer to dawn on her. He then encouraged her not to do something that so negates the very reason she chose the field of nursing in the first place. I am told that the woman carried the baby to term and completed her certification with her priorities intact.

The sense of children first, and assets second, is a value that we see displayed by Yakov in Parshas Vayishlach. We are told (Bereishis 33:17), *"He made a house [for the family]; and for the cattle he made huts."* Thus Yakov set into motion a sense of priority. Certainly the assets are needed. But one must recognize the family as the priority.

A Rabbinic colleague of mine was once presenting to a very career oriented audience. After the presentation, during the Q and A, one person asked, *"And what does your wife do?"*

The Rabbi replied, *"She runs a home for 7 needy children ages newborn through 14. She is in charge of their schooling, tutoring, as well as their physical and emotional well being. She keeps the home in good shape so that hopefully they will all grow up to be productive members of society."*

The audience was deeply impressed by the altruistic nature of this woman's career. *"Where does she do this?"* they asked.

*"In our home,"* he replied. *"The children she takes care of are our own."*

Seeing the perturbed look on people's faces, he added, *"Please don't hold it against her, that we are still alive, and the children are not orphans."*

In our time, it appears to many that the dual salaries of husband and wife are necessary for a family to function properly. Still, one's attitude and sense of balance can make all the difference in raising a healthy family.

There is a prevalent expression that goes: A dollar and a dream. I think Yakov and Moshe would have said that the expression is out of order. First must come the dream: the impact of family, friends, and core values. Only afterwards can we discuss the dollar.

\* Rabbi Mordechai Rhine is a certified mediator and coach with Rabbinic experience of more than 20 years. Based in Maryland, he provides services internationally via Zoom. He is the Director of TEACH613: Building Torah Communities, One family at a Time, and the founder of CARE Mediation, focused on Marriage/ Shalom Bayis and personal coaching. To reach Rabbi Rhine, his websites are [www.care-mediation.com](http://www.care-mediation.com) and [www.teach613.org](http://www.teach613.org); his email is [RMRhine@gmail.com](mailto:RMRhine@gmail.com). **For information or to join any Torah613 classes, contact Rabbi Rhine.**

Rabbi Rhine is on vacation, so I am reprinting a Dvar Torah from his archives: <https://www.teach613.org/parshas-matos-a-dollar-and-a-dream/>

---

## **Parshas Matos-Masei**

by Rabbi Yehoshua Singer \* ©2020

After forty years of wandering in the desert, the Jewish nation finally prepared to enter the land of Israel. Yet, it appeared that some tribes were once again weakening in their resolve to cross into the land of Canaan. The tribes of Reuven and Gad asked for their tribal portions to be east of the Jordan River and that Moshe not cross them through the Jordan River. Moshe responded by sharply rebuking them for their request and chastising them for starting the process all over again, risking the destruction of another generation.

The Sforno (ibid. 32:6) tells us that Moshe's rebuke ran even deeper. Moshe challenged that their entire request was only a ruse to weaken the hearts of the people. How could they possibly expect that they would be allowed to settle while the rest of the nation went on to continue the battle for the conquest of Canaan? They certainly knew their request would be rejected. Why then did they ask? It could only be to show others that they were afraid to enter Canaan and weaken the nation's resolve. )The tribes of Gad and Reuven were responding directly to this challenge when they responded to Moshe that they would settle their families and then lead the battles for the conquest of Canaan.(

If we could imagine for a moment the scene when the leaders of the tribes of Gad and Reuven stood before Moshe, Elazar Hakohein and the other leaders of the nation. They had spent forty years traveling in the desert waiting for the day when they could finally enter the promised land. They had left Egypt, accepted the Torah and become G-d's nation, but were still waiting to establish their society and to enter the promised land. An entire generation had been born and raised in the barren wasteland, growing up with the knowledge that they were held in limbo unable to fulfill their destiny. We can only but imagine the shock that must have run through them upon hearing the request.

Moshe's response in this context seems verbose. He tells them in detail of the failure of the first attempt to enter the land of Canaan. How the spies travelled through the land and returned with their evil report, weakening the nation's resolve. He recounts how Hashem swore that their generation would perish in the desert and how they wandered in the desert for forty years. Surely these details were ones they all knew only too well. They had lived and were currently living with the repercussions of this story. Why did Moshe need to spell out the details of the story? Would it not have sufficed for Moshe to say to them "We have waited forty years to get to this day! How can you start this again now?"

Rav Yitzchak Blazer writes in his composition *Sha'arei Ohr* that part of the gift of free will is that we do not innately respond emotionally to the obvious. Morally compelling concepts will only move us if we choose to focus on them, to pay attention to the thoughts and actually think about the concepts. As the Mesillas Yesharim says in his introduction, the well known and obvious concepts are the most forgotten and overlooked.

Recognizing the depth of their error, Moshe understood that these tribes were overlooking the obvious. Were he to merely remind them of it in a general sense, they would continue to be unmoved and determined in their position. To awaken them to their error, Moshe had to focus their minds. He had to list the details of the story to lead them to truly consider the past. Only then could they begin to appreciate its moral significance.

Moshe's response guides us in our own paths in life. No matter how fundamental and obvious the concept, we must take the time to reflect if we want it to become and to remain the way we live. If we fail to reflect, we can live in a holding pattern for forty years and still forget what we are waiting for. We must make a daily effort to study and reflect on who we are and who we want to be. For it is only by reviewing and reflecting on Torah and on our goals, that it will become not only how we want to live, but indeed who we truly are.

\* Savannah Kollel; Congregation B'nai Brith Jacob, Savannah, GA. Until recently, Rabbi, Am HaTorah Congregation, Bethesda, MD. Rabbi Singer will become Rosh Kollel next year.

---

### **Matot-Masei** by Rabbi Herzl Hefter \*

[Rabbi Hefter did not send in a Dvar Torah for Matot-Masei. Watch this space for his future Devrei Torah]

\* Founder and dean of the Har'el Beit Midrash in Jerusalem. Rabbi Hefter is a graduate of Yeshiva University and was ordained at Yeshivat Har Etzion. For more of his writings, see [www.har-el.org](http://www.har-el.org). To support the Beit Midrash, as we do, send donations to America Friends of Beit Midrash Har'el, 66 Cherry Lane, Teaneck, NJ 07666.

---

### **Mattot: Forgive Me, For I have Vowed** By Rabbi Haim Ovadia \*

In Parashat Mattot we are introduced to the legal intricacies of making vows. I am using the word "vow" here in its halakhic sense, which is a commitment to perform or avoid a certain action. The rabbis of the Mishnah argued that vows can be undone if it can be proven that the one who took the vow was not fully aware of its implications. For example, R. Akiva's father-in-law vowed to not give his daughter even a penny of his possessions, because she married an ignoramus. Years later, when he regretted his vow, he was asked if he would have still made the vow had he known that his son-in-law will become a learned man. He answered negatively, and the rabbi who happened to be R. Akiva himself declared the vow null and void. However, the rabbis also stated in the Mishnah that there is no logical or biblical basis for the practice of undoing a vow. R. Ovadia of Bertinoro explains that there was an oral tradition which allowed a court to nullify vows, but it is also possible that the process was created by the rabbis to fight the phenomenon of excessive vowing. If one would ask how can the rabbis nullify a vow which according to the Torah is binding for life, we will have to say that once the rabbis introduced the idea of a conditional vow, the possibility of undoing a vow became built into the process.

As I mentioned, Mishnaic rabbis faced a serious problem as people tended to take vows upon themselves and to swear in an uncalled for manner. The situation was so bad that Mishnaic sages mentioned the possibility of filing for divorce because ones spouse makes too many vows. One of those sages, Rabbi Tarphon, swore at five different occasions that a certain Halakha is incorrect, and said that if he is mistaken his sons should die. That reality raises two questions: why did people feel the urge to make vows, and why were the rabbis concerned about it?

The answer to the first question is that making a vow is usually a result of weakness. We bind ourselves with a commitment which cannot be nullified and which has a religious status, so we will not be tempted to break it. When trying to start a diet, for example, one might make a vow which will deprive him of a favorite activity every time he breaks the

diet. In that sense, vows are helpful, because they demonstrate one's awareness of possible pitfalls in the future and express willingness to set protective devices while still in control. This concept is beautifully illustrated in Homer's Odyssey, as Odysseus prepares himself to pass near the dreadful sirens, mythical creatures who would entice sailors with their enchanting singing and then devour them. He tells his crewmen to tie him to the mast and plug their ears, so he alone will be able to hear the song, but will also be rendered unable to control the ship:

*...first of all, we should guard against the wondrous voices of the Sirens in their flowery meadows... I alone should listen to them. But you must tie me down with cruel bonds, so I stay where I am and cannot move, standing upright at the mast. You must fix the rope at both its ends onto the mast. If I start ordering you to set me free you have to tie me down with still more rope.*

It is interesting to note that the same root is used in Hebrew for tying or binding and for making a prohibitive vow – אסר. Odysseus knows that he would not be able to resist the temptation and therefore, while still in possession of his faculties, requests to be tied to the mast. When the dieter says that if he eats a piece of cake he will punish himself by not playing video games for a week, he binds himself into obedience before he is tempted.

So, if vows can help us control ourselves, why did the rabbis fear excessive vowing? Because we should be able to control ourselves without turning every commitment into a religious one, or without including a self-inflicted punishment. The dieter could replace the punishment with thoughts of fitting into more complementing clothes or felling healthier, instead of implicating himself in new sets of regulations. This insight is also applicable to education. To succeed in parenting or teaching, there should be few rules, which can be easily forced, while the major part of the educational process should rely on the parents and teachers serving as role models.

In that vein, I suggest we read in the following manner the conclusion of the most famous nullification of vows, the Kal Nidrei, recited on the eve of Kippur:

*All religious vows, oaths, and prohibitions, which we unnecessarily took upon ourselves, are declared null and void. We will strive to gradually improve our behavior by sheer willpower, without the aid of fear-inducing vows and oaths. May God forgive our iniquities, and help us overcome our weaknesses and embark on a path of a greater self-awareness.*

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Torah VeAhava. Until recently, Rabbi, Beth Sholom Sephardic Minyan )Potomac, MD(. Faculty member, AJRCA non-denominational rabbinical school(. **Many of Rabbi Ovadia's Devrei Torah are now available on Sefaria:** <https://www.sefaria.org/profile/haim-ovadia?tab=sheets> . The Sefaria articles usually include Hebrew text, which I must delete because of issues changing software formats.

**Devrei Torah from Rabbi Ovadia this year come from an unpublished draft of his forthcoming book on Tanach, which Rabbi Ovadia has generously shared with our readers. Rabbi Ovadia reserves all copyright rights to this material.**

---

## **Matot-Masei: Love that Endures**

By Rabbi Moshe Rube \*

In the Hokitika Jewish cemetery lies a man named Henry Levy, who passed away at 36 years old in 1888. Interred with him is his wife Sarah Levy. I know she loved him deeply, because she passed in 1936 at the age of 79. That means she waited 43 years in Hokitika after her husband passed, refusing to leave him, and wished to be buried alongside him no matter how many decades separated the end of their lives.

I wonder what it must have been like for Henry and Sarah to rush to Hokitika in the hope of finding gold and starting a new life together, only for Henry to suddenly die. I can only imagine Sarah's heartbreak and how throughout the next four decades she kept Henry alive in her heart, enough to be buried next to him so many years later.

None of us knew Henry and Sarah, but something about seeing that stone inspired me. It made me think of the Torah portion this week, which talks about the laws of vows. Isn't the type of bond that the Henry and Sara Levy had that we strive for in our relationships? To know another's thoughts and feelings in such a close way?

It's that bond that caused Sarah to yearn for Henry even after 43 years. May both of their souls have an Aliyah.

Shabbat Shalom.

\* Senior Rabbi of Auckland Hebrew Congregation, Remuera )Auckland(, New Zealand. Formerly Rabbi, Congregation Kneseth Israel )Birmingham, AL(.

\*\* The walls of a large residential building in Surfside, FL collapsed on June 24, 2021. KI member Gary Cohen and his brother Brad were among the victims of the building collapse in this building, where most of the residents were Jewish. Rabbi Rube is on vacation this week, so I am reprinting his Dvar Torah from last year. During the Three Weeks, a time of death for so many of our people, we can remember those who died a year ago.

---

## **Rav Kook Torah**

### **Matot-Masei: Atonement for the Soldiers**

God commanded Moses to attack Midian after their devastating scheme against the Israelites. The Midianites had used their daughters to lure the Israelite men into worshipping the licentious idolatry of Peor, resulting in Divine anger and a terrible plague.

The war against Midian was a remarkable success: not a single soldier fell. After the battle, the generals and captains approached Moses:

*"We wish to bring an offering to God. Every man who found a gold article — an anklet, bracelet, ring, earring, body ornament — to atone for our souls before God."* )Num. 31:50(

The officers had followed God's command, waging war against Midian. Why did they feel a need for atonement?

#### **The Sin of the Soldiers**

The Sages explained that the soldiers committed no actual sins; but they were not free of improper thoughts. Rabbi Ishmael expressed this idea with a curious phrase, saying that *"their eyes feasted on the immodest sights"* )Shabbat 64a-b(.

When the soul's innate sense of purity is strong and healthy, it will not absorb degrading, inappropriate sights. Such visual stimuli are inconsistent with the soul's overall makeup and will be promptly rejected.

If, on the other hand, the soul has failed to retain its pristine purity, it will lack an orderly defense against defiling images. Improper sights will have a negative impact on a person's emotional and imaginative faculties. They generate confusion and turmoil within the soul.

Rabbi Ishmael described this phenomenon as a 'feast' of the eyes. When we feast and derive benefit from something, that

points to a natural connection between us and that object. The soldiers were not immune to the sights of Midian. The images of the Midianite women and their ostentatious ornaments found a place in their souls, and *"their eyes feasted on the immodest sights."*

True, the soldiers did not act upon these stimuli. But the very fact that they found them alluring was a sign that the soldiers needed atonement and spiritual cleansing. As the officers announced, they wished to *"atone for our souls before God."*

### Superficial Attraction

The gold ornaments were an apt metaphor for the corrupting deception that confronted the soldiers in Midian. The Sages wrote that the ornaments were fashioned into lewd shapes. The golden pieces of jewelry lured the eye with their dazzling exterior of glittering beauty. Their influence was a function of the magnetism of their superficial attraction. On the inside, however, their true essence was, as before, crude and repulsive.

)Adapted from *Ein Eyah* vol. IV, pp. 114-116.(

<https://www.ravkooktorah.org/MATOT62.htm>

---

### Matot-Masei: My Teacher: In Memoriam (5780)

By Lord Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l, Former Chief Rabbi of the U.K.\*

Jed. note: Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, z"l, wrote lovingly about his Rebbe and close friend, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, z"l, who passed away May 6, 2020. At this time, Rabbi Sacks was fighting pancreatic cancer and presumably did not know that he would die only six months later, November 7, 2020.[

There are moments when Divine Providence touches you on the shoulder and makes you see a certain truth with blazing clarity. Let me share with you such a moment that happened to me this morning.

For technical reasons, I have to write my essays for the Covenant & Conversation series many weeks in advance. I had come to Matot-Masei, and had decided to write about the cities of refuge, but I wasn't sure which aspect to focus on. Suddenly, overwhelmingly, I felt an instinct to write about one very unusual law.

The cities were set aside for the protection of those found guilty of manslaughter, that is, of killing someone accidentally without malice aforethought. Because of the then universal practice of blood vengeance, that protection was necessary.

The purpose of the cities was to make sure that someone judged innocent of murder was safe from being killed. As Shoftim puts it: *"And he shall flee to one of these cities and live"* )Deut. 19:5(. This apparently simple concept was given a remarkable interpretation by the Talmud:

*The Sages taught: If a student was exiled, his teacher was exiled with him, as it is said: "And he shall flee to one of these cities( and live," meaning do the things for him that will enable him to live.)*<sup>1</sup>[

As Rambam explains: *"Life without study is like death for scholars who seek wisdom."*<sup>2</sup>[ In Judaism, study is life itself, and study without a teacher is impossible. Teachers give us more than knowledge; they give us life. Note that this is not an aggadic passage, a moralising text not meant to be taken literally. **It is a halachic ruling, codified as such. Teachers are like parents only more so. Parents give us physical life; teachers give us spiritual life.**<sup>3</sup>[ **Physical life is mortal, transient. Spiritual life is eternal. Therefore, we owe our teacher our life in its deepest sense.** ]emphasis added[

I had just written the text above when the phone went. It was my brother in Jerusalem to tell me that my teacher, Rabbi Nachum Eliezer Rabinovitch, zecher tzaddik livracha, had just died. Only rarely in this *"world of concealment"*<sup>4</sup> do we feel the touch of Providence, but this was unmistakable. For me, and I suspect everyone who had the privilege of studying with him, he was the greatest teacher of our generation.

He was a master posek, as those who have read his Responsa will know. He knew the entire rabbinic literature, Bavli, Yerushalmi, Midrash Halachah and Aggadah, biblical commentaries, philosophy, codes and responsa. His creativity, halachic and aggadic, knew no bounds. He was a master of almost every secular discipline, especially the sciences. He had been a Professor of Mathematics at the University of Toronto and had written a book about probability and statistical inference. His supreme passion was the Rambam in all his guises, particularly the Mishneh Torah, to which he devoted some fifty years of his life to writing the multi-volume commentary *Yad Peshutah*.

By the time I came to study with the Rav, I had already studied at Cambridge and Oxford with some of the greatest intellects of the time, among them Sir Roger Scruton and Sir Bernard Williams. Rabbi Rabinovitch was more demanding than either of them. Only when I became his student did I learn the true meaning of intellectual rigour, *shetihyu amelim ba-Torah*, *"labouring"* in the Torah. To survive his scrutiny, you had to do three things: first to read everything ever written on the subject; second to analyse it with complete lucidity, searching for *omek ha-peshat*, the deep plain sense; and third, to think independently and critically. I remember writing an essay for him in which I quoted one of the most famous of nineteenth century Talmudic scholars. He read what I had written, then turned to me and said, *"But you didn't criticise what he wrote!"* He thought that in this case the scholar had not given the correct interpretation, and I should have seen and said this. For him, intellectual honesty and independence of mind were inseparable from the quest for truth which is what Talmud Torah must always be.

Some of the most important lessons I learned from him were almost accidental. I remember on one occasion, his car was being serviced, so I had the privilege of driving him home. It was a hot day, and at a busy junction in Hampstead, my car broke down and would not start up again. Unfazed, Rabbi Rabinovitch said to me, *"Let's use the time to learn Torah."* He then proceeded to give me a shiur on Rambam's Hilchot Shemittah ve-Yovel. Around us, cars were hooting their horns. We were holding up traffic and a considerable queue had developed. The Rav remained completely calm, came to the end of his exposition, turned to me and said, *"Now turn the key."* I turned the key, the car started, and we went on our way.

On another occasion, I told him about my problem getting to sleep. I had become an insomniac. He said to me, enthusiastically, *"Could you teach me how to do that?"* He quoted the Rambam who ruled that one acquires most of one's wisdom at night, based on the Talmudic statement that the night was created for study.<sup>5</sup>

He and the late Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l were the Gedolei ha-Dor, the leaders and role models of their generation. They were very different, one scientific, the other artistic, one direct, the other oblique, one bold, the other cautious, but they were giants, intellectually, morally and spiritually. Happy the generation that is blessed by people like these.

It is hard to convey what having a teacher like Rabbi Rabinovitch meant. He knew, for example, that I had to learn fast because I was coming to the rabbinate late, after a career in academic philosophy. What he did was very bold. He explained to me that the fastest and best way of learning anything is to teach it. So the day I entered Jews' College as a student, I also entered it as a lecturer. How many people would have had that idea and taken that risk?

He also understood how lonely it could be if you lived by the principles of intellectual integrity and independence. Early on, he said to me, *"Don't be surprised if only six people in the world understand what you are trying to do."* When I asked him whether I should accept the position of Chief Rabbi, he said, in his laconic way: *"Why not? After all, maybe you can teach some Torah."*

He himself, in his early thirties, had been offered the job of Chief Rabbi of Johannesburg, but turned it down on the grounds that he refused to live in an apartheid state. He told me how he was visited in Toronto by Rabbi Louis Rabinowitz who had held the Johannesburg position until then. Looking at the Rav's modest home and thinking of his more palatial



accommodation in South Africa, he said, “*You turned down that for this?*” But the Rav would never compromise his integrity and never cared for material things.

In the end, he found great happiness in the 37 years he served as head of Yeshivat Birkat Moshe in Maale Adumim. The yeshiva had been founded six years earlier by Rabbi Haim Sabato and Yitzhak Sheilat. It is said that when Rabbi Sabato heard the Rav give a shiur, he immediately asked him to become the Rosh Yeshiva. It is hard to describe the pride with which he spoke to me about his students, all of whom served in the Israel Defence Force. Likewise it is hard to describe the awe in which his students held him. Not everyone in the Jewish world knew his greatness, but everyone who studied with him did.

I believe that Judaism made an extraordinarily wise decision when it made teachers its heroes and lifelong education its passion. We don’t worship power or wealth. These things have their place, but not at the top of the hierarchy of values. Power forces us. Wealth induces us. But teachers develop us. They open us to the wisdom of the ages, helping us to see the world more clearly, think more deeply, argue more cogently and decide more wisely.

“*Let the reverence for your teacher be like the reverence for Heaven,*” said the Sages.]6[ In other words: if you want to come close to Heaven, don’t search for kings, priests, saints or even prophets. They may be great, but a fine teacher helps you to become great, and that is a different thing altogether. I was blessed by having one of the greatest teachers of our generation. The best advice I can give anyone is: find a teacher, then make yourself a disciple.

#### **FOOTNOTES:**

]1[ Makkot 10a.

]2[ *Mishneh Torah*, Hilchot Rotze’ach, 7:1.

]3[ *Mishneh Torah*, Talmud Torah 5:1.

]4[ The phrase comes from the Zohar.

]5[ Rambam, *Hilchot Talmud Torah* 3:13; based on )a slightly different text of( Eruvin 65a.

]6[ Avot 4:12.

#### **AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE:**

]1[ Why does the law force a person's teacher to relocate to a city of refuge whenever their student moves there?

]2[ What do you think were the most important lessons Rabbi Sacks learned from Rabbi Rabinovitch?

]3[ Why does Judaism “make teachers its heroes and lifelong education its passion”?

\* Note: because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

<https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/matot/my-teacher-in-memorial/>

Because Likutei Torah and the Internet Parsha Sheet, both attached by E-mail or saved in my archives at PotomacTorah.org, normally include the two most recent Devrei Torah by Rabbi Sacks, I have selected an earlier Dvar.

## Life Lessons From the Parshah -- Matot-Masei -- Getting Our Priorities Straight

By Rabbi Yehoshua B. Gordon, z"l \* © Chabad 2024

### A Controversial Request

Matot and Masei — the final two portions in the Book of Numbers — are usually combined and read together. Matot contains the narrative of an extraordinary request by two of the Twelve Tribes — Reuben and Dan — to settle in the land east of the Jordan River, outside of the Holy Land. Rich in livestock, they approached Moses and presented their case:

*The land that the L-rd struck down before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock. If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not take us across the Jordan.<sup>1</sup>*

Their logic seemed sound. They had considerably more livestock than the other tribes, and the Jewish people had just conquered the mountainous and fertile land of the Emorites — perfect for cattle-raising. Why cross the Jordan into Israel proper when this land suited their needs so well?

Moses, for his part, was none too pleased. This request indicated that the tribes of Reuben and Gad were not interested in entering the Holy Land, and it was uncomfortably reminiscent of the sin of the Spies — the tragic episode that led to the Jewish people wandering the desert for 40 years as a punishment.

Additionally, Moses was troubled by the notion that two tribes might comfortably tend to their livestock while the other ten tribes waged battle to conquer the land of Canaan:

*Shall your brethren go to war while you stay here? Why do you discourage the children of Israel from crossing over to the land which the L-rd has given them?<sup>2</sup>*

The tribes of Reuben and Gad allayed Moses' concerns, however, assuring him that they would not sit by while their brothers waged war with the Canaanites; nor would they discourage anyone from conquering and settling the land. Instead, they would build fortified cities for their wives and children, ensuring their safety, and then they would join the battle in the Holy Land, remaining until the conquest was complete.

Moses was relieved:

*If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves for battle before the L-rd ... you shall be freed of your obligation from the L-rd and from Israel, and this land will become your heritage before the L-rd.<sup>3</sup>*

Moses then made it official, granting the former land of the Emorites to the tribes of Reuben and Gad and, curiously, to half of the tribe of Manasseh as well.

### Mistaken Priorities

During the dialogue with Moses, the representatives of the tribes of Reuben and Gad make a slight but significant error. Moses immediately noticed it and pointed it out to them, teaching them — and all of us — a tremendous life lesson.

The men said to Moses:

*We will build sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children, and we will then arm ourselves quickly [and go] before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place.<sup>4</sup>*

Rashi, quoting the Midrash,<sup>5</sup> explains that Moses heard mistaken priorities in their words. *"We will build sheepfolds for our*

*livestock,” and only then “cities for our children.” Since they mentioned sheepfolds before cities, it appeared that their wealth was more important to them than their families. They were more concerned about their possessions — their cattle and sheep — than their sons and daughters!*

Reading into Moses' response, in which the cities are mentioned first, we see how he is teaching them, *“It sounds like it's all about the money. We will go with your idea, but get your priorities straight. Build homes and cities for your children. When you are sure your families are well taken care of, then — and only then — build sheepfolds for your livestock.”*

This lesson is timeless. To put it into a contemporary context, we live in a time when sending our children to Jewish schools can be quite challenging because of the expense. And yet, we need to prioritize that. Do not care for your sheep first and put your children's wellbeing second. We need to say, *“I'm going to send my child to a Jewish school; I'm going to find a way to pay the tuition. I may need to negotiate, I may need to cut down on my vacations, I may need to cut down on my luxuries — but we have to put our children before our sheepfolds.”*

Many years ago, the community in a particular shtetl in Eastern Europe was looking to hire a new shochet (ritual slaughterer). One day, a fellow showed up and applied for the job. He did well in the interview process, but before hiring him, they asked him for references in order to ascertain that he was a G d-fearing person.

Emails were not yet a thing, and they said to the shochet, *“We mailed letters to your references, and we expect to hear back from them in a few months. In the interim, the melamed (teacher) in our school just recently left town to tend to some personal matters, and we need a substitute teacher. Would you agree to fill in for him for a few weeks and teach our children?”*

*“Actually,”* said the shochet, utterly disappointed, *“I withdraw my application. I am no longer interested in being the shochet in this town.”*

Shocked, the town elders waited for his explanation.

*“Do you understand the implication of your offer to me?”* he continued. *“You want to wait to hear from my references whether you should trust me with your animals, but for your children I'm good enough?! This is not the type of community I want to live in.”*

Priorities. We must put our children first.

### **Farmers vs. Shepherds**

The Rebbe spoke at length about the similarity between the Spies and the members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad.<sup>6</sup>

Spiritually, the Spies meant well. *“If we enter the land, we will be busy with agriculture and we will have no time for Torah study; if we remain in the desert, we will continue to be free to study Torah all day and night!”* They believed that a life of farming — waking up early to milk cows and work the land — was not worth giving up their desert life of spiritual bliss, with all their needs miraculously taken care of by G d.

The members of the tribe of Reuben and Gad ostensibly held a similar view: *“Why should we enter the land where we will need to fight wars, settle the land, and then get busy being farmers from dawn to dusk? We are very spiritual people. It would be best if we could remain shepherds and sit, study, and meditate upon spiritual matters all day.”* And they had good role models for their chosen profession — the Patriarchs, Jacob's 12 sons — progenitors of the Twelve Tribes, and Moses were all shepherds.

Why did they not make a good case? The Rebbe explains that this does not align with G d's plan for creation. G d does not want us to be hermits, hiding in caves and avoiding materialism. G d's world is about engaging with materialism! G d's plan for us includes becoming part of the world, marrying, having children, having credit cards, having mortgages, and yet

serving G d — planting, tilling, and harvesting, all the while transforming the material world. It's all about becoming one with physicality and elevating materialism into the service of G d.

What was the difference between the Spies, whose ideas were rejected outright, and Reuben and Gad, whose request was ultimately granted?

The difference lies in the fact that Reuben and Gad didn't say, *"This is the only way."* They said, *"This is a way for certain people. This works for us. The Jewish people need Torah scholars, but not everybody will be a Torah scholar. We want to be that select group of people, but there will still be ten other tribes. We support the plan of Israel and the Holy Land and connecting to the material world. But we would like to be the scholars."*

### **A Perpetually Positive Influence**

Ultimately, Moses not only agreed to grant the tribes of Reuben and Gad their request, but also added half of the tribe of Manasseh, giving them a portion of the land east of the Jordan River.

While Moses appreciated the logic behind the desire to settle in the newly conquered Emorite lands, he also detected a lack of appreciation for the sanctity of the Land of Israel. And so he decided to include half of a tribe that had clearly demonstrated a passionate love and appreciation for the land of Israel: Manasseh.

Why Manasseh? The five daughters of a man named Zelophehad, of the tribe of Manasseh, approached Moses with a deep concern regarding their connection to the Holy Land. Zelophehad died in the desert and his daughters were worried that they would not receive a share in the Land of Israel. They therefore turned to Moses and requested that they be granted the land that would have otherwise been given to their father. Stumped, Moses turned to G d, who agreed! Henceforth, daughters were to inherit when there were no sons.

Since this tribe demonstrated such a passionate love for the Land of Israel, Moses opted to strategically place them next to Reuben and Gad, to perpetually be a positive influence and to serve as a constant reminder of the love that every Jew must have for the Land of Israel.

### **FOOTNOTES:**

1. Numbers 32:4-5.
2. Numbers 32:6-7.
3. Numbers 32:20,22.
4. Numbers 32:16-17.
5. *Tanchuma* Matot 7.
6. *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 8 pg 186 )Matot II(

\* Rabbi Yehoshua Gordon directed Chabad of the Valley in Tarzana, CA until his passing in 2016. Adapted by Rabbi Mottel Friedman from classes and sermons that Rabbi Gordon presented in Encino, CA and broadcast on Chabad.org. "Life Lessons from the Parshah" is a project of the Rabbi Joshua B. Gordon Living Legacy Fund, benefiting the 32 centers of Chabad of the Valley, published by Chabad of the Valley and Chabad.org.

[https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article\\_cdo/aid/6523506/jewish/Getting-Our-Priorities-Straight.htm](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/6523506/jewish/Getting-Our-Priorities-Straight.htm)

## **Matot-Masei: Why Joshua?** by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky \*

### **The Test of Dedication**

*These are the names of the men who will inherit the land on your behalf [under the leadership of] Eleazar the priest and Joshua son of Nun. )Num. 34:17(*

Moses wanted his sons to inherit his position of leadership, but G-d informed him that the leadership would pass to Joshua. The Torah tells us why: *"Moses' attendant, the young man, Joshua son of Nun, never left Moses' tent."*

It was Joshua's unwavering attention to all that Moses could teach him, both by example and by instruction, that made him worthy of being Moses' successor.

We can learn from Joshua's example. Spiritual growth requires constant effort and dedication. Just as academicians and musicians marshal every ounce of self-discipline and perseverance in order to attain and maintain their accomplishments, so do we all need to muster the dedication and self-discipline required to progress in our spiritual growth.

Constant and consistent study of the Torah coupled with devoted adherence to its commandments make us, like Joshua, students of Moses. As such, we constantly enhance both our own Divine consciousness and that of the world we live in, thereby hastening the ultimate Redemption.

— from *Daily Wisdom 3* \*

**May G-d grant resounding victory and peace in the Holy Land.**

Gut Shabbos,

Rabbi Yosef B. Friedman  
Kehot Publication Society

\* A Chasidic insight by the Rebbe on parshat Ma'sei, selected from our *Daily Wisdom*, by Rabbi Moshe Wisniefsky.

**Chapters of psalms to recite for Israel to prevail over Hamas and for the release of remaining hostages. Recite these psalms daily – to download:**

<https://mail.yahoo.com/d/folders/1/messages/AKMWqg80kU-LZSgctgRwuPHhxuo>

**Booklet form download:**

<https://mail.yahoo.com/d/folders/1/messages/AKMWqg80kU-LZSgctgRwuPHhxuo>

---

To receive the complete D'Vrai Torah package weekly by E-mail, send your request to [AfisherADS@Yahoo.com](mailto:AfisherADS@Yahoo.com). The printed copies contain only a small portion of the D'Vrai Torah. Dedication opportunities available. Authors retain all copyright privileges for their sections.

---

# Likutei Divrei Torah

Gleanings of Divrei Torah on Parashat Hashavuah  
via the Internet

Sponsored by Lily & Saadia Greenberg  
on the occasion of the yahrzeit of Lily's father,  
Salomon Nadel, a"h  
(Shlomo Zalman ben Pinchas HaKohen)

Volume 30, Issue 42

Shabbat Parashat Matot-Masei

5784 B"H

## Covenant and Conversation

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, z"l

### The Complexity of Human Rights

The book of Bamidbar comes to a close that is very strange indeed. Earlier in the parsha of Pinchas we read of how the five daughters of Tzelophehad came to Moses with a claim based on justice and human rights.[1] Their father had died without sons. Inheritance – in this case, of a share in the land – passes through the male line, but here there was no male line. Surely their father was entitled to his share, and they were his only heirs. By rights that share should come to them:

“Why should our father's name be disadvantaged in his family merely because he did not have a son? Give us a portion of land along with our father's brothers.” Num. 27:4

Moses had received no instruction about such an eventuality, so he asked God directly. God found in favour of the women.

“The daughters of Tzelophehad are right. You shall give them possession of an inheritance among their father's brothers and transfer the inheritance of their father to them.”

He gave Moses further instructions about the disposition of inheritance, and the narrative then passes on to other matters.

Only now, right at the end of the book, does the Torah report on an event that arose directly from that case. Leaders of Tzelophehad's tribe, Menasheh, son of Joseph, came and made the following complaint. If the land were to pass to Tzelophehad's daughters and they married men from another tribe, the land would eventually pass to their husbands, and thus to their husband's tribes. Thus land that had initially been granted to the tribe of Menasheh might be lost to it in perpetuity.

Again, Moses took the case to God, who offered a simple solution. The daughters of Tzelophehad were entitled to the land, but so too was the tribe. Therefore, if they wish to take possession of the land, they must marry men from within their own tribe. That way both claims could be honoured. The daughters did not lose their right to the land but they did lose some freedom in choosing a marriage

partner.

The two passages are intimately related. They use the same terminology. Both Tzelophehad's daughters and the leaders of the clan “draw near”. They use the same verb to describe their potential loss: yigara, “disadvantaged, diminished”. God replies in both cases with the same locution, “kein ... dovrot/dovrim,” rightly do they speak.[2] Why then are the two episodes separated in the text? Why does the book of Numbers end on this seemingly anticlimactic note? And does it have any relevance today?

Bamidbar is a book about individuals. It begins with a census, whose purpose is less to tell us the actual number of Israelites than to “lift” their “heads”, the unusual locution the Torah uses to convey the idea that when God orders a census it is to tell the people that they each count. The book also focuses on the psychology of individuals. We read of Moses' despair, of Aaron and Miriam's criticism of him, of the spies who lacked the courage to come back with a positive report, and of the malcontents, led by Korach, who challenged Moses' leadership. We read of Joshua and Caleb, Eldad and Medad, Dathan and Aviram, Zimri and Pinchas, Balak and Bilam and others. This emphasis on individuals reaches a climax in Moses' prayer to “God of the spirits of all flesh” to appoint a successor (Bamidbar 27:16) – understood by the Sages and Rashi to mean, appoint a leader who will deal with each individual as an individual, who will relate to people in their uniqueness and singularity.

That is the context of the claim of Tzelophehad's daughters. They were claiming their rights as individuals. Justly so. As many of the commentators pointed out, the behaviour of the women throughout the wilderness years was exemplary while that of the men was the opposite. The men, not the women, gave gold for the Golden Calf. The spies were men: a famous comment by the Kli Yakar (R. Shlomo Ephraim Luntschitz, 1550 – 1619) suggests that had Moses sent women instead, they would have come back with a positive report.[3] Recognising the justice of their cause, God affirmed their rights as individuals.

But society is not built on individuals alone. As the book of Judges points out, individualism is another name for chaos: “In those days there was no king in Israel,

everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” Hence the insistence, throughout Bamidbar, on the central role of the tribes as the organising principle of Jewish life. The Israelites were numbered tribe by tribe. The Torah sets out their precise encampment around the Mishkan and the order in which they were to journey. In Naso, at inordinate length, the Torah repeats the gifts of each tribe at the inauguration of the Mishkan, despite the fact that they each gave exactly the same. The tribes were not accidental to the structure of Israel as a society. Like the United States of America, whose basic political structure is that of a federation of (originally thirteen, now fifty) states, so Israel was (until the appointment of a king) a federation of tribes.

The existence of something like tribes is fundamental to a free society.[4] The modern state of Israel is built on a vast panoply of ethnicities – Ashkenazi, Sephardi, Jews from Eastern, Central and Western Europe, Spain and Portugal, Arab lands, Russia and Ethiopia, America, South Africa, Australia and other places, some Hassidic, some Yeshiva-ish, others “Modern”, others “Traditional”, yet others secular and cultural.

We each have a series of identities, based partly on family background, partly on occupation, partly on locality and community. These “mediating structures”, larger than the individual but smaller than the state, are where we develop our complex, vivid, face-to-face interactions and identities. They are the domain of family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, and they make up what is collectively known as civil society. A strong civil society is essential to freedom.[5]

That is why, alongside individual rights, a society must make space for group identities. The classic instance of the opposite came in the wake of the French revolution. In the course of the debate in the French Revolutionary Assembly in 1789, the Count of Clermont-Tonnerre made his famous declaration, “To the Jews as individuals, everything. To the Jews as a nation, nothing.” If they insisted on defining themselves as a

**What Does Judaism Say About ... Podcast**  
with Rabbi Dr. Nachum Amsel. The week's topic is **Science & Judaism: Conflict or Harmony?**

Next week: Self Defense — Search for “Nachum Amsel” on your podcast app or go to:  
Apple: [tinyurl.com/applejudaismsays](http://tinyurl.com/applejudaismsays)  
Spotify: [tinyurl.com/spotifyjudaismsays](http://tinyurl.com/spotifyjudaismsays)

To sponsor an issue of Likutei Divrei Torah:  
Call Saadia Greenberg 301-649-7350  
or email: [sgreenberg@jhu.edu](mailto:sgreenberg@jhu.edu)  
<http://torah.saadia.info>

nation, that is, as a distinct subgroup within the republic, said the Count, "we shall be compelled to expel them."

Initially, this sounded reasonable. Jews were being offered civil rights in the new secular nation state. However, it was anything but. It meant that Jews would have to give up their identity as Jews in the public domain. Nothing – not religious or ethnic identity – should stand between the individual and the state. It was no accident that a century later, France became one of the epicentres of European antisemitism, beginning with Édouard Drumont's vicious *La France Juive*, 1886, and culminating in the Dreyfus trial. Hearing the Parisian crowd shout "Mort aux Juifs", Theodor Herzl realised that Jews had still not been accepted as citizens of Europe, despite all the protestations to the contrary. Jews found themselves regarded as a tribe in a Europe that claimed to have abolished tribes. European emancipation recognised individual rights but not collective ones.

The primatologist Frans de Waal, whose work among the chimpanzees we mentioned in this year's Covenant & Conversation on Korach, makes the point powerfully. Almost the whole of modern Western culture, he says, was built on the idea of autonomous, choosing individuals. But that is not who we are. We are people with strong attachments to family, friends, neighbours, allies, co-religionists and people of the same ethnicity. He continues:

A morality exclusively concerned with individual rights tends to ignore the ties, needs and interdependencies that have marked our existence from the very beginning. It is a cold morality that puts space between people, assigning each person to his or her own little corner of the universe. How this caricature of a society arose in the minds of eminent thinkers is a mystery.[6]

That is precisely the point the Torah is making when it divides the story of the daughters of Tzelophehad into two. The first part, in parshat Pinchas, is about individual rights, the rights of Tzelophehad's daughters to a share in the land. The second, at the end of the book, is about group rights, in this case the right of the tribe of Menasheh to its territory. The Torah affirms both, because both are necessary to a free society.

Many of the most seemingly intractable issues in contemporary Jewish life have appeared because Jews, especially in the West, are used to a culture in which individual rights are held to override all others. We should be free to live as we choose, worship as we choose, and identify as we choose. But a culture based solely on individual rights will undermine

families, communities, traditions, loyalties, and shared codes of reverence and restraint.

Despite its enormous emphasis on the value of the individual, Judaism also insists on the value of those institutions that preserve and protect our identities as members of groups that make them up. We have rights as individuals but identities only as members of tribes. Honouring both is delicate, difficult and necessary. Bamidbar ends by showing us how. [1] The word "rights" is, of course, an anachronism here. The concept was not born until the seventeenth century. Nonetheless it is not absurd to suggest that this is what is implied in the daughters' claim, "Why should our father's name be disadvantaged?"

[2] These two passages may well be the source of the story of the rabbi who hears both sides of a marital dispute, and says to both husband and wife, "You are right." The rabbi's disciple asks, "How can they both be right?" to which the rabbi replies, "You too are right."

[3] Kli Yakar to Num. 13:2.

[4] See most recently Sebastian Junger: *Tribe: On homecoming and belonging*, Fourth Estate, 2016.

[5] This is the argument made most powerfully by Edmond Burke and Alexis de Tocqueville.

[6] Frans de Waal, *Good Natured*, Harvard University Press, 1996, p. 167.

---

### **Shabbat Shalom: Rabbi Shlomo Riskin**

---

#### **The Unique Prophecy of Moses**

"This is the thing [or word] which God has commanded." (Numbers 30:2) How was Moses different from the many other prophets recorded in the biblical tradition? Was there a distinction only in degree, or was there a much more fundamental difference, a difference in "kind" between Moses and those who came after him?

The opening verse in the portion of Matot may well provide us with an insight concerning this issue. We read, "And Moses spoke unto the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel saying: 'This is the thing [or "word," zeh hadavar] which God has commanded: when a man vows a vow unto God...'." (Numbers 30:2–3).

In his commentary, Rashi cites a midrash (Sifrei) which makes the following distinction between Moses and the other prophets: whereas the other prophets consistently introduced their prophecy with the word, "Thus said God," (koh amar Hashem), the expression "zeh hadavar asher tziva Hashem" (this is the thing which God has commanded) is unique only to Moses (although koh also appears in Mosaic prophecies), and so zeh represents Moses' additional and superior prophetic status.

Rashi is apparently lifting Moses above the other prophets; he does not seem, however, to flesh out the substance of this superiority. One of the most important supercommentaries – or commentaries on the primary commentary

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

Rashi – Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi, the Re'em (1448–1526, chief rabbi of Constantinople), suggests that the phrase "koh amar Hashem" (thus said God) expresses the intention or the essence of the vision, although not necessarily the vision itself; after all, the other prophets only see "through a glass darkly" (aspaklarya she'eina me'ira). Moses' prophecy, however, is through "a glass brightly" (aspaklarya me'ira), and therefore he had the power to express precisely what was given to his eye or communicated to his mind, word for word: "zeh," this is (precisely) the thing, or word.

In Emek HaNetziv, the classic commentary on the Sifrei written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the author questions any interpretation which could possibly suggest that the vision of the other prophets could be anything less than an exact transmission. Moreover, the Netziv proves that the use of the word koh elsewhere in the Torah is taken by the Talmudic sages to indicate something absolute and exact: for example, when the priests are commanded to bless the Israelites, we read the following words, "And God spoke unto Moses telling him to speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: 'This [koh] is how you must bless the children of Israel'" (Numbers 6:23). And our sages insist that the blessing is to be recited exactly as presented in the text, twenty-two words, no more and no less, in other words, "This is how you must bless...."

The Netziv therefore explains that what makes the prophecy of Moses unique, and what is the true significance of "this" rather than "thus," is the fact that Moses communicated the divine word immediately upon his having received it, whereas the other prophets could only process their message after a delay of a period of time; after all, the prophetic state had a paralyzing and debilitating affect on the other prophets, weakening their physical condition, while Moses received the Godly message naturally, without the requirement of time-in-between for recuperation. It was that in-between time which caused the delivery of the message by the other prophets to be less exact.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, the late erudite rabbi of London, called my attention to another commentary of Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (CHidushei HaGryz) which can truly illuminate our distinction between koh and zeh. When the young shepherd Moses is confronted by a burning bush which is not consumed, the Almighty attempts to convince him to accept the responsibility of Jewish leadership. Moses is hard to convince: "Who am I that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Exodus 3:11). But God counters Moses' resistance: "Certainly I will be with you" (Exodus 3:12).

The Gryz points out that the real significance of this dialogue is more profound than Moses merely seeking assurance and God guaranteeing “back-up.” Moses is questioning the efficacy of human involvement altogether in what he thinks ought to be a divine mission. After all, did not the Almighty promise the patriarchs that He, God Himself, would act as the redeemer (Midrash Rabba 15)? The interpretation must be that the divine response “I will be with you” is God’s explanation that indeed He will act as the redeemer, but that God acts through human instruments. God requires, as it were, human beings to be His full partners; the ground rules with which the world is governed require divine objectives to be realized through human agency. Hence, God must insist that He and Moses go to Pharaoh and redeem Israel together; God is choosing Moses to redeem the Israelites alongside of Him!

I would suggest that herein lies the truest distinction between Moses and the other prophets, as well as the significance of the differences in phraseology in the Hebrew text. The other prophets succeeded in receiving and transmitting a divine will; Moses succeeded in living a life and doing deeds which were the human extension of the divine plan, “this is the thing which God commands.” Davar is more than a “word”; it is a thing, an objective and substantive reality. The other prophets conveyed words in accordance with the divine message; Moses, however, changed reality in accordance with the divine plan, in accordance with his actions. The other prophets spoke words which were a transmission of the divine; Moses lived a life which was an extension of the divine. And the Hebrew word zeh can also refer to a human being (ha’ish hazeh, this man), and not only to a word, koh tomar (thus shall you say).

Perhaps this is why the Sifrei chooses to point out this distinction between Moses and the other prophets in the context of the opening verse of our biblical portion Matot, in the context of the laws of oaths and promises. Human beings have the power to alter reality by the oaths and words which they utter, as well as to effectuate forgiveness and absolution by words which they express (Numbers 30:3). The realm of oaths and promises unmistakably points out the almost God-like powers of human beings, the ability of humans to serve in an almost divine capacity as God’s helpers, as God’s partners. It is indeed the most exalted goal of every person to become a vehicle for the expression of the divine will. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch so interprets the biblical words zeh Eli ve’anvehu sung by the Israelites after the splitting of the Red Sea: “This is my God, and I shall be His sanctuary” (Exodus 15:2). Most translators render the verse, “This is my God and I shall

glorify Him” from the Hebrew na’eh, to beautify, but Rabbi Hirsch derives the meaning from naveh, which means “home” or “sanctuary.” The human being, his very body acting upon the messenger of his brain, his heart, and his soul – must become the vehicle, the expression, for God’s will in its every word and action.

Moses’ physical being, Moses’ every act and word, was indeed a sanctuary, an extension of the divine. Moses is therefore the greatest of all prophets and the highest human achievement in world history.

---

### **The Person in the Parsha** **Rabbi Dr. Tzvi Hersh Weinreb**

---

#### **Breaking Promises**

It was a typical park bench conversation. I hadn’t seen my friend for quite some time, and we both were delighted when we ran into each other by chance that afternoon.

We shook hands, and withdrew to a bench in the shade to spend a few minutes together catching up with each other. As is often the case in such conversations, we found ourselves discussing mutual acquaintances with whom one or the other of us had lost touch. Pretty soon we were discussing Sam.

Sam was a person who had many fine qualities, indeed some outstanding ones. But the one that made the biggest impression upon my park bench partner and me was Sam’s impeccable honesty.

“Once Sam says something,” my pal remarked, “he never backs out or changes his mind. You can count on him to keep his word.”

Something deep inside of me, perhaps the ornery part of me, then spoke up. “Is it always a virtue to keep your word and never change your mind? Isn’t that a sign of a certain rigidity, which is not always beneficial, and may even sometimes be morally wrong?”

My friend objected. “Surely,” he said, “you don’t mean to condone lying.”

At this point, I realized that our idle conversation was taking a deeper turn. We were beginning to wax philosophical and would soon have to resort to a higher level of discourse than we had bargained for when we initially sat down together.

But before changing the topic of conversation, I was reminded of this week’s double Torah portion, Matot-Masei, and of its opening passages which discuss the binding nature of vows and promises, and the circumstances under which those verbal commitments can be annulled.

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

“When a man vows a vow...or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.” (Numbers 30:3)

The binding quality of one’s promises is emphasized by many non-biblical authors. The Roman sage Horace writes in his Epistles, “Once a word has been allowed to escape, it cannot be recalled.” The Spanish novelist, Miguel de Cervantes, puts these words in the mouth of his hero Don Quixote: “An honest man’s word is as good as his bond.”

It is apparent that being true to one’s words is a universal ethical standard. The Torah, however, while fully supporting the binding quality of one’s promises, also recognizes that there are situations which call for the revocation of those promises. Times change, circumstances are altered, and a reassessment of past commitments is not only permitted but is to be commended. Blind obedience to one’s past vows can lead to disastrous consequences.

Whereas the Torah explicitly grants the authority to a father to annul the vows of his daughter, and under certain circumstances allows a husband to abrogate his wife’s vows, our sages recognize that every individual must have access to a wise man, a chacham, who can help him assess his verbal commitments, and, when justified, release him from those commitments.

The classic case of misguided adherence to one’s words is the story, narrated in the book of Judges chapter 11, of Jephthah (Yiftach). He was a great military leader who, when he embarked upon a battle against the Ammonites, vowed that if God would grant him victory, he would offer “whatever comes out of the door of my house...as a burnt offering.” Tragically, it was his daughter, his only child, who came out to meet him. He felt bound by his words and “did to her as he vowed.”

Our Sages see his blind obedience to his own words as being a result of his ignorance, and they do not commend his fidelity to his vow. Quite the contrary; our rabbis recognize the complexities of life and understand full well that situations which call for morality can be most ambiguous.

In certain circumstances, a sense of being bound by one’s promises is an example of integrity and honesty of the highest order. But even one’s promises need to be assessed in the light of changing circumstances. When those circumstances demand a loosening of the bond of verbal commitment, our tradition knows of procedures whereby one can be released even from his most fervent oaths and vows.



The opening passages of this week's Torah portion recognize this complexity. These passages teach that one must be careful never to profane or violate his words. But they also teach that one's words need to be revisited, re-examined, and reassessed. And they teach that, under the guidance of a wise and pious chacham, the bonds of words can be undone, and the chains of past commitments can be loosened.

There is an additional lesson here, and that is the lesson of forgiveness. Sometimes human relationships necessitate certain reactions. My vow to have nothing to do with you may have been based upon the factual consideration that your behavior was undesirable and might have a negative effect upon me or my family. But I must be ready to say, "That was then and this is now." I must be ready to realize that you have changed and that now our relationship must change.

And when I realize that, I must re-examine my past promises and commitments and be ready to undo them. That is the underlying concept behind the procedure known as *hatarat nedarim*, the undoing of the bonds of words. That is among the messages of this week's Torah portion.

I am sharing these thoughts with you, dear reader, but didn't share them with my park bench partner. Certain matters are much too important for a park bench. But I am sharing my thoughts with you, and hope you find them meaningful.

**[Compiler's Note: Hatarat nedarim applies only to vows to the Almighty, NOT promises to our fellow humans.]**

---

#### **Dvar Torah: Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis**

---

The maths doesn't add up. In Parshat Maasei we're told how six cities of refuge were established for our people: three which were to be west of the River Jordan, in Israel proper, and three in Transjordan, called Ever HaYarden, east of the River Jordan. These were cities which were wisely established for people guilty of homicide. There was a danger that family members of the victim might seek revenge, and so the person who had killed somebody inadvertently needed to flee, for his or her safety, to a city of refuge.

But the maths doesn't add up. Because in Israel proper there were nine and a half tribes, and in Transjordan there were only two and a half tribes: Reuven, Gad and half the tribe of Menashe. So why would there be three cities of refuge on each side?

The Talmud explains that outside of the holy territory of the land of Israel, people had less respect for the sanctity of life, therefore there was a greater need for cities of refuge in that

area.

Reb Itzele of Volozhin, a great 19th century scholar, adds a further dimension. He talks about the primary problem being the threat from members of the family of the victim. Outside of the land of Israel they wanted to seek revenge but inside Israel proper, they were more likely to consider: seeing as one person has already died, what sense will it make for another person to die? These people therefore controlled their urges. As a result there were fewer people who came into the category of 'goel hadam' – somebody seeking to take revenge.

From here emerges a hugely important lesson for all of us. It's all about the impact of our surroundings. Our environment sets a tone for our lives. I believe that there are two primary messages here.

First of all we should carefully select where we live where we raise our children because the influences of our environment will always have an impact on us. Secondly and more importantly, let us also guarantee that within our own family circles the tone of morality and ethics that we establish will be such that those growing up within the family will be committed to leading a responsible life.

If we see to it that our homes are a place of kedusha, of much sanctity, that will hopefully make all the difference to the ways of life of those within them.

---

#### **Ohr Torah Stone Dvar Torah**

---

**Rabbanit Aviya and Rabbi Amram Maccabi**

These are the journeys of the children of Israel, by which they went forth out of the land of Egypt by their hosts under the hand of Moshe and Aharon. And they journeyed from... and they camped in... and they journeyed from...and they camped in..." (Bamidbar 33)

The first half of the portion of Mas'ei focuses on the journeys of the Israelites en route to the Promised Land, with the repetition of the phrase "And they journeyed from... and they camped in... and they journeyed from...and they camped in..."

Many of the exegetes ask why it was important to specify all the places through which the Israelites passed. For what purpose does the Torah give us a list of 49 places, from Egypt all the way to the eastern border of the Land of Israel, most of which we have never even heard of?

In answer to this, the Rambam explains that "there is a great need to mention all the different journeys, for the miracles that had transpired [in each place] were real for all to

#### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

see. However, in future times all these happenings will turn into hearsay, and those who hear about them will no longer believe... and yet all these great wonders had indeed been visible to the eye. However, the Almighty who knows well that just as the years pass and are forgotten, these wonders, too, shall fade, such that those who hear of them will no longer believe they had really transpired... And for this purpose, He wished to engrave these miracles in the recollection of the journeys, so that all future generations will know of the great wonders that had taken place, and how the people had journeyed through all these places for 40 years."

Simply put, the Rambam describes the natural course of life and how historical events become dim in our memory. Even significant events, which have impacted the hearts of many and have become engraved in social narrative, soon turn into an historical lesson, and later metamorphose into myth or science fiction.

My father, of blessed memory, used to tell us how during the Six Day War he and his friends witnessed open miracles. For example, how the young women of Nablus welcomed three buses, filled with our own soldiers, with shouts of glee, throwing rice and candy, only because my father had shouted out from the bus in Arabic that they were Tunisian soldiers... Or about the time their military jeep had run out of fuel, and so they filled it up with orange juice and it kept going. Or the time he had interrogated an officer of the Egyptian commando in order to understand what made the latter (and hundreds of Egyptian soldiers) throw down their weapons and run away from one single IDF section comprising 30 soldiers only. The Egyptian officer insisted that it was because they had seen "devilish spirits standing behind the Jewish soldiers".

The general atmosphere following the war was one of great spiritual upliftment. The Six Day War had not only been a formative moment for the soldiers themselves, but an historic event for the entire nation. The morning after the victory, my father went on with his story, when he put on his tefillin, almost all of the "secular" soldiers asked to put on his tefillin. (He sent them to the other religious guy in the platoon, who had more of a "Lubavitch spirit", saying to them: "Where have you been all this time?")

I imagine that after a year or two, all the great miracles that had transpired, could be explained logically. For example: The radio broadcasts in Arabic kept transmitting that Israel had been cleansed of its Jewish inhabitants and that any soldiers remaining were Iraqi. Or, that the orange juice poured into the fuel tank caused the little fuel that was

there to float to the surface, and so the jeep's engine was able to keep running (please don't try this at home). As to the devilish sprits which were spotted, the columns of dust created by the Israeli military vehicles, seemed from afar (at least through Arab eyes) to be supernatural beings.

Of course, the miraculous Israeli victory was explained in numerous ways: Jewish wisdom, precise intelligence; the Air Force's outstanding capability; the improvements made to the Israeli jeeps and tanks gave the IDF an advantage in the battlefield... Today, less than 60 years later, the traditional Flag March has become a political event, and there is still an ongoing debate as to whether the Hallel prayer and the blessing of Shehechianu should be recited on the day marking the victory...

Rashi on our parsha quotes a midrash which really echoes, at least for me, the rabbinical work my family and I were engaged in when we served communities abroad.

"This can be likened to a king whose son was sick, and so he journeyed with him [the son] to a far-off place to be cured. After they had returned, the king would recall all the places they had journeyed and say [to his son]: Here we slept; here we suffered cold; here your head hurt..."

The portion of Mas'ei, which recounts the journeys of the Israelites, teaches the shaliach to remove the dust, as it were, from the forgotten journeys of his own community members, and to listen attentively to the stories of any wandering Jew who should chance upon his sermons or his prayers services or even eat upon his table. And a little tip on how we, the shlichim, can better engage our "clients" and enter their hearts: instead of inviting 'our Jews' to our Shabbat table, better still to go to them and eat in their homes!

Let's set aside the halachic technicalities and constraints for a moment, or even the awkwardness entailed in the rabbi and rebbetzin leaving their comfort zone and place of authority, as those who are expected to be the host who open their home to others. When done with humility and in the proper fashion, there is no tool more powerful in the toolkit of any shaliach than the rabbi and rebbetzin going to the home of a community member.

Such an encounter, which takes place in the home and haven of the Jew, has the potential not only to remove the dust from things long forgotten, but to dig up real gold, gold lying hidden under layers of dirt. We, the shlichim, have heard a myriad of stories from our community members: of parents and grandparents; of educational dilemmas and the

turbulent journey of marriage. And what about those Jews who are far removed from Torah and mitzvot? What will become of their stories, which are packed away in a little box in the attic because they are too heavy to carry? "And they journeyed from... and they camped in... and they journeyed from...and they camped in..."

In one such encounter, a member of my community told me of his grandmother, who had exposed her arm to him for the first time when she was very old. Upon it was tattooed a number, burned into her flesh by the Nazis at Auschwitz. (She had not told her offspring of this to protect them from the horror of it.) Today, this very man – whose wife and children have meanwhile converted and learned Hebrew – learns the Daf Yomi every single day.

Another story: A journalist who was an accomplice to the malicious and unobjective coverage of the Marmara [the Turkish ship which attempted to reach the shores of Gaza] with the aim of defaming Israel, told me of his father who had asked his son to say Kaddish for him (I listened with some disgust, I do confess). Today, however, this journalist frequents our small minyan and regularly takes part in shiurim.

More stories:

A Buddhist monk, currently married to a Jewish woman, is raising two children all because he had heard of King Solomon after finding a Bible in his grandfather's house. His son was circumcised two years ago.

A Russian woman who had left Israel now has a mezuzah on her front door and runs a bakery with kosher foodstuffs only – and all because of a conversation we had evolving around the menorah that adorned her living room.

Stories of Shabbat songs sung on people's deathbeds which evoked Jewish tears and ultimately led to a Jewish burial instead of a cremation.

"And they journeyed from... and they camped in... and they journeyed from...and they camped in..."

Every Jew we chance to meet, wherever it happened to be, carries with him family stories (which may have already evolved into myth), traditional melodies, the taste of childhood dishes and a myriad of experiences that make up his and his family's private-miraculous timeline.

It is the role of every Jew, with a little help from an attentive shaliach on occasion, to stop for a moment and set up camp, in order to

## Likutei Divrei Torah

recollect and refine his personal Jewish journey.

---

### Dvar Torah: TorahWeb.Org

---

#### Rabbi Benjamin Yudin

#### Construct-ive Criticism

In Parshas Matos (perek 32) the Torah relays the story of the two shevatim, Reuven and Gad, who seek and are given land on the eastern side of the Jordan which had previously been owned by Sichon and Og. The two tribes come to Moshe and inform him that they are blessed with an abundance of sheep and this land is appropriate for livestock, and therefore they request, "do not bring us across the Jordan." Moshe then reproves them for following in the evil ways of the meraglim who thirty-nine years ago dissuaded the Jewish nation from entering the Promised Land and he was fearful that their request would once again undermine the national desire for their homeland. They respond to Moshe and declare (32:16), "Corrals for the flock we will build here for our livestock, and cities for our small children. We shall arm ourselves and join our brethren in their conquest of the land and stay with them till the land of Canaan is settled and our small children will stay in the fortified cities here."

Rashi cites from the Tanchuma that Moshe chastises the two tribes and accusing them of having faulty priorities, i.e. for their prioritizing their financial concerns over the welfare of their children, as we can see in their request wherein they stated, "We will build corrals for our sheep and cities for our children". Moshe taught them this is improper, rather let the primary values be primary and the secondary values be secondary; build cities for your children first and then take care of the needs of the sheep.

The Be'er Yosef (Rev Yosef Salant zt"l) comments that at first glance, this is most difficult to understand. How could the dor deah, which was raised in an aura of spirituality, make such a glaring mistake of putting their material concerns before the welfare of their families? He then proceeds to give the following fascinating explanation, as follows: note that when the Jewish nation asked the two kings, first Sichon then Og, to pass through their lands (see Parshas Chukas) they were not only rebuffed, but each of these kings brought their armies to the desert and attacked the Jewish people, and the young Jewish nation was victorious over both kings and defeated them. It is interesting to note that since the battles occurred in the desert the cities of Sichon and Og were not in any way war-torn or disturbed. Perhaps a screen door here and a broken window there needed replacement, but for the most part Reuven and Gad believed that these cities were open, available, and ready for their families to move

in. It is here, the Be'er Yosef explains, that Moshe disagrees with the two tribes. Don't think, Moshe said, that you can simply take the wreath off the door, put a Mezuzah up, and then you can move your families in. Since these homes were steeped in idolatry they cannot be used for raising a Jewish family. Moshe Therefore instructs them (32:24) "Build for yourselves cities for your small children and tents for the flocks". Indeed, the two tribes listen to Moshe, and therefore we are taught (32:34-38) that the children of Gad and Reuven built many cities in that area.

Is this really the halacha, that before one moves into a home that was inhabited by non-Jews that they have to make some significant structural change to the home? Indeed, this is the halacha regarding the conversion of a church into a synagogue. Many poskim were against this practice including the Chasam Sofer (Orach Chaim 42) and Maharam Shik (Yoreh Deah 142). The late Reb Moshe Feinstein (Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim (1:49) writes that he is not comfortable with the converting of a church to a synagogue, however if it was done with panim chadashos, meaning structural changes within the building, then he could agree to its usage as a synagogue. Why, then, did Moshe insist upon this more rigid application of the law where we are talking about homes for the tribes of Reuven and Gad and not synagogues? I'd like to suggest two possibilities.

Firstly, I believe we can understand this by utilizing a halachic principle found in Hilchos Channukah. The Pnei Yehoshua (Shabbos 21b) asks why did the Chashmonaim insist on finding pure oil to light the menorah when there is the halachic principle (as found in Pesachim 77a) that the laws of tumah are hutra b'tzibbur, i.e. the laws of impurity are suspended in a situation when we are dealing with the majority of the Jewish nation? His question, therefore, is: why did we need a miracle and why make a fuss over the one cruse of oil when they could have used the impure oil? Reb Yosef Engel (Gilyonai Hashas, Shabbos 21b) answers that the principle of tumah hutra is applicable when we have a functioning Beis HaMikdash. However, to initiate and start a Beis HaMikdash anew requires a stronger foundation of total purity, and therefore they insisted on using pure oil.

Hashem said (Vayikra 14:34) that when Klal Yisrael would enter the Land of Canaan, He will place a tzara'as affliction houses in the land. The Medrash Rabbah (Vayikra 17:6) teaches that this was a good tiding for the Jewish nation because Amori people hid their treasured possessions in the walls of their homes so that the Jewish people would not find them, and as a result of the process of dealing with tzara'as in a house which includes

opening the wall, the Jews were enriched with these hidden possessions. The Zohar (Parshas Tazria 50a) asks that if the purpose of the tzara'as was to benefit the Jewish nation, why could they not replace the stones they removed from the wall to find the treasure? Why did they have to remove the stones to outside their cities? The Zohar answers that the tzara'as was Divinely sent because the homes of the Amorites were spiritually contaminated by the idolatry worshipped therein, and this would prevent a foundation of kedusha from being laid for a Jewish home. Therefore, it was necessary to remove the stones and have them replaced, and oftentimes demolish the house, in order to facilitate and construct a Jewish home.

The settling of the two tribes in eiver haYarden was the beginning of the settlement of the Jewish nation, albeit in the "annex" of the Land of Israel. Just as reinaugurating the Beis HaMikdash required a strong foundation of total purity, so too this settlement of the land had to be al pi taharas hakodesh, in the most pure and pristine manner, and therefore they had to re-construct the homes to facilitate them being imbued with the highest levels of kedusha.

A second possibility as to why Moshe adopted a stringent standard for the homes of the tribes of Reuven and Gad was to intimate that each and every Jewish home is really a mikdash me'at (a miniature Temple) and therefore he applied the halacha that is afforded a synagogue, namely to reconstruct the building. An interesting proof of the spiritual potential of each home may be found in the Talmud (Brachos 16b) which brings many examples of the personal prayer that different Amoraim recited at the conclusion of their Shemoneh Esrei. Aside from the Torah, avodah and gemilas chasadim that each Jew must bring to their home, Rebbe Elazar added the following prayer to his amidah: "May it be Your will Hashem our G-d, that You cause to dwell in our lot, love brotherhood, peace and companionship." We see that in addition to man's initiative and actions, he has to pray to Hashem that he be successful in this holy endeavor.

I'm going to give an example of the beautiful chessed that emerges from a sensitive Jewish home. The Vishnitzer Rebbe would ordinarily spend but a few moments each night at the many weddings he was invited to. He once made an exception, stayed for a long time and before he left he said to the father of the chassan, "Please call me whenever you get home". The man insisted it could be very late, perhaps one or two in the morning. The rebbe said, "I don't care. Make sure you call me when you get home." The man reluctantly called the Rebbe after two in the morning and

## Likutei Divrei Torah

the Rebbe started to ask him many, of what seemed to be mundane questions, especially from a most holy rav. He asked how the food was, was it plentiful, was it served nicely? He asked how the music was, was it too loud? The rebbe engaged him in very down to earth questions regarding the evening's proceedings. When the call was over his shamash, who had answered the call and was privy to this entire conversation, asked the rebbe at the end "What's going on here? Since when are you concerned with such trivial issues?" The rebbe answered that the man had lost his wife only a few months prior to the wedding. "Ordinarily, when the parents of the kallah or chassan get home from the wedding they go over each and every detail of the wedding. What was it like on your side? How was the food? How was the music? This man, unfortunately, came home to an empty home. He had no one to rehash the events of the evening with. I, therefore, called him to give him that opportunity and experience." WOW! That is an example of generating a creative house of chessed.

In the period of the three weeks that we find ourselves in, the tefillah with which we conclude every Shemoneh Esrei is sheyiboneh Beis haMikdash bimhayra biyamaynu. This is usually translated as "Please rebuild the Beis haMikdash speedily in our days". The Rav Naftali of Rupchitz zt"l interpreted this alternatively in the following way: "May you speedily rebuild the Temple with our days", that is to say that the positive actions, Torah and mitzvos, performed in our homes each day, contribute another brick to the building of the Beis haMikdash on high.

In reality, each individual is a living Beis haMikdash, as the Torah teaches (Shemos 25:9) "They shall make a Sanctuary for Me, so that I may dwell in each and every one of them." Therefore, it is most significant that we do some serious introspection regarding the personal Beis haMikdash within ourselves. It is not sufficient to resolve to no longer speak lashon hara, rather, this is the time to ask, why do I have the tendency to be jealous of others and to knock others? It is a time for deep constructive criticism to reconstruct the Mikdash within ourselves. There are so many factors that divide the Jewish people from one another, and when we think about and analyze these factors, we see that in reality they are, for the most part, inconsequential. Maybe there are differences in hashkafa but these differences are certainly no excuse nor license to hate another. If we look to the giants of the previous generation, such as the late Reb Shlomo Zalman Auerbach zt"l, the Lubavitcher Rebbe zt"l, they had a neshama that embraced all Jews. Reb Aryeh Levin zt"l visited, and extended love to, Jewish criminals and prisoners. It is purported that Reb Tzvi Yehuda Kook zt"l said that he heard from his

father that he did not hate anybody except for Ben Yehuda as they had studied together in Volozhin and he became an apikores. However, he added, that he was working on it. The message, I believe, is very clear. We have to learn from what Moshe told the tribes of Reuven and Gad, i.e. that we all need to accept constructive criticism and ensure that our foundations are laid al pi taharas haKodesh.

---

### **Torah.Org Dvar Torah**

**by Rabbi Label Lam**

---

#### **Traveling from Shabbos to Shabbos**

These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who left the Land of Egypt in their legions, under the charge of Moshe and Aaron. Moshe recorded their starting points for their journeys according to the word of the word of HASHEM, and these were their journeys with their starting points. They journeyed from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the day following the Passover sacrifice, the children of Israel left triumphantly before the eyes of all the Egyptians. And the Egyptians were busy burying because HASHEM had struck down their firstborn and had wrought vengeance against their deities. The children of Israel journeyed from Rameses and camped in Succos. They journeyed from Succos and camped in Esam, at the edge of the desert. (Bamidbar 33:1-6)

There is a question that has haunted me for a while regarding the Torah's description of the 42 journeys of the Children of Israel in the desert over the course of 40 years. Why, in each case, does the Torah tell us where they exited from first and then where they encamped? Just tell us where they went to and we know automatically it was from the last place they settled down. When Yaakov left Be'er Sheva on his way to Charan, Rashi is compelled, based on that question, to tell us that when a Tzadik leaves a place the impression of his absence is felt. Why is Rashi silent on these multiple accounts of the Children of Israel traveling from A to B and then from B to C?!

The Ksav HaKabbalah writes: "The departures. We learn from this that the names of these places that are mentioned here are not the actual names that they had before. They are in fact the names that were given them as a result of the events that took place when Yisrael camped there. That, in my opinion, is what was meant when Scripture says: "Moshe recorded their departures for their journeys." He recorded all of the events that befell them on all of their journeys. That is in of itself why he mentioned afterwards the names of their encampments, because the names themselves describe the events that took place.

It seems that each place was, like when the Jewish People left Egypt, an event, an experience worth noting as a new launching point, like "survivors"! These were not just horizontal journeys or an arbitrary list of starting and stopping points but a life journal of experiences and graduations building up to crescendo, entering Eretz HaKodesh. This is a holy quest like none before or after. The Jewish People are a "Mamlachas Kohanim v'Goy Kadosh...A Kingdom of Priests (servants of HASHEM) and a Holy Nation" by design.

What does it mean to be HOLY? It is easy to be thrown and distracted by that hard to define word. Maybe we can understand it best by studying the opposite. When we make Havdala at the conclusion of Shabbos, each week we make a Brocho, "HaMavdil Bein Kodesh L'Chol – Who separates between Holy and Profane". I don't know what profane or secular means but "Chol" is literally sand in Hebrew. How can that explain HOLY and how to turn Chol into Kodesh, sand into diamonds?

Hold in your hand a pile of sand and study it briefly. There is no top or bottom, or middle. It is a loose collection of particles. There is no rhyme or reason. It has no shape or form of its own. Nothing grows from sand. It lacks the magic of soil which gives birth to life and has a future. Sand – Chol represents a life of experiences that, no matter how pleasant and exciting they may have been, are essentially vacuous and empty, sound and fury signifying nothing. There is no theme and connectivity one to another and of no ultimate meaning or value.

However, if one is living a life where, for example, Shabbos is a centerpiece of existence, then everything is building up to and leading to Shabbos Kodesh. All of our work and our shopping too are organized around and leading towards Shabbos. Shabbos Kodesh is a golden thread that holds all the pearls and diamonds of our daily deeds together like a beautiful necklace, a rich piece of Jewelry.

Everything we do connects us to HASHEM. Every breath we take and every move we make is made HOLY and is ultimately meaningful on our weekly march from one Shabbos to another Shabbos and we are becoming HOLIER people, camping and traveling from Shabbos to Shabbos!

---

### **Mizrachi Dvar Torah**

**Rav Doron Perez**

#### **80,000 Aharons: Changing Society One Relationship at a Time**

Our Sages make a remarkable comment about the funeral procession of Aharon HaKohen. His death is mentioned in this week's Parasha of Masei – the only yahrzeit explicitly

### **Likutei Divrei Torah**

mentioned in the Torah – on the first day of the month of Av.

The Sages say there were 80,000 young men bearing Aharon's name who walked behind him at his funeral. Why were 80,000 boys named after him? Because there were 80,000 homes where there was a lack of shalom bayit, where husbands and wives were not getting on, and Aharon ensured there would be peace in the home, and to recognize the efforts of Aharon, they named their children after him.

This is the legacy of Aharon. As Hillel says in Pirkei Avot we should strive to be spiritual students of Aharon whose legacy was that he was a lover of peace and pursuer of peace. That was his main role.

What a lesson for us. There is often strife at home, in families, in communities, in society, within the Jewish people. This personality of Aharon is one which is so needed today – especially as we enter the month of Av, when the Jewish people are called on to reflect on sinat chinam, baseless hatred. Each of us finds ourselves in such situations and need to be the children of Aharon, to not just want peace but to pursue peace. Don't wait for the other person – pursue peace. You be the one not to be right, but to be smart. You take the first step. We should strive to be the peacemakers – that is the legacy of Aharon.

Today, within Jewish and Israeli society, there is so much discord, political and religious, and it is so important we follow this legacy of Aharon, for us to be the peacemakers. To pursue peace, to be the one that despite the differences finds the way to bring us closer together.

## Home Weekly Parsha MATOT – MAASEI

### Rabbi Wein's Weekly Blog

The fourth book of the Torah – Bamidbar – concludes in this week's public Torah reading. The new generation of Jews, no longer the slave generation that left Egypt hastily and constantly longed to return there when faced with problems and difficulties, stands poised to enter the Land of Israel and fulfill God's covenant with Avraham. However here again, narrow personal interests becloud the general picture and weaken the necessary national resolve.

It is no longer the so-called fleshpots of Egypt that beckon and entice. It is rather the pasture lands east of the Jordan River that force the cattle raising tribes of Reuven and Gad to plead with Moshe that they not be compelled to cross the Jordan and enter the Land of Israel.

Moshe's initial reaction to their request is one of shock and bitter disappointment. He reminds them that their parents' generation was destroyed in the desert for disparaging the Land of Israel and refusing to struggle on its behalf. And he warns them that they have apparently learned little from that bitter event in Jewish history.

Here they stand making the same error in judgment and vision that the previous generation did. Moshe's greatest frustration is that the Jewish people can't see past their cattle, their personal gain, an imagined short term benefit and their refusal to acknowledge the grandeur of the Lord's long term vision for themselves and their land. It is this blindness of spirit and unwillingness to appreciate the uniqueness of Israel, the people and the land that Moshe bemoans.

But all of this temporary gain comes with cost and a price. Separated from their brethren west of the Jordan, the tribes of Gad and Reuven have a difficult time defending themselves and are the first tribes to be exiled. They produce no major leaders or heroes for the Jewish people and their dreams of prosperity and material success are only fleetingly realized.

Criticized bitterly and eternally by the prophetess Devorah for standing aside in an hour of national Jewish peril, they become the model of individual Jewish indifference to the general cause of Jewish survival and success. In our current world they unfortunately have many heirs and disciples. Mordecai warned Esther not to stand away and be passive in the face of Haman and his decrees. He warned her that when the Jews would somehow escape from the troubles she and her family would be doomed to extinction in the Jewish story if she allowed her narrow self-interest to rule over her national duty for the preservation of Israel.

Today, also, narrow self-interests govern many Jews – even leaders who seemingly should know better – in their attitudes, policies and behavior regarding the existential problems that face the Jewish people and the Jewish state. The Talmud teaches us that Jerusalem always needs advocates for its cause. That certainly is the case in the generation and times in which we find ourselves currently. Jewish apathy and alienation are our enemies. The allure of current political correctness in policy and mindset is misleading and dangerous. We too stand on the cusp of great adventures and opportunities. We should avoid the Reuven/Gad syndrome.

Shabbat shalom  
Rabbi Berel Wein

### Natural or Supernatural?

#### Matot, Masei

#### Rabbi Jonathan Sacks

The book of Bamidbar draws to a close with an account of the cities of refuge, the six cities – three on each side of the Jordan – set apart as places to which people found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, were temporarily exiled.

In early societies, especially non-urban ones that lacked an extensive police force, there was a concern that people would take the law into their own hands, in particular when a member of their family or tribe had been killed. Thus would begin a cycle of vengeance and retaliation that had no natural end, one revenge-killing leading to another and

another, until the community had been decimated. This is a phenomenon familiar to us from literature, from the Montagues and Capulets of Romeo and Juliet, to the Sharks and Jets of West Side Story, to the Corleones and Tattaglias of The Godfather.

The only viable solution is the effective and impartial rule of law. There is, though, one persisting danger. If Reuben killed Shimon and is deemed innocent of murder by the court – it was an accident, there was no malice aforethought, the victim and perpetrator were not enemies – then there is still the danger that the family of the victim may feel that justice has not been done. Their close relative lies dead and no one has been punished.

It was to prevent such situations of “blood vengeance” that the cities of refuge were established. Those who had committed manslaughter were sent there, and so long as they were within the city limits, they were protected by law. There they had to stay until – according to our parsha – “the death of the High Priest” (Num. 35:25).

The obvious question is, what does the death of the High Priest have to do with it? There seems no connection whatsoever between manslaughter, blood vengeance, and the High Priest, let alone his death.

Let us look at two quite different interpretations. They are interesting in their own right, but more generally they show us the range of thought that exists within Judaism. The first is given by the Babylonian Talmud: A venerable old scholar said, ‘I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Rava, that the High Priest should have prayed to God for mercy for his generation, which he failed to do.

Makkot 11a

According to this, the High Priest had a share, however small, in the guilt for the fact that someone died, albeit by accident. Murder is not something that could have been averted by the High Priest's prayer. The murderer was guilty of the crime, having chosen to do what he did, and no one else can be blamed. But manslaughter, precisely because it happens without anyone intending that it should, is the kind of event that might have been averted by the prayers of the High Priest. Therefore it is not fully atoned for until the High Priest dies. Only then can the manslaughterer go free.

Maimonides offers a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed:

A person who killed another person unknowingly must go into exile because the anger of “the avenger of the blood” cools down while the cause of the mischief is out of sight. The chance of returning from the exile depends on the death of the High Priest, the most honoured of men, and the friend of all Israel. By his death the relative of the slain person becomes reconciled (ibid. ver. 25); for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one has befallen another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest.

The Guide for the Perplexed III:40

According to Maimonides, the death of the High Priest has nothing to do with guilt or atonement, but simply with the fact that it causes a collective grief so great that it causes people forget their own misfortunes in the face of a larger national loss. That is when people let go of their individual sense of injustice and desire for revenge. It then becomes safe for the person found guilty of manslaughter to return home.

What is at stake between these two profoundly different interpretations of the law? The first has to do with whether exile to a city of refuge is a kind of punishment or not. According to the Babylonian Talmud it seems as if it was. There may have been no intent. No one was legally to blame. But a tragedy has happened at the hands of X, the person guilty of manslaughter, and even the High Priest shared, if only negatively and passively, in the guilt. Only when both have undergone some suffering, one by way of exile, the other by way of (natural, not judicial) death, has the moral balance been restored. The family of the victim feel that some sort of justice has been done.

Maimonides however does not understand the law of the cities of refuge in terms of guilt or punishment whatsoever. The only relevant consideration is safety. The person guilty of manslaughter goes into exile, not because it is a form of expiation, but simply because it is safer for him to be a long way from those who might be seeking vengeance. He stays there until the death of the High Priest because only after national tragedy can you assume that people have given up thoughts of taking revenge for their own dead family member. This is a fundamental difference in the way we conceptualise the cities of refuge.

However, there is a more fundamental difference between them. The Babylonian Talmud assumes a certain level of supernatural reality. It takes it as self-understood that had the High Priest prayed hard and devotedly enough, there would have been no accidental deaths. Maimonides' explanation is non-supernatural. It belongs broadly to what we would call social psychology. People are more able to come to terms with the past when they are not reminded daily of it by seeing the person who, perhaps, was driving the car that killed their son as he was crossing the road on a dark night, in heavy rainfall, on a sharp bend in the road.

There are deaths – like those of Princess Diana and of the Queen Mother in Britain – that evoke widespread and deep national grief. There are times – after 9/11, for example, or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 – when our personal grievances seem simply too small to worry about. This, as Maimonides says, is “a natural phenomenon.”

This fundamental difference between a natural and supernatural understanding of Judaism runs through many eras of Jewish history: Sages as against Priests, philosophers as against mystics, Rabbi Ishmael as against Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides in contradistinction to Judah Halevi, and so on to today.

It is important to realise that not every approach to religious faith in Judaism presupposes supernatural events – events, that is to say, that cannot be explained within the parameters of science, broadly conceived. God is beyond the universe, but His actions within the universe may nonetheless be in accordance with natural law and causation.[1]

On this view, prayer changes the world because it changes us. Torah has the power to transform society, not by way of miracles, but by effects that are fully explicable in terms of political theory and social science. This is not the only approach to Judaism, but it is Maimonides', and it remains one of the two great ways of understanding our faith.

[1] For a further study of the contrasting approaches to events as either natural or supernatural, please refer to the essay Rabbi Sacks wrote on parshat Beshallah, re-shared earlier this year: <https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallah/the-power-of-ruach/>

---

## Laws of the Three Weeks

### Revivim – Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

These days are days of mourning over the destruction of the Temple \* One should refrain from listening to joyous songs from the beginning of the Three Weeks \* An aerobics class that is primarily for exercise can be held until the end of the month of Tammuz \* It is permissible to hold an evening of singing focused on devotion to God and longing for redemption during the Three Weeks \* During the Nine Days, it is not possible to hold a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah celebration as is customary throughout the year \* From the beginning of the month of Av, one should not swim for recreational purposes \* During the Nine Days, business activities are reduced, so one should not purchase items that bring joy \* Many communities have the custom to be strict and not get haircuts during the entire Three Weeks

Q: Is it permissible to listen to music during the Three Weeks?

Answer: These days are days of mourning over the destruction of the Temple, and although our Sages did not establish special ordinances to express sorrow and mourning during this time, Jews have adopted some mourning customs during the Three Weeks, including refraining from holding dances and festivities (Magen Avraham 551:10).

As a result, the poskim (Jewish law arbiters) of the previous generation debated whether it is permissible to listen to musical instruments

through home electrical devices during the Three Weeks. As the years pass and listening to music through electrical devices becomes more common, the festive nature of this activity diminishes. In practice, songs can be divided into three categories:

1. The first is joyous songs, such as wedding songs, which should be avoided from the beginning of the Three Weeks.
2. The second category includes songs that are neither particularly joyous nor sad, including most contemporary songs and most classical compositions, which should be avoided from the beginning of the month of Av.
3. The third category consists of sad songs, such as mourning songs for a deceased person or songs about the destruction of the Temple, which are permitted to be listened to even during the Nine Days.

#### Lowering the Volume of Music

When music is played loudly, even if it is neutral in nature, the volume gives the song a festive quality, making it like a joyous song. Therefore, even songs that are permitted to be heard during the Three Weeks should not be listened to at high volume. Similarly, one should not attend a concert of sad music (such as a requiem) during the Three Weeks, because even though it is mournful music, a concert in general is a festive and joyous event (Peninei Halakha: Z'manim 8:4).

#### Dance Classes and Aerobics Classes

Dance classes, concerts, and joyous singing events should not be held or attended during the Three Weeks.

An aerobics class accompanied by music, which is primarily for exercise purposes, can be held until the end of the month of Tammuz, and efforts should be made to use music that is not known to be joyous.

#### Educational-Cultural Events

At an educational-cultural event, it is permissible to play music that is appropriate to its nature. Even during the Nine Days, it is permissible to play sad songs that express sorrow over the destruction of the Temple and songs of longing for the building up of Torah, the nation, and the land (see Peninei Halakha: Zmanim 8:4).

It is also permissible to hold an evening of singing focused on devotion to God and longing for redemption during the Three Weeks, as these are not joyous songs. During the Nine Days, it is permissible to hold a talk and incorporate singing and music of songs about the sorrow of the destruction and longing for redemption.

#### Music and Singing at Mitzvah Meals

It is permissible to sing joyous songs at mitzvah meals during the Three Weeks, such as at a brit milah (circumcision), pidyon haben (redemption of the firstborn), and sheva brachot (seven blessings after a wedding). Until the end of the month of Tammuz, it is also permissible to play music as is customary throughout the year.

Once the month of Av begins, joyous songs should not be played through electronic devices, and only songs related to the joy of the mitzvah may be sung vocally. It is also permissible to dance in a circle, as many customarily do at a brit milah celebration.

#### Music during Havdalah and Melave Malka

Families that are accustomed to playing sacred songs on Saturday night may continue to do so until the beginning of the month of Av, because the atmosphere of Shabbat, which does not include mourning customs, still lingers in the hours designated for the melave malka meal. Additionally, these are sacred songs.

#### Bar Mitzvah and Bat Mitzvah

Until the beginning of the month of Av, it is permissible to celebrate a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah on the day of entering into mitzvot. It is also permissible to hire musicians, provided that this is their custom throughout the year. When it is difficult to hold the party on the same day and they want to hold it on one of the nearby days, it is appropriate for the bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah celebrant to complete an important book of study at the beginning of the event, thus allowing them to hold the celebration with music or musicians as is customary throughout the year. If they cannot make a siyum (completion of study), they can rely on a siyum made by one of the relatives. When there is no such possibility, they can, as a last resort, rely on the bar mitzvah or bat

mitzvah speech, which is an important Torah discourse, clarifying that the essence of the party is to celebrate entering into mitzvot.

However, during the Nine Days, it is not possible to celebrate a bar mitzvah or bat mitzvah as is customary throughout the year, since it is usual to invite many participants and play music, which is prohibited during the Nine Days. Therefore, it is appropriate to postpone the large party until after Tisha B'Av, and on the day of reaching mitzvot age, a home meal can be arranged with meat and wine and a limited number of guests (Peninei Halakha: Z'manim 8:3).

#### Trips and Vacations in Hotels

It is permissible to hike and bathe in the sea or in a pool until the beginning of the month of Av, because only from the beginning of Av did our Sages instruct to reduce joy, but before then there is no prohibition on doing things that bring pleasure and enjoyment, and only events of excessive joy should be avoided. Therefore, it is permitted to hike, bathe, and vacation in a hotel until the end of the month of Tammuz.

Once Av begins, joy is reduced, so one should avoid trips and recreational activities that are primarily for pleasure and joy.

However, a trip or vacation that is primarily for educational or health purposes is permitted during the Nine Days.

#### Swimming During the Nine Days

From the beginning of the month of Av, one should not swim for recreational purposes. However, if swimming is for health purposes, for example, people who regularly swim for half an hour every day in a pool, it is permitted until Shabbat Chazon, and after Shabbat Chazon it is appropriate to be stricter. Those who need to swim for medical reasons may swim until the eve of Tisha B'Av (see Peninei Halakha: Z'manim 8:5).

#### 'Shehecheyanu' During the Three Weeks

It is customary to refrain from reciting the Shehecheyanu blessing during the Three Weeks, for how can we bless "Who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us to this time" during a time of calamity? Although some are strict about this even on Shabbatot during the Three Weeks, in practice, one may recite Shehecheyanu on Shabbat.

If one has the opportunity to perform a mitzvah that requires the Shehecheyanu blessing, such as a brit milah, they should recite Shehecheyanu (Shulchan Aruch 551:17). Similarly, one who sees a dear friend after not seeing them for thirty days and is happy to see them, should recite Shehecheyanu, for if they do not recite it, they will miss the opportunity for the blessing.

#### Shopping During the Three Weeks

Since we do not recite Shehecheyanu during the Three Weeks, one should not make purchases that require the Shehecheyanu blessing, such as a new garment or utensil that requires this blessing. However, items that do not require Shehecheyanu because they are not so important, such as socks and undershirts, may be purchased until the end of the month of Tammuz. Similarly, a couple may purchase furniture, because since they are partners in it, the blessing is "Hatov VeHameitiv" (Who is good and does good) and not Shehecheyanu. However, an individual should refrain from buying furniture, as its blessing is Shehecheyanu (ibid. 8:6).

During the Nine Days, business activities are reduced, so one should not purchase joyous items even when they do not require Shehecheyanu, such as socks and undershirts, as well as furniture for family use that requires the "Hatov VeHameitiv" blessing. Online purchases are also included in this prohibition (ibid. 8:15).

#### Weddings

Most Jewish communities have the custom not to perform weddings during the Three Weeks. This is the custom of all Ashkenazi communities and most Sephardic communities, including those from Turkey, Morocco, Babylon, and Yemen.

There are some Sephardic communities that only refrain from weddings during the Nine Days, as written in the Shulchan Aruch (551:2, Yabi'a Omer 6:43).

Grooms from communities that allow weddings until the end of the month of Tammuz may invite a regular band to their wedding, as there is

no joy for a bride and groom without musical instruments. Even those who follow the custom not to get married during these days may participate and dance at their celebration, as it is a mitzvah celebration.

#### Engagements

Large engagement parties should not be held during the Three Weeks. Even those who are lenient about holding weddings are not lenient about holding an engagement party in a hall. However, it is permissible to hold a home engagement party until the end of the month of Tammuz with songs and dancing as is customary, because it is a mitzvah celebration of the couple's agreement to marry.

During the Nine Days, when joy should be reduced, it is forbidden even to hold a modest home engagement party. However, it is permissible for the parents of the bride and groom to meet and set the terms of the wedding. Even though there is joy in this meeting and light refreshments are served, since it will make the relationship between the couple a finalized fact, and it brings them closer to the mitzvah of marriage, it is permitted to hold it. Similarly, it is permissible and even a mitzvah for single people to meet during the Nine Days for the purpose of marriage (ibid. 8:9).

#### Haircuts during the Three Weeks and Nine Days

Our Sages ordained not to get haircuts or launder clothes during the week in which Tisha B'Av falls (Ta'anit 26b). Some Sephardic Jews follow the custom of not getting haircuts from the beginning of the week in which Tisha B'Av falls, but they do get haircuts before then (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 551:3).

However, many communities have adopted the stricter custom of not getting haircuts during the entire Three Weeks. This is the custom of all Ashkenazi Jews, as well as some Sephardic Jews, including those from Morocco and Djerba, and those who follow the customs of the Ari (Rema 551:4; Kaf HaChaim 80; Kitzur Shulchan Aruch Toledano 387:8, Brit Kehuna 2:12). The custom of Jews from Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya is not to get haircuts from the beginning of the month of Av.

#### Haircuts for a Mitzvah Celebration

For a brit milah, when necessary, it is permissible for the father of the baby, the sandak, and the mohel (circumciser) to get haircuts until the week in which Tisha B'Av falls. It is appropriate for a bar mitzvah celebrant not to get a haircut during these days, as he can get a haircut before the 17th of Tammuz. However, the father of a bar mitzvah celebrant who usually shaves every day can shave for his son's bar mitzvah meal until the week in which Tisha B'Av falls.

#### Shaving During the Three Weeks

According to those who observe the custom of not getting haircuts during the Three Weeks, some poskim are of the opinion that one should also be strict about not shaving. Many who are meticulous in observance follow this practice. On the other hand, some believe that there is no prohibition against shaving until the end of the month of Tammuz, because shaving does not involve any festivity but only removes unkemptness. It is appropriate for each person to follow their father's custom. For someone without an established custom, it seems that until the beginning of the month of Av, it is good to shave every Friday for Shabbat, and if they want to shave every day – they are permitted to do so.

However, from the beginning of the month of Av, and even for Shabbat Chazon, according to the custom of Ashkenazi Jews and some Sephardic Jews, it is appropriate not to shave. And in the week in which Tisha B'Av falls, according to all opinions, it is forbidden to shave (Peninei Halakha: Z'manim 8:9). This article appears in the 'Besheva' newspaper and was translated

Rabbi Eliezer Melamed

---

#### Parshat Matot-Masei: The Unique Prophecy of Moses

**Rabbi Dr. Shlomo Riskin is the Founder and Rosh HaYeshiva of Ohr Torah Stone**

"This is the thing [or word] which God has commanded." (Numbers 30:2)

How was Moses different from the many other prophets recorded in the biblical tradition? Was there a distinction only in degree, or was there a

much more fundamental difference, a difference in “kind” between Moses and those who came after him?

The opening verse in the portion of Matot may well provide us with an insight concerning this issue. We read, “And Moses spoke unto the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel saying: ‘This is the thing [or “word,” zeh hadavar] which God has commanded: when a man vows a vow unto God...’” (Numbers 30:2–3).

In his commentary, Rashi cites a midrash (Sifrei) which makes the following distinction between Moses and the other prophets: whereas the other prophets consistently introduced their prophecy with the word, “Thus said God,” (koh amar Hashem), the expression “zeh hadavar asher tziva Hashem” (this is the thing which God has commanded) is unique only to Moses (although koh also appears in Mosaic prophecies), and so zeh represents Moses’ additional and superior prophetic status.

Rashi is apparently lifting Moses above the other prophets; he does not seem, however, to flesh out the substance of this superiority. One of the most important supercommentaries – or commentaries on the primary commentary Rashi – Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrahi, the Re’em (1448–1526, chief rabbi of Constantinople), suggests that the phrase “koh amar Hashem” (thus said God) expresses the intention or the essence of the vision, although not necessarily the vision itself; after all, the other prophets only see “through a glass darkly” (aspaklarya she’eina me’ira). Moses’ prophecy, however, is through “a glass brightly” (aspaklarya me’ira), and therefore he had the power to express precisely what was given to his eye or communicated to his mind, word for word: “zeh,” this is (precisely) the thing, or word.

In Emek HaNetziv, the classic commentary on the Sifrei written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, the author questions any interpretation which could possibly suggest that the vision of the other prophets could be anything less than an exact transmission. Moreover, the Netziv proves that the use of the word koh elsewhere in the Torah is taken by the Talmudic sages to indicate something absolute and exact: for example, when the priests are commanded to bless the Israelites, we read the following words, “And God spoke unto Moses telling him to speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: ‘This [koh] is how you must bless the children of Israel’” (Numbers 6:23). And our sages insist that the blessing is to be recited exactly as presented in the text, twenty-two words, no more and no less, in other words, “This is how you must bless....”

The Netziv therefore explains that what makes the prophecy of Moses unique, and what is the true significance of “this” rather than “thus,” is the fact that Moses communicated the divine word immediately upon his having received it, whereas the other prophets could only process their message after a delay of a period of time; after all, the prophetic state had a paralyzing and debilitating affect on the other prophets, weakening their physical condition, while Moses received the Godly message naturally, without the requirement of time-in-between for recuperation. It was that in-between time which caused the delivery of the message by the other prophets to be less exact.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, the late erudite rabbi of London, called my attention to another commentary of Rabbi Yitzchak Zev Soloveitchik (CHidushei HaGryz) which can truly illuminate our distinction between koh and zeh. When the young shepherd Moses is confronted by a burning bush which is not consumed, the Almighty attempts to convince him to accept the responsibility of Jewish leadership. Moses is hard to convince: “Who am I that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?” (Exodus 3:11). But God counters Moses’ resistance: “Certainly I will be with you” (Exodus 3:12).

The Gryz points out that the real significance of this dialogue is more profound than Moses merely seeking assurance and God guaranteeing “back-up.” Moses is questioning the efficacy of human involvement altogether in what he thinks ought to be a divine mission. After all, did not the Almighty promise the patriarchs that He, God Himself, would act as the redeemer (Midrash Rabba 15)? The interpretation must be that the divine response “I will be with you” is God’s explanation that indeed He will act as the redeemer, but that God acts through human instruments. God requires, as it were, human beings to be His full

partners; the ground rules with which the world is governed require divine objectives to be realized through human agency. Hence, God must insist that He and Moses go to Pharaoh and redeem Israel together; God is choosing Moses to redeem the Israelites alongside of Him!

I would suggest that herein lies the truest distinction between Moses and the other prophets, as well as the significance of the differences in phraseology in the Hebrew text. The other prophets succeeded in receiving and transmitting a divine will; Moses succeeded in living a life and doing deeds which were the human extension of the divine plan, “this is the thing which God commands.” Davar is more than a “word”; it is a thing, an objective and substantive reality. The other prophets conveyed words in accordance with the divine message; Moses, however, changed reality in accordance with the divine plan, in accordance with his actions. The other prophets spoke words which were a transmission of the divine; Moses lived a life which was an extension of the divine. And the Hebrew word zeh can also refer to a human being (ha’ish hazeh, this man), and not only to a word, koh tomar (thus shall you say).

Perhaps this is why the Sifrei chooses to point out this distinction between Moses and the other prophets in the context of the opening verse of our biblical portion Matot, in the context of the laws of oaths and promises. Human beings have the power to alter reality by the oaths and words which they utter, as well as to effectuate forgiveness and absolution by words which they express (Numbers 30:3). The realm of oaths and promises unmistakably points out the almost God-like powers of human beings, the ability of humans to serve in an almost divine capacity as God’s helpers, as God’s partners. It is indeed the most exalted goal of every person to become a vehicle for the expression of the divine will. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch so interprets the biblical words zeh Eli ve’anvehu sung by the Israelites after the splitting of the Red Sea: “This is my God, and I shall be His sanctuary” (Exodus 15:2). Most translators render the verse, “This is my God and I shall glorify Him” from the Hebrew na’eh, to beautify, but Rabbi Hirsch derives the meaning from naveh, which means “home” or “sanctuary.” The human being, his very body acting upon the messenger of his brain, his heart, and his soul – must become the vehicle, the expression, for God’s will in its every word and action.

Moses’ physical being, Moses’ every act and word, was indeed a sanctuary, an extension of the divine. Moses is therefore the greatest of all prophets and the highest human achievement in world history.

Shabbat Shalom

---

[from: Rabbi YY Jacobson <rabbiyy@theyeshiva.net

reply-to: info@theyeshiva.net

date: Aug 1, 2024, 4:05 PM

**Rabbi YY Jacobson**

**The First Marriage Therapist in History**

The Only Yartzeit Mentioned in the Torah is Aaron’s. Why?

Why Aaron?

The Torah never mentions the yartzeit—the day of the passing—of any of its protagonists. We do not know the day when Adam, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Sarah, or Rachel passed away. Even Moses’ day of passing is omitted in the Torah.[1]

There is one single exception: Aaron, the older brother of Moses and the High Priest of Israel. His death is recorded in the weekly portion with a date:

מסעי לג, לח: וַיַּעַל אֶהֱרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אֱלִיָּהוּ הַקָּדוֹשׁ עֲלֵי-פִי ה' וַיָּמָת שָׁם בַּשָּׁנָה הָאַרְבָּעִים לְצֵאת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַחֲמִישִׁי בָּאֶחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ:

Numbers 33:38: Aaron the priest ascended Mount Hor, at the behest of G-d, and died there, in the fortieth year after the Israelites had left the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month.

Why Aaron? Even with his own siblings, Miriam and Moses, we don’t see in the Torah the date of their passing. Why was his passing day enshrined in the biblical text?

What is more, the date of his death is not mentioned in the actual story of his passing (back in Chukas, Numbers ch. 20), where it would seem to belong, but rather in the portion of Massei (Numbers ch. 33), while



discussing the forty-two journeys that the Israelites traveled in the desert—en route from Egypt to the Promised Land.

It is in this context, apparently not relevant to the discussion, that the Torah takes a detour:[2] "They journeyed from Kadesh and camped at Mount Hor, at the edge of the land of Edom. Aaron the High Priest ascended Mount Hor at G-d's behest and died there..."

The Peacemaker

The Lubavitcher Rebbe once offered a moving insight, demonstrating the timeless relevance of the Torah.[3]

Aaron, we know, was the ultimate peace lover and peacemaker among the Jewish people. As Hillel says in the Ethics of the Fathers:[4] "Be of the disciples of Aaron—a lover of peace, a pursuer of peace, one who loves the creatures and draws them close to Torah." Aaron dedicated his life to bringing peace between rivals and quarreling spouses.[5]

When the Torah describes his death, it states:[6] The whole congregation saw that Aaron had expired, and the entire house of Israel wept for Aaron for thirty days.

Why the "entire house of Israel"? When Moses passes away, the Torah states[7] that the "sons of Israel wept for Moses"; but here it was the "entire house." Why the distinction? Rashi explains: "Both the men and the women, for Aaron had pursued peace; he promoted love between disputing parties and between husbands and wives."

The Talmud relates[8] that 80,000 young men who were all given the name "Aaron" came to eulogize Aaron after his passing. They were the children born from parents who wanted to get divorced, and Aaron saved their marriages. They named their babies Aaron, in tribute to the person who saved their marriage and allowed these children to be born.

This means that over forty years in the wilderness, Aaron restored peace and trust among 80,000 Jewish couples. He must have been one busy marriage therapist!

In addition to serving as High Priest, doing the service in the Sanctuary, and being a prophet and teacher himself, he was busy with teaching Jewish couples how to heal and trust. Following decades of trauma in Egyptian exile, this must have been a grueling task, but his love and empathy managed to save marriages.

His efforts were rewarded in kind, with the appearance of Clouds of Glory that served as a unifying force, molding the entire Israelite encampment into a cohesive unit.

The Remedy

Now, we can understand, on a homiletical level, why the yartzeit of Aaron is specified in the Torah -- on the first day of the fifth month of the year, which is the Hebrew month of Av.

1500 years after the death of Aaron, the first of Av would usher in a period known in Jewish law as the "Nine Days," referring to the first nine days of the Hebrew month of Av, a time dedicated to mourning the destruction of the first and second Holy Temples in Jerusalem, which were both burned down on the 9th day of AV (the first by Babylon in 586 BCE, the second by Rome in 70 CE).

The Talmud states:[9] "The second Temple, why was it destroyed? Because the Jews harbored baseless hatred towards each other." This was also true on a political level: The Romans exploited the in-fighting between the Jewish people to defeat Judea.

During the first Temple era, too, it was the ongoing conflicts between the two kingdoms of Israel that weakened the nation, and the violence among Jews which spelled disaster, as the prophets explicitly warn.

"G-d provides the remedy before the disease," says the Talmud.[10] Before any challenge in life, G-d provides the energy to deal with it. The yartzeit of a person, the day when their life journey is completed, is a day in which their energy and light is manifest in a uniquely potent way in the world.[11] So on the first day of Av, when we usher in the Nine Days of grief over our discord and hatred, the Torah tells us we have the yartzeit of Aaron the great peacemaker and unifier—a day in which can connect with Aaron's energy and legacy of love and unity, to repair and heal the rifts and mistrust that caused our exile, and usher in a new era of redemptive consciousness.

That is why the Torah places the day of the yartzeit in the portion of Maasei, which according to Jewish tradition is always read on or right

before the very day of his yartzeit—the first day (Rosh Chodesh) of the month Av. It is during this time of the year that the Torah wants to empower us with the energy of Aaron to restore cohesion, trust, and love among our people.

On every first day of Av, as one can smell the flames of destruction, Aaron casts upon us his power of love, reminding us that we are capable of transcending our fears and our egos, and creating a revolution of love among our eternal but fragmented people. If baseless hatred was the cause of our destruction, baseless love will create our redemption.

A Healthy Heart

A story:[12]

Moshe Tzur, an Israeli Air Force veteran, who has a skill for activism and leadership, returned to Judaism later in his life, and at a visit to the US in the 1970s he visited the Lubavitcher Rebbe. The Rebbe asked him what he was doing to help the Jewish people and the community. Moshe was not that excited about getting involved.

The Rebbe asked him, "Why is the heart of the human being on the left side? Everything important in Judaism is on the right side. We put on tefillin with the right hand, we put the mezuzah on the right side of the door, we shake hands with the right hand, we hold the Torah scroll on our right side, Joseph wanted the blessing of the right arm of his father for his oldest son; in the Temple they always walked to the right, so why is the heart—the organ responsible giving us vitality—on the left?"

The Rebbe shared his vintage answer:

"Your heart is indeed on your right side! Because what is the true function of a heart? To feel and experience the heart of the person standing in front of you; and for the person in front of you, your heart is on the right side. When your heart is linked with others, then indeed your heart is on the "right" side.

Moshe continued to relate his story:

"This message really spoke to me, and I adopted it as the center of my philosophy of life. Since then, my mission in life has been to reach the heart of every Jew that I meet. I returned to Israel, and I established two important yeshivot. One yeshiva is called Aish HaTalmud; it is a yeshiva high school with almost two hundred boys enrolled. The other is called Torat Moshe, with about ninety-five boys. I have also established four kollelim, study groups for married men, with almost a hundred-twenty enrolled."

"In addition, I founded an organization to support poor families for Rosh Hashanah and Passover. These are people who don't have much income, and we help them with food and money. All this because of the words of the Rebbe – that the key is to help others – which changed my perspective on life and shaped my life's mission."

As Israel fights for its existence, we need this love and unity more than ever. We may not all agree on everything, but we must be here for each other like never before.

[1] The Talmud and the Midrash deduce from the verses which dates they passed on, but it is not explicit in the Torah. [2] Numbers 33:37-38 [3] Sichas 29 Tamuz, 5735 (1975). Sichas Motzei Shabbos Matos-Maasei 5739 (1979). Cf. Likkutei Sichos vol. 18 Matos-Maasei pp. 411-12. A similar idea I saw in Sefas Emes Maasei 5659. [4] 1:12 [5] Avos chapter 1. Avod D'Rabi Nosson ch. 12 [6] Numbers 20:29. See also Rashi Rashi Devarim 34:8. [7] Deuteronomy 34:8 [8] Tractate Kallah ch. 3 [9] Yuma 9b [10] Megilah 13b [11] See Tanya Igeres Hakodesh ch 27-28 [12] [https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article\\_cdo/aid/3779581/jewish/Its-Their-Right.htm](https://www.chabad.org/therebbe/article_cdo/aid/3779581/jewish/Its-Their-Right.htm) ]

---

## Perceptions

**By Rabbi Pinchas Winston**

Parshas Matos

Kosher Extraction

THE LAWS OF kashering are many and confusing, and learned from this week's parsha. Thanks to Midian, we're still in exile. Bilaam sent them in, and their impact went far beyond Shittim, causing the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe to choose the land east of the Jordan river. And unfortunately and clearly unbeknownst to them at the time, it cost them and every Jew since then, the final stage of redemption.

Because, by choosing not to settle in Eretz Yisroel, they reduced the magical number of 600,000 necessary to annihilate the Sitra Achra and begin the Messianic Era. Had that many men between the ages of twenty and sixty settled on the west side of the Jordan, evil would have been destroyed forever, and Yemos HaMoshiach would have begun at that time.

Revenge against Midian in this week's parsha therefore was more historic than it might seem. And unlike with respect to the annihilation of Amalek, we were allowed to take spoils of war, which we did. Among the many things taken were cooking implements, and that created the need to talk kashrus, specifically the kashering of treif pots, pans, dishes, etc.

Obviously, everything had to be thoroughly washed and cleaned. That took care of all the mamashos, the traces of food that stuck to the vessels. For the average person, that would have seemed like enough. What else could there be to worry about?

Bliyos. Absorptions. Molecules of food that can, under the right conditions, become absorbed into the walls of a pot, a roasting spit, or a knife, etc. And even though such vessels may seem impervious to everything, especially today given the materials and methods used to make them, halachically, nothing is. With enough heat, bliyos of what is being cooked will split away from the main food and become absorbed in the walls of the cooking instrument.

That's how a pot, etc., can become milchig (dairy) or fleishig (meat) and remain that way even after the food has been removed and the pot has been cleaned. It's the bliyos that were absorbed that do that, and they will remain in the walls of the pot until one of two things happen. Either the pot remains unused for 24 hours, or something is done, like kashering, to draw out the bliyos and make the pot pareve again.

Why 24 hours? Because Tradition teaches that bliyos can only remain detached from their source for 24 hours before they lose their taste, and kashrus is a large part about taste. This works in two ways, because bliyos are something the rest of the world would not consider to be something to worry about in terms of kashrus. On the other hand, they would call something food even though it has lost all taste. Kashrus does not.

This means, technically-speaking, that any pot that sits a full 24 hours without being used and clean of all food automatically becomes pareve once again and, indeed, that is the Torah law. The rabbis however have declared that such a pot remains milchig or fleishig forever until properly kashered. People make mistakes, especially with kashrus, so many halachic fences have been put in place to keep people a safe distance from breaking Torah law.

However because many laws of kashrus are rabbinic in origin, it leaves room for leniencies in emergency situations. No one can pick and choose which rabbinic laws to keep or ignore, but a competent halachic authority can decide in what situations they may or may not apply. This is usually based upon precedents from earlier generations.

The other way to kasher something is prescribed in this week's parsha. Since heat is usually the main culprit in causing bliyos to enter vessels, heat has to be used to rectify the situation as well. How much heat is used to kasher will depend upon how it was used to make something treif in the first place, or to make it milchig or fleishig. The stronger the heat, the deeper the bliyos enter the vessel and likewise, leave it.

That is part of the technical laws of Kashrus. There is mussar in this as well because, like bliyos of food, we get absorbed into the "walls" of exile as well. Depending upon the heat (passion) that was used to cause this, that is how deep a Jew can be absorbed into exile, and that is how much heat (anti-Semitism) will be needed to extract the bliyos.

When Moshe Rabbeinu went down to Egypt, he did not convince everyone of his mission right away. Only a few people joined him, the rest holding out until they too became convinced of his Godly mission. After a few more plagues, some more joined the group, and then a few more.

But even still, after all of that and eight plagues, four-fifths of the Jewish people in Egypt at that time were still not onboard, and died in the Plague of Darkness instead of going out. That was twelve million Jews

altogether who had become absorbed into the Egyptian lifestyle and refused to be extracted! "Rava says: It will be likewise in the Messianic Era" (Sanhedrin 111a.). No wonder Heaven is turning up the heat, and the Diaspora is becoming less and less hospitable.

---

**Shlomo Werdiger <news@agudah.org>**

Dear Friends,

There is a well-known vort from the Chidushei Harim. On the pasuk of V'hotzeisi eschem mitachas sivlos Mitzrayim, I will take you out from under the burdens of Mitzrayim (Shemos 6:6), he explains that the first step to getting out of galus is the realization that we can no longer be sovel it, that it has become intolerable.

Hashem says that He will take away our savlanus, our tolerance, for Mitzrayim and we will realize that we are not in the right place.

Spending time in Washington DC last week was, for me, the perfect way to get into the mindset of the Three Weeks, a chance to contemplate the fact that even as we continue to prosper and grow in this medina shel chesed, we are still very much in Galus.

Prime Minister Netanyahu had come to deliver a speech - an impassioned plea!- to the United States congress, asking them to stand behind him and his people at a particularly difficult hour for their country.

It was a well-received speech, one which received thunderous and sustained applause from the gallery, and from so many of our friends in Congress. Personally, I got lots of feedback because of the visibly warm reception he gave me and my wife, which, to be honest, has less to do with personal prestige and more to do with his need to connect with people of emunah, to know that our tzibbur is davening along with him. We had a robust minyan for mincha, and there was food with a trusted hechsher served at the private reception after the speech: on the surface it appeared to be a successful trip to DC.

But all that is just external, one small part of the story at most.

There was another dimension to the speech, one that was not captured by the cameras and this was the undercurrent of antipathy that pervaded certain sections of the floor of the house as the Prime Minister spoke.

The level of animus was disconcerting and the source of it was even more alarming: our "friends", those who have graced our dinners and smilingly greeted our askanim over the years, the ones who have pledged their love for our people at every opportunity, who saw it as politically convenient to stand publicly with us, have switched sides.

It was worrisome - but also, in a strange way, empowering, because it was a stark reminder that we are in the Ribbono shel Olam's hands and only in His hands, with no other friends or allies to count on.

I left the nation's capital thinking about how in these Three Weeks, each one of us has to work harder not only to daven for Acheinu kol beis Yisrael, but to make it clear where we belong, and Who we take orders from.

Ein lanu al mi l'hishaen - we have nowhere else to turn.

If, as the Chidushei Harim said, the first step is to cry out, "We can't take it anymore," then we are a lot closer today than we were last year at this time.

May the Ribbono shel Olam see our sincerity, our loyalty, and our hope and draw us closer than ever.

Shloime

---

## **Tearing Keri'ah for the Beis Hamikdash**

**By Rabbi Yirmiyohu Kaganoff**

Introduction:

This is obviously an appropriate week to discuss the halachos regarding the agony we are to feel when seeing the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash. I want to note that, for various well-meaning but incorrect reasons, people are very lenient about these laws. However, it is clear from the Gemara and the halachic authorities that we are to feel tremendous anguish when seeing the destruction of our Beis Hamikdash area and to express this agony by tearing keri'ah on a garment that we are wearing at the time. Thus, various approaches, such as visiting the Kosel

on erev Shabbos or “selling your clothes” to someone else, are probably all invalid (Shu”t Teshuvos Vehanhagos 1:334; Orchos Rabbeinu #2 page 149; Makom Hamikdash page 7) and certainly do not reflect the proper hashkafah.

The Gemara (Mo’eid Katan 26a) states: Someone who rends his clothes because of the passing of his father, mother, his rebbe who taught him Torah, the king of Klal Yisrael, the head of the beis din or upon hearing other bad tidings -- including hearing someone curse Hashem or he observed a sefer Torah being burned or he saw the destroyed cities of Yehudah, the Beis Hamikdash, or Yerushalayim -- may not reweave the garment afterward to mend it (see Hagahos Maimaniyos, Hilchos Aveil 9:3). Improperly stitching or pinning the garment closed afterward is permitted (Rambam, Hilchos Aveil 9:3). A woman should pin her torn garment closed (Mo’eid Katan 22b; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 340:15).

From this Gemara, the Rishonim and poskim derive the obligation to tear one’s garments upon seeing the destroyed cities of Yehudah, Yerushalayim or the Beis Hamikdash (Rambam, Hilchos Ta’anis 5:16; Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 561). As is evident from the Gemara and the Rambam, the point of tearing one’s garments over the calamity of the destruction is to express one’s sorrow over these tragic events.

The laws of keriah apply equally to men and women, the only distinction being that a woman should tear in a tzeniyus way (Mo’eid Katan 22b; Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 340:11; Shach 340:22). Most authorities rule that a child under bar or bas mitzvah does not tear keriah upon observing the site of the Beis Hamikdash.

Keriah must be performed while standing (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah 340:1). The rending should be on the front of the garment and from the top, near the collar, downward. The torn area should be a tefach (Shulchan Aruch, Yoreh Deah, 340:3), about three inches long.

How many garments does one tear?

Germane to one who tears keriah for the loss of a close relative, the Gemara lists several halachic stringencies that apply when tearing keriah for the loss of a parent that do not apply when tearing keriah for other relatives. When tearing keriah for the loss of a parent, the tearing must be done by hand and includes a requirement to tear any garment worn at the time that is included in the laws of keriah, regardless as to how many one is wearing (Mo’eid Katan 22b). As we will see shortly, this excludes both undergarments and coats and similar outer garments. After the loss of any other relative, one tears only one garment, and it may be torn by using a scissors or knife. We will soon explain which garments are excluded and what is the halacha germane to someone tearing his garment because he sees the Beis Hamikdash grounds.

There is no requirement to be wearing many garments when tearing keriah for a parent, but any garment that qualifies for the rules of keriah (see below) that is worn at the time must be torn.

Which garment does one tear?

Which garment is one required to tear upon seeing the destroyed remnants of the Beis Hamikdash? Prior to answering this question, I need to provide some background, regarding the laws of rending keriah for the loss of a close relative. Based on the descriptions provided by Chazal, the rishonim explain that there is no requirement to tear garments worn next to the body that are meant to “absorb perspiration.” Nor is there a requirement to tear garments that are worn only outside the house, such as a coat, but something worn both indoors and outdoors must be rent (Aruch Hashulchan, Yoreh Deah 340:9).

In practical halacha, there is a dispute among the early poskim which garment to tear for the loss of a close relative (Yoreh Deah 340:10 with Taz and Nekudos Hakesef). The common practice among Ashkenazim in America is to tear keriah on a jacket, whereas the common practice in Eretz Yisrael is to tear keriah on a shirt.

Common custom is that, upon losing a parent, one tears keriah on the left side of a garment, and the halacha requires that it be from the top of the garment downward. The left side is torn, in the case of a parent, because of the reference of Chazal that, in this instance, one should tear until he “reveals his heart,” and the heart is on the left side.

Custom is that someone who lost a different relative tears keriah on the right side of the garment. Someone who tore on the right side for a parent or on the left side for someone other than a parent has fulfilled the mitzvah and should not make another tear, provided he tore the front part of the garment (Rema, Yoreh Deah, 340:2).

How to tear for the Beis Hamikdash

Someone should feel as emotional about the loss of our Beis Hamikdash as he feels about the loss of a parent, and, therefore, should tear “until he reveals his heart,” meaning, on his left side. How many garments must he tear?

This is the subject of a dispute among the rishonim. The Rambam (Hilchos Ta’anis, 5:17) understands that, since the Gemara rules that the tearing performed for a parent and for the Beis Hamikdash may never be repaired, we see that tearing for the Beis Hamikdash is considered the more severe type of tearing and should therefore be on all his garments. In the Rambam’s opinion, just as someone tearing keriah upon the loss of a parent is required to tear his jacket, his shirt and any other garments that he might be wearing; someone tearing because of loss of the Beis Hamikdash should tear all the garments he is wearing at the time – perhaps even his jacket, sweater and shirt.

On the other hand, the Ra’avad (ad loc.) and other rishonim (Magid Mishnah ad loc.) rule that, although the tear rended because of the Beis Hamikdash can never be repaired, there is no requirement to tear all his garments, only one. Although the Shulchan Aruch (Orach Chaim 561:4) concludes like the stringent opinion of the Rambam to tear all the garments being worn, and specifically only by hand, the accepted practice is to tear only one garment, usually a shirt, and to allow use of an instrument to make the tear (Ir Hakodesh Vehamikdash, Volume 3, 17:1.1; Shu”t Minchas Shlomo 1:73).

The custom is to tear a shirt and, as mentioned above, to tear it on his left side, from the collar area of the shirt downward one tefach.

Yerushalayim today

Above, we quoted the Gemara that requires tearing keriah when seeing cities in Yehudah that are destroyed and when seeing Yerushalayim. The poskim rule that this does not refer to the newer areas of Yerushalayim, which were not destroyed at the time of the churban (see also Sha’arei Teshuvah 561:1).

The more recent authorities dispute whether seeing Yerushalayim nowadays, when the city is, thank G-d, rebuilt with a large Jewish population, still requires tearing keriah. Some contend that since today there is a sizable Jewish population in Yerushalayim, one does not need to tear keriah when seeing the city (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 5:37), whereas others contend that, since the city is still not in the ideal way the Torah would like it to be, we should still tear keriah upon seeing it (Shu”t Minchas Shlomo, 1:73; Shu”t Shevet Halevi, 7:78).

The common custom is not to tear upon seeing Yerushalayim (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 5:37).

Upon seeing the place where the Beis Hamikdash once stood, everyone agrees that there is an obligation to tear one’s clothes (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 4:70:11; 5:37). When we speak about the obligation to tear one’s clothes upon seeing the place of the Beis Hamikdash, what does one have to see? Does one have to see the actual ground where the Beis Hamikdash stood on Har Habayis, also called Har Hamoriah, the top of the mountain where the Beis Hamikdash stood? Perhaps it is sufficient to see the mosque or the Dome of the Rock that stands where the Beis Hamikdash once stood? Or is it sufficient just to see the Kosel, which is the wall surrounding the Har Habayis (Makom Hamikdash page 6)?

There are poskim who hold that tearing keriah opposite the Kosel fulfills the mitzvah (Shu”t Igros Moshe, Orach Chaim 4:70:11; Halichos Shlomo, Tefillah, chap. 16, footnote #15; see Makom Hamikdash page 6). However, this matter is disputed, since the Kosel is the wall surrounding the Har Habayis, the top of Mount Moriah, and is not where the Beis Hamikdash stood. Although Har Habayis has kedusha, and the gedolim of previous generations across the hashkafic spectrum banned entering the Har Habayis until we again have ashes of the parah adumah,

many poskim rule that tearing keri'ah is for seeing the area of the Beis Hamikdash itself or signs of its destruction.

Some authorities contend that it is preferable to see the actual floor of the Har Habayis before tearing. This involves finding a high enough point from which he can see over the walls surrounding Har Habayis, such as from parts of Har Hazeisim, Har Hatzofim, or perhaps a rooftop within the Old City (Shu"t Teshuvos Vehanhagos, 1:331 in the name of the Brisker Rav). However, most authorities rule that seeing the mosque or the Dome of the Rock is sufficient. After all, the Gemara states that something attached to the ground is considered like the ground itself (see Shabbos 81a; Gittin 39a). Therefore, since both the mosque and the Dome of the Rock standing on Har HaBayis are connected to the ground, seeing either of them is the equivalent to seeing the ground itself (Zichron Betzalel 38:2). More importantly, there is perhaps no greater indication of the churban than seeing a mosque on the site where the Beis Hamikdash should be (Sefer Eretz Yisrael; Halichos Shlomo, Tefillah, chap. 16, footnote #15).

#### Standing

As mentioned above, keri'ah must be made while standing (Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chayim 561:4), unless the person is physically unable to stand. Someone who tore his garment while sitting or while leaning on something with enough weight that he would fall if it was removed suddenly, has not fulfilled the mitzvah of keri'ah and must tear again. Therefore, someone who sees the area where the Beis Hamikdash once stood or something constructed on its site while riding in a car or a bus should not tear while seated. If he can, he should get out of the vehicle and tear.

#### The proper procedure

The Bach (Orach Chayim 561) cites the following: Someone who enters Yerushalayim and sees where the Beis Hamikdash stood is required to bow facing its direction, tear his clothes, cry, moan, mourn and feel sorrow over the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash -- crying in a bitter way and reciting first the 79th chapter of Tehillim describing how the gentiles entered, contaminated and destroyed Hashem's holy sanctuary. When tearing keri'ah, he should recite the words, baruch Dayan ha'emes, without the Name of Hashem. He then recites several pesukim: Devarim 32:4; Nechemiah 9:33; Eichah 2:9. Other sefarim present other, similar procedures.

The Bach then explains that the recital of this passage and these pesukim is so that it is obvious why he is rending his clothes. Although the ruling that someone cry and moan about the churban is not mentioned in the Gemara specifically in reference to seeing the destroyed location of the Beis Hamikdash, the Bach notes that common sense dictates that one act as if his loved one lies dead in front of him. This idea is implied by the pasuk in Yirmiyahu (41:5).

#### Thirty days

Someone who saw the place where the Beis Hamikdash once stood and tore keri'ah is not required to tear keri'ah again, until thirty days have passed since the last time that he saw it (see Yerushalmi, Brachos 9:2; Rambam, Hilchos Ta'anis 5:18). The Magen Avraham (561:6) notes that someone born in Yerushalayim may never be required to tear keri'ah for the destruction of the Beis Hamikdash, if he saw the area of the churban within 30 days before turning bar mitzvah, and then returns to it within every thirty days.

#### Second visit

Someone who did not tear his garment upon seeing the churban hamikdash area, either because he was unaware of the halacha or because he was unable to (such as, it was Shabbos) and revisits the area within thirty days, must he tear now, since he did not tear the first time? This question is disputed by the poskim. Rav Moshe Feinstein maintains that he must tear his garment at his next visit (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 3:52:4), whereas Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach contends that he is exempt (Shu"t Minchas Shlomo, 1:73) and notes that this is the accepted practice.

Someone who arrives at the Kosel dressed for Shabbos, and will not have anything else appropriate to wear on Shabbos, is exempt from

tearing (Shu"t Igros Moshe, Yoreh Deah 3:52:4 and Orach Chaim 5:37; Shu"t Minchas Shlomo, 1:73).

#### Chol Hamo'eid

Does someone who sees the Beis Hamikdash area on chol hamo'eid tear keri'ah? Although the halacha implies that there is an obligation to tear even on chol hamo'eid, the minhag is to follow the opinions of the rishonim that one does not tear on those days (Shu"t Minchas Shlomo, 1:73).

#### Yerushalayim residents

Some authorities contend that Yerushalayim residents do not need to tear again, even if they did not see the place of the churban for thirty days (Birkei Yosef, Orach Chayim 561:2; Sha'arei Teshuvah 561). This is the prevailing practice, although there is much discussion among late authorities whether it is halachically correct (Sha'arei Teshuvah 561; Shu"t Shevet Halevi 7:78; Shu"t Divrei Yetziv 1:89; Zichron Betzalel #38).

I have been told that Rav Shlomo Zalman Auerbach explained the reason why the minhag is not to tear is because a person living in Yerushalayim who does not come to the Kosel at least once a month indicates that he does not feel the pain of the churban, and there is no point for him to tear his clothes.

#### Meat and wine

The Mishnah Berurah (561:4) rules that the first time someone tears keri'ah for seeing the destroyed Beis Hamikdash, it is proper that he not eat meat or drink wine that day.

#### Conclusion

The prophet Yeshaya declared: "Exult with Yerushalayim and rejoice over her, all those who love her. Rejoice with her rejoicing all those who mourned over her" (Yeshaya 66:10). "From here we see," says the Gemara, "that whoever mourns over Yerushalayim will merit to see her happiness, and whoever does not mourn over Yerushalayim will not merit to see her happiness" (Ta'anis 30b).

The Midrash (Midrash Rabbah, Shemos 15:21) teaches that Hashem will bring forth ten new creations in the era of Moshiach:

1. He will endow the world with a new light.
2. Hashem will create a spring in Yerushalayim whose waters will heal all illness.
3. He will create trees that will produce new fruits every month that cure disease.
4. All the cities of Eretz Yisrael will be rebuilt, including even Sodom and Amora.
5. Hashem will rebuild Yerushalayim with glowing sapphire stone. It will attract all the nations of the world to come and marvel at the beauty of the city.
6. The cow and the bear will graze together, and their young will play together (see Yeshaya 11:7). The commentaries dispute whether this pasuk is meant to be understood literally or as a parable for the nations of the earth.
7. Hashem will make a covenant with all the creatures of the world and banish all weapons and warfare (see Hoshea 2:20).
8. There will be no more crying in the city of Yerushalayim.
9. Death will perish forever.
10. Everyone will be joyful, and there will be an end to all sighing and worry.

May we all merit seeing these miracles speedily and in our days.

---

#### Drasha

##### By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

Parshas Masei

#### Kinder and Gentler Killers

This week we read about the cities of refuge. A man who kills someone accidentally is exiled to an Ir Miklat, a city of refuge. In addition to killers, a very distinguished group of people, the Levites, lived in those cities. Their job was something similar to today's Rabbis. They traveled throughout Israel, teaching and preaching. The Levites would return to their homes and neighbors, people who killed through carelessness, who

were convianslaughter of sorts. They played an integral role in the killer's rehabilitation.

The sentence imposed on the killers was also very unique. It was not defined by time, but rather by circumstance. The killers would go free only when the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would die. The Talmud in Makos tells us that the Kohen Gadol's family members were quite worried. They were not concerned that there would be an assassination plot against the Kohen Gadol's life. They were worried that the convicts would pray that the Kohen Gadol would die before his due time, thus releasing them early. In order to dissuade them, the mother of the Kohen Gadol would distribute food and clothing to the inmates to deter them from praying that her son die.

It is hard to understand. Are there no loved ones waiting for these outcasts with food and clothing to be offered upon release? Were the Kohen Gadol's mom's cookies worth exile in the city of refuge? How did these gifts work as bribes?

Reb Aryeh Levine took it upon himself to visit Jewish inmates, mostly members of the Irgun, held under British rule prior to Israel's statehood. He became like a father to those prisoners, bringing them food, clothes and love. For years, despite sweltering heat and frigid rains, he never missed a Shabbos visit, save one.

Once, in the midst of a Shabbos service, a very excited messenger called him out of the prison. Reb Aryeh's daughter had become paralyzed and the doctors were helpless. He was needed for support at home, immediately. After the Shabbos, an Arab messenger was sent by the concerned inmates to inquire what tragedy interrupted the weekly visit.

The next Shabbos, despite the enduring tragedy at home, the Rabbi went to the prison as usual. Normally during the Torah reading, prisoners would pledge a few coins to charity. This week the donations were far different.

"I will give up a week of my life for the sake of Reb Aryeh's daughter," the first convict pledged. Another prisoner announced that he would give a month from his. Each one called to the Torah upped the previous pledge until the last prisoner cried out, "what is our life compared to Reb Aryeh's anguish? I will give all my remaining days for the sake of the Rabbi's daughter."

At this unbelievable display of love and affection, Reb Aryeh broke down and wept.

Miraculous as it may sound, that Saturday night Reb Aryeh's daughter began to move and within days was fully recovered.

The cities of refuge were not jails, nor were they mere detention camps. They were environments in which reckless people became aware that careless actions have serious ramifications. They were constantly under the influence of their neighbors, the Levites. They would observe them pray, learn, and teach others. They would see the epitome of awareness and care for fellow beings.

The mission of the Kohen Gadol's mother was not just to distribute food. It was to develop a bond with those people whose carelessness spurred a death. They saw the love a parent had for her son as she subconsciously plead with the inmates to spare her child. They saw how a total stranger, despite her great esteem, would make sure that their needs in the city of refuge were cared for. They may have even thought of the loved one they killed and his family.

After developing an awareness of life, they would never be able to pray for the death of anyone, even if it meant their own freedom. In fact, they, like Reb Aryeh's prisoners, may have offered their years for the merit of the Kohen Gadol.

The Torah can not punish without teaching and rehabilitating. It infuses a love for life and spirituality into former careless killers. Its goal is to mold a new person whose attitudes will cause him to be kinder, gentler, and a lot more careful.

The story was adapted from A Tzadik in Our Time, by Simcha Raz, (c) 1976 Feldheim Publishers.

Good Shabbos!

**By Rabbi Yisroel Ciner**

Parshas Matos

'I Didn't Take Your Spoons!'

This week we read the double parsha of Mattos-Massoy thereby concluding the Sefer {Book} of Bamidbar. The nation of Moav, afraid of Bnei Yisroel, joined forces together with Midyan and hired Bilaam to curse Bnei Yisroel. When that proved unsuccessful, Bilaam offered them devious advice which led to Bnei Yisroel's succumbing to the idolatry of Baal P'ore. This, in turn, led to the death of twenty four thousand Jews.

"And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: N'kome nikmas Bnei Yisroel me'eis haMidyanim {avenge the revenge of Bnei Yisroel against the Midyanites} achar tay'a'seif el amecha {then you will 'gather to your nation (die)}.[31:1-2]" Hashem made it clear to Moshe that this would be the final mitzvah {commandment} before his death. Yet Moshe, with unfaltering zealotry, immediately began to implement it. Why was there a command to avenge Midyan, but not against Moav who had initiated the partnership with Midyan and who had actually hired Bilaam to curse?

Rashi explains that Moav had a legitimate fear. Bnei Yisroel, on their way to Eretz Yisroel, had wiped out the nations of Sichon and Og and had conquered their land. They were now heading for Moav. Moav was therefore acting in self defense.

Midyan, on the other hand, had nothing to fear. Bnei Yisroel were not heading toward them. They get involved in a fight that wasn't theirs—that didn't involve them. The command to avenge was therefore only against Midyan.

We are now in the midst of 'The Three Weeks' during which we mourn the destruction of both the First and Second Temple. The Temple could never have been destroyed through a simple battle. Only the degeneration of Bnei Yisroel's spiritual standing could cause the Shechinah {Hashem's holy presence} to leave the Temple. Only then, stripped of its holiness, could it be destroyed.

The Talmud teaches that the First Temple was destroyed through our involvement in idolatry, incestuous relationships and murder. However, during the time of the Second Temple we were involved in Torah, mitzvos {fulfillment of commandments} and acts of kindness. Why was that destroyed? The Talmud teaches that it was because of sin'as chinam {baseless hatred}. >From here we derive that sin'as chinam is equal to idolatry, incestuous relationships and murder [Yuma 9B].

The Ro"sh warns not to get involved in an argument that doesn't involve you. "In the end they will make peace and you will remain with anger." They had a point of contention. Once that becomes resolved, their anger also rests. However, you, whose anger was not based on a real issue, will never fully resolve that anger.

The fact that we are still in the exile of the Second Temple today clearly shows that we are still plagued by the scourge of sin'as chinam. As a bent paper can only be straightened by bending it the other way, so too we must try to go to the other extreme in our interpersonal relationships. Viewing all others as the children of Hashem, de facto brothers of ours, and showering them with ahavas chinam {baseless love}.

The Zichron Meir offers a beautiful insight. In the Shoshanas Yaakov prayer recited on Purim we state: "Cursed is Haman who tried to destroy me, blessed is Mordechai." Why is a reason given for us to curse Haman but no reason given for us to bless Mordechai? He explains that even a Haman could not be cursed without a very valid reason. Every person was created in the 'form' of Hashem and is therefore dear and special. Our hatred of Haman is only because of his want to destroy us. However, to bless and love Mordechai—for that no reason needs to be given. Ahavas chinam...

He writes that the way of scholars is to be "marbeh shalom ba'olam"—to increase the peace of the world. Not only to abstain from hating others and not only to love them but to actively increase the peace in the world. I saw a beautiful story in a book entitled "Gut Voch" (and I thank my father for always searching out and sending me books to aid me in my writing—sheli shelcha). Rav Abish Frankfurter was traveling to Frankfurt

to begin his tenure as the Rav there. On the way he stopped at an inn where he was given a room to share with a merchant.

A robber furtively entered their room that night and stole valuable spoons from the merchant. Early the next morning, Rav Abish arose, prayed and resumed his journey. When the merchant awoke, he saw that his roommate had left and realized that his valuable spoons were also missing. Unaware of the towering stature of his roommate, he assumed that the quiet, simple-looking man had stolen them. He dashed to the station where the wagon drivers would await customers and hired the fastest driver. Having been offered double fare if he'd catch up to the 'thief', the driver whipped his horses and pursued the unsuspecting Rav Abish.

Finally overtaking the bewildered Rav Abish, the merchant began to shout at him to return his spoons. "I don't know what you're talking about!" cried Rav Abish. "I never saw any spoons and I certainly didn't take them!"

The merchant grabbed Rav Abish and pulled him off his wagon, demanding that he reveal where he had hidden the spoons. When Rav Abish didn't reply, he tied the poor, innocent man to a tree and began to whip him mercilessly. When the merchant saw that his torment wasn't loosening his tongue, he stalked off to the inn, leaving poor Rav Abish behind, still tied to the tree.

Rav Abish finally managed to untie the bounds and, bruised, battered and humiliated, he made his way to Frankfurt. There he was greeted by a large crowd who had come to honor their new Rav. He disguised his pain and returned their smiles and greetings.

The next day, Rav Abish delivered a brilliant two hour shiur {lecture} which awed the townspeople. Afterwards, people crowded around their new Rav to discuss various points with him.

Among them was none other than the merchant from the inn who kept wondering why the voice had sounded so familiar to him. Suddenly he realized that the 'thief' he had tied to a tree and beaten was none other than the new Rav of Frankfurt. Horrified, he shrank into his seat, wondering if the Rav would ever forgive him.

He finally gathered the courage and approached the Rav with his head bent in shame and remorse.

Rav Abish immediately recognized the man standing before him. Though he was still standing in front of hundreds who were admiring his brilliance, the Rav gave no thought to his own dignity. He ran to the merchant and cried over and over, "Please believe me, I never took your spoons. Please, please believe me..."

Scholars are "marbeh shalom ba'olam"—they increase the peace in the world. Ahavas chinam. Chazak, chazak v'nischazek.

Good Shabbos,  
Yisroel Ciner

---

## Rav Kook Torah

### Massei: The Merit of Building the Land of Israel

"You shall take possession of the Land and settle in it; for I have given you the Land to possess it." (Num. 33:53)

The Ramban interpreted this verse as the Biblical source for the mitzvah to settle and build up the Land of Israel.

#### The Yemenite Visitor

The following remarkable story was told by Mr. Yigal Gal-Ezer, who served as Israel's vice state comptroller. In his younger days, Gal-Ezer would often visit Rav Kook's home to be inspired by his holy presence. During one of my visits, I found the rabbi in his study, engrossed in a complex Talmudic topic. Suddenly I heard a hesitant knocking at the door. The door opened partially, and a Yemenite Jew — slight of stature, with streaks of white in his beard and long peiyot — entered the room.

The guest closed the door behind him and stood in the doorway, his back to the door. He lowered his head to the floor, afraid to look at the rabbi directly.

Rav Kook raised his eyes from his Talmud and looked at the man kindly. "Come closer, my son." With a gentle voice, the rabbi tried to instill confidence in the visitor.

With slow steps, the man approached the rabbi's desk. He remained standing, head down.

"What troubles you, my son?"

"Honored rabbi," the Yemenite said. "I came to ask the rabbi an important question."

"Ask, my son, ask."

"For twenty-five years, I have engaged in backbreaking labor, working from morning till evening. I weeded plots of land so that orchards could be planted. I planted saplings, removed stones from fields, and dug foundations for buildings in Eretz Yisrael. I have spent all my strength in exhausting manual labor. And yet I barely earn enough to support my family."

Embarrassed, the Yemenite lowered his voice. "I would like to ask," he said hesitantly, "is it permissible for me to immigrate to America? Perhaps there my fortune will shine and I will be able to properly support my family...." The visitor finished his short speech and stood in silence.

For several minutes, Rav Kook remained deep in thought. Suddenly, he rose from his seat, pointed to his chair, and instructed the man, "Sit."

The visitor was filled with trepidation. "Honored Rabbi," he stammered. "It is improper that a stranger should sit on your chair."

"Sit," the rabbi repeated firmly.

With short, reluctant steps, the Yemenite circled around the desk until he reached the rabbi's chair. He slowly lowered himself into the seat.

#### The Dream

As soon as he settled in the chair, his head dropped to the desk and he fell into a deep sleep. A short while later, he awoke, startled.

"What happened when you slept?" asked the Rav.

"I dreamt that I had passed on to the next world," he recounted. "My soul ascended to heaven. When I reached heaven's gates, an angel stood at the entrance and directed me to the heavenly court. There I saw scales — scales of justice."

The Yemenite laborer continued his account. "Suddenly, carriages drawn by horses rushed in front of me. The carriages were loaded with packages. Some of the packages were small, some medium-sized, and some large. The angels proceeded to unload the packages and place them on one side of the scales. That side of the scales plunged downwards due to the weight, until it nearly touched the ground."

"What is the meaning of these packages?" I asked the angel standing before me.

"These," the angel responded, "are your sins and transgressions from your earthly days. Everything is accounted for."

Hearing this, my spirits sank.

Then other carriages arrived. These carriages were loaded with dirt, rocks, stones, and sand. As the angels loaded them on the other side of the scales, it began to lift up — slightly — the side bearing the sins and transgressions.

"What is the meaning of these bundles of dirt?" I asked.

"These are the stones, the rocks, and the dirt which your hands labored to remove from the ground of the Holy Land," the angel explained. "They have come to speak in your defense, testifying to your role in the mitzvah of yishuv ha'aretz, settling the Land of Israel."

"Trembling, I stared at the side of merits. I watched as it dipped lower and lower, lifting the opposite side. Finally, the side of merits stopped moving. It came to a halt as it outweighed the sins — but just barely."

"You see, my son," Rav Kook told the man gently. "You have received your answer from Heaven."

---

## Parshas Mattos-Masei

### Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moises ben Shabtai, Moises Behar.

#### Man of Your Word

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisroel saying, "This is the matter that Hashem commanded: If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath [...] (30:2-3).

Parshas Mattos begins with Moshe introducing the laws of vows to the heads of the tribes. Rashi (ad loc) points out that this was a remarkable departure from Moshe's usual method of teaching the laws of the Torah to Bnei Yisroel and that Moshe taught the heads of the tribes first as a way of according them honor. Rashi also notes that a tribunal of three common people can nullify a vow if no expert in vows is available.

The holy day of Yom Kippur begins with this concept of vows – Kol Nidrei. What is so essential about the laws of vows that it opens the service on what is arguably the most intense day on the Jewish calendar? The Talmud (Bava Basra 88a) comments on the verse “speaks truth in his heart” (Psalms 15) as referring to someone who truly fears Hashem. Curiously, the Gemara found it necessary to give an example of such a person: Rav Safra. Rashi (ad loc) goes on to explain how Rav Safra came to be the paragon of this virtue:

Rav Safra was in the middle of saying Krias Shema when someone approached him to buy something that Rav Safra was selling. The buyer proceeded to offer a sum of money for the item he wished to buy. Rav Safra, who was still davening, was silent. The buyer understood Rav Safra's silence as a reluctance to sell because the sum wasn't high enough, so he kept raising his offer until it was a very large sum of money. Once Rav Safra finished his prayers he turned to the buyer and sold it to him for the original price offered. Rav Safra explained, “I had already decided after hearing your first offer to accept the original amount offered.”

Most people grow up valuing the concept of “keeping your word.” Unfortunately, modern society has all but abandoned this ideal, in fact in some cultures a signed contract is only a basis for further negotiation. In general, this notion of being “a man (or woman) of your word” is seen as being morally binding because once you give your word someone else has ownership over your expected performance, which in turn causes them to make decisions and commitments of their own based on your word.

However, we see from the Gemara that there is really a much more profound reason for keeping your word. The story that Rashi cites has nothing to do with keeping your word; Rav Safra was silent the entire time, he never committed to a price. Why was Rav Safra bound to fulfill the price that he had only agreed to in his mind?

The answer is that there is a much higher truth that we are ALL bound to: we are obligated to be truthful to ourselves. We don't have to live up to our word because someone else has relied on it and made decisions based upon it; we have to fulfill our promises because we said it and we have an obligation to ourselves to make it a reality. This is why the verse says, “speaks truth in his heart” (Psalms 15): It has nothing to do with our commitments to other people – the basis for keeping our word is because we owe it to ourselves. That is what the whole discussion in this week's parsha regarding vows is all about: when a person takes something that is permitted and forbids it from himself.

We often feel like we own the rights to ourselves. Therefore, even if we make commitments to ourselves (I will stop smoking, I will lose weight, etc.) we often have no compunction at all, or perhaps only a fleeting sense of guilt, about breaking those promises to ourselves. This is wrong. We don't own ourselves, we are here as a gift of the Almighty. Our responsibility to ourselves lies in the obligation to Hashem; that's why the Gemara calls those like Rav Safra “those that truly fear Hashem.”

This is why the subject of vows is so central to the Yom Kippur service. We acknowledge that we understand that even within commitments to ourselves we have an obligation to Hashem. Only when we articulate the severity of the obligation that comes with giving our word can we

commit to fulfilling our word and changing our ways through teshuvah. This is the very essence of Yom Kippur, and thus why we begin with Kol Nidrei.

#### Violations and Obligations

Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, “Take vengeance for Bnei Yisroel from the Midianites [...]” (31:1-2).

Hashem asks Moshe to go to war with Midian and take revenge for what they did to the Jewish people. Interestingly enough, Moshe chooses not to go himself, but rather sends Pinchas to lead Bnei Yisroel into battle. This seems somewhat odd as Hashem told Moshe to take vengeance on the Midianites. Why didn't he go himself? Is it possible that it was because he was getting up there in years? However, just shortly prior, Moshe himself defeated the two greatest world powers: Sichon and Og. So why didn't Moshe go to fight the Midianites as Hashem had commanded?

There is a concept known as hakoras hatov – recognizing the good that someone has done for us. We see this in Egypt when it came to striking the water to create the plagues of blood and frogs. Aharon was asked to perform these plagues instead of Moshe because both these plagues entailed afflicting the Nile, so to speak, and the Nile had served to protect Moshe when he was a baby (see Rashi Shemos 7:19). Similarly, Moshe was not permitted to strike the ground for the third plague (lice) because the earth had helped him by hiding the corpse of the Egyptian that he struck down (see Rashi Shemos 8:12).

So too, Moshe could not possibly attack the Midianites as he owed them a debt of gratitude from when he was a fugitive from Egyptian justice. Eventually, he also married the daughter of Yisro, a high priest in Midian, and had children there.

We see something quite fascinating here; even though Hashem clearly told Moshe to go and take vengeance from the Midianites, Moshe understood that he himself could not go because that would display a deep sense of personal disloyalty. The Torah is teaching us an incredible lesson: Hashem doesn't just issue a command and in doing so, abrogate a core principle and tenet of Jewish philosophy. Moshe understood that even though Hashem wanted the Midianites to pay for what they had done, it was inappropriate for him to lead an attack.

This message is often lost on those who blindly follow what they believe to be the right course of religious action, believing they are doing it for the sake of Hashem. In fact, the Torah gives us an example of a person who had every intention of acting for the sake of heaven, but the Torah castigates her for what she wanted to do. The wife of Potiphar tried to seduce Yosef in order to have children with him – believing that she saw in her astrological signs that some of the Jewish tribes would descend from her. The Torah considers her act so repulsive that she is called a “wild animal” for what she wanted to do; even though she thought she was doing it for the sake of Hashem.

Having the right intention isn't enough. We cannot abrogate Hashem's other commandments to fulfill those that we would like to do, or to make social commentary (e.g. throwing rocks on Shabbos at cars traveling through a religious neighborhood). We must remember that Hashem places the highest importance on the value of shalom, even allowing His name to be erased for the possibility of shalom. Finally, it is important to remember that Hashem destroyed the generation of the flood because they were fighting with each other, while he kept the generation of the disbursement alive because they got along (even though their unity was really only grounded in fighting a war against Hashem).

---

#### לע"נ

שרה משא בת ר' יעקב אליעזר ע"ה  
ביילא בת (אריה) לייב ע"ה  
אנא מלכה בת ישראל



## **PARASHAT MATOT: SECRET STRUGGLE**

by Rabbi Eitan Mayer

### **SETTING THE SCENE:**

In the end of our parasha, two shevatim (tribes) approach the leaders of the nation with a request. The tribes: Re'uvein and Gad. The leaders: Moshe, Elazar, and the Nesi'ei Eda (leaders of the congregation).

Thinking back just a bit, we recall a similar scene of people with a request approaching almost the same group of leaders: the daughters of Tzelafhad approach Moshe, Elazar, the Nesi'im, and the entire congregation with their request. Since only males can inherit a portion of land in Eretz Yisrael, will they be excluded simply because their father fathered no sons?

Just as the Torah's account of Benot Tzelafhad's request first introduces the group voicing the request, telling us all of their names and also obliquely introducing their request (earlier, during the census, by telling us that Tzelafhad has only daughters) — here also, in our parasha, the Torah introduces the group and, obliquely, its problem: these are the people of Re'uvein and Gad, and they have "lots of cattle." But unlike the daughters of Tzelafhad, this group is not protesting an injustice, they are seeking an economic advantage.

### **ANTICIPATING RESISTANCE:**

The fact that the request is calculated to their economic advantage is something Gad and Re'uvein implicitly acknowledge in the way they make their request. Instead of saying baldly, "Instead of continuing on with the rest of the nation to Eretz Yisrael, the land promised to the Avot, we would rather settle right here in 'hutz la-Aretz,' in order to raise enormous flocks on the fertile grazing land here," they simply put two facts before Moshe: "Well, uh, this here land is cattle land, and we, uh, we've got lots of cattle." They leave Moshe to draw the inevitable conclusion.

They also refer to themselves as "avadekha," "your [Moshe's] servants," behaving obsequiously to mitigate the explosive reaction they expect from Moshe. Recall that others in the Torah have made the same move, referring to themselves as "your servant" in anticipation of a hostile response:

1) On his return from his many years at Lavan's house, Ya'akov refers to himself as "your servant" several times in his communications with his brother Eisav. Since Ya'akov expects Eisav to confront him with still-murderous rage over his theft of Eisav's berakhot (the deathbed blessings Yitzhak intended for Eisav), he hopes to calm Eisav with gifts and a show of fealty to him as family leader.

2) Ya'akov's sons refer to themselves as "your servants" when they stand before the "disguised" Yosef, accused of espionage. They deny Yosef's accusation, but do so humbly, using the term "avadekha" many times.

3) The representatives of Bnei Yisrael refer to themselves this way when trying to deal with Paro, who has just made the conditions of their servitude more harsh than before.

In sum, we often find this term used when the person using it thinks the other person is going to be angry. The same is true here — the obsequious self-reference shows that Gad and Re'uvein know that their request will likely alarm or anger Moshe.

### **NEGOTIATING POSTURE:**

The use of "avadekha" is also reminiscent of the negotiations over the cave and field of Mahpela which Avraham purchases from Efron as a gravesite for Sara (Parashat Hayyei Sara). Each party to the negotiations attempts to outmaneuver the other by being super-courteous, giving the appearance of generosity while truly struggling for a more powerful position. Avraham casts himself as the pitiful stranger and wanderer, his wife's corpse lying before him awaiting



burial. He tries to force his opponent(s) to yield the cave he wants by making it seem like refusing would be an act of great callousness to a poor stranger. The Bnei Het, Avraham's interlocutors, know exactly what Avraham is up to, and try to take the wind out of his sails by denying that he is a pitiful wanderer, insisting that he is not a "ger ve-toshav," but instead a "nesi Elokim," a prince of God, a powerful noble. On the surface, they pay tribute to Avraham, but in truth, they are trying to weaken his bargaining position by according him great status.

#### **"THE LAND HASHEM HAS CONQUERED":**

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein describe the land they desire as "eretz mikneh," a land of cattle, or well suited for cattle. This is no surprise. But they also refer to the land as "the land Hashem has conquered before the congregation of Israel." Why do they have to remind Moshe who conquered the land for them? Do they imagine that Moshe thinks he should get the credit, or that the people should?

Recall how in Sefer Bereshit the servant of Avraham (Eliezer, according to the midrash), trying to find a wife for Yitzhak, devises a test by which (he hopes) Hashem will show him the right woman. When Rivka passes the test, the servant 'knows' she's the one. But he still must convince her family that the match is a good one; after all, Rivka's family has never even met Yitzhak, and he is asking them to send off their daughter to a new life with a man sight unseen. So the servant tells her family the story of the test he devised and how Rivka passed it with flying colors. Of course, he changes a few details to make it seem a bit more impressive, and he succeeds: by the time he is finished, the family can respond only, "Me-Hashem yatza ha-davar" — "This matter has gone forth from Hashem": it seems to be Hashem's will, so we must agree to it.

Abravanel suggests that perhaps something similar occurs here (although he does not cite the parallel with Avraham's servant): Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein want Moshe to accept their proposal, so they make it seem if it is really Hashem's plan. "Look: We have lots of cattle, and Hashem has conquered this \*\*cattle-land\*\* before the nation . . . obviously, He means for some part of the nation to have it, otherwise why did He 'conquer it before the congregation of Bnei Yisrael'? And obviously, \*we\* are the people who are meant to settle there, because this land is such great cattle land, and we have loads of cattle!" Moshe is supposed to respond the same way Rivka's family did: "Me-Hashem yatza ha-davar."

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein may also anticipate that Moshe will reject their plan because it is unfair: since the entire nation participated in the conquest of the land that Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein now desire, it would be unfair to allow them to settle without helping the other shevatim conquer the land which will become theirs. In order to deflect this argument, they characterize the conquest of this land as something done completely by Hashem, with the people merely following in His victorious wake. "You can't tell us that everyone helped win this land for us, and that we have to help them conquer their land — Hashem did it all! And just as He did it on this side of the Jordan for us, He'll do it on the other side for the rest of the shevatim. It really had nothing to do with actual soldiers who risked their lives — it was all Hashem!"

#### **MOSHE RESPONDS (NOT):**

But Moshe doesn't play ball. He responds to the request of Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein by remaining silent. He doesn't say a word. Many times in our study of the parasha, we have noted that when someone ("A") says something to someone else ("B"), and then "A" says something \*else\* in a new statement (preceded by a new "va-yomer"), it's because "B" has not responded!

Why doesn't Moshe respond?

A few weeks ago, we talked about Bil'am and how Hashem asks him questions. First, when Balak's men arrive to summon Bil'am to curse Bnei Yisrael, Hashem asks him, "Who are these men with you?" Now, Hashem knows the answer to the question, and Bil'am knows He knows. But instead of acknowledging that Hashem is telling him that he is on the wrong track, Bil'am simply answers the question: "Oh, these fellows are Balak's men." Hashem's unnecessary question hints to him that he should really just forget about cursing Bnei Yisrael and ask Balak's men to go home, but, blinded by Balak's shimmering promises of gold, he refuses to see. (Similar scenes occur when Hashem asks Adam, who has just eaten from the tree of knowledge, "Where are you?", or when Hashem asks Kayyin, who has just killed Hevel,

“Where is your brother?”, see the shiur on Parashat Balak for more details.) Hashem even speaks to Bil’am through his donkey, asking him three further unnecessary questions, but it is no use: Bil’am simply answers the questions instead of going home as he is supposed to. Bil’am doesn’t truly “see” until after Hashem has blessed Bnei Yisrael twice through his own mouth; then, finally, he “sees” that Hashem desires to bless Bnei Yisrael, and he adds his own blessing.

Moshe plays the opposite game with Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein — instead of using speech to hint something, he uses silence. Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein voice their request in a subtle way because they knew Moshe won’t like it; they are hoping they won’t have to spell it out completely. But Moshe pretends not to understand, making it seem as if he is waiting for them to make their request, as if they have delivered only the introduction and not the request itself. Just as Bil’am is not supposed to answer the questions, and instead take them as a hint that Hashem doesn’t want him to get involved in cursing His nation, Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein are not supposed to actually make their request explicit — they are supposed to withdraw it and drop the matter. But just as Bil’am ignores the hints and simply answers Hashem’s questions, Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein ignore Moshe’s hint and make their request explicit.

### **MOSHE RESPONDS (REALLY):**

Moshe, of course, responds explosively when they finally state what they want. What is it that bothers Moshe so much? Possibilities:

- 1) It’s not fair that these people should fight one battle and be able to settle in their portion, while everyone else must continue to fight.
- 2) Their desire to settle here and not cross the Jordan will be interpreted by the rest of the people as a sign of fear: they will believe that Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein don’t want to go on because they don’t trust Hashem’s promises to give them the Land and help them conquer it. Like the meraglim (spies) of forty years ago, they will cause the people to reject Hashem’s promises.

Notice, by the way, the word plays Moshe uses in his speech:

- 1) “Mil’u aharei Hashem” — this phrase figuratively means to be faithful to Hashem, but here Moshe uses it in a more literal sense: to follow Hashem into the Land, versus “ki teshuvun me-aharav,” not to follow Him into the Land. Yehoshua and Calev are “mil’u aharei Hashem” not simply because they follow His instructions and remain faithful to Him, but because they are ready to go literally “aharav” — to follow Him into the Land. On the other hand, those who reject the Land are “shav me-aharav,” meaning not only figuratively that they do not “follow Him,” but literally that they do not follow Him — into the Land.
- 2) “Teni’un / va-yeniem” — Moshe accuses Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein of breaking the resolve of the other shevatim and weakening their courage: “teni’un,” “preventing” or “weakening.” Hashem’s reaction to the last time this happened was a very similar word: “va-yeniem,” He tossed the people into the desert for 40 years. Moshe is basically telling the Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein that their action of “meni’a” (with an alef) is tantamount to an action of “meni’a” (with an ayyin) — that by breaking the people’s courage, they are directly responsible for what will surely be Hashem’s terrible reaction.

### **LET ME TELL YOU A LITTLE SECRET:**

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein’s next move is to come close (“va-yigshu”) to Moshe. What is this all about? Is Moshe suddenly hard of hearing, or are they suddenly hoarse? Are they trying to threaten Moshe by coming closer?

Most likely, they are embarrassed. They have been exposed: they first made their proposal obliquely, not even spelling out what they wanted, but Moshe didn’t bite. Then they made their request explicit, and Moshe exploded. Not only did he rebuff their request, he accused them publicly — in front of “Elazar and the leaders of the congregation” — of selfishness and of having repeated the crime of the meraglim. They are trying to save face and contain the situation, so they come closer to Moshe, as if to say, “Hey, can we just talk about this quietly? Let’s not make a big deal out of this.” Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein are basically ready to just melt into the ground out of mortification, so they try to defuse the situation by first

making this a private conversation and then sweetening their offer.

### **THE NEW DEAL:**

What are the elements of the Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein's new offer?

1) They will build structures for their animals and families.

2) They will lead the military charge into Eretz Yisrael, forming the avant garde, first to face the enemy's slings and arrows.

3) They will return to their cities only once all of Bnei Yisrael have received their own portions in Eretz Canaan.

Moshe seems happy with the new offer: "If you will do as you have said, then all will be well." And then he warns them to take this commitment very seriously. But why does the Torah bother telling us *\*all\** of what Moshe says when he repeats all the details of the deal? We already know what the deal is — we've just heard it from Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein! Why do we need to hear Moshe say it back to them?

### **SUB-SURFACE STRUGGLE:**

On the surface, it seems that everyone agrees — Moshe begins his response, "If you will do this thing that you have said . . ." and finishes off, "and what has come out of your mouth, you should do!", but the truth is that the deal Moshe describes is radically different from the deal Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein have just offered. It is not at all "what has come out of your mouth"!

This is classic in biblical scenes of negotiation: on the surface there is agreement, but the subtle ripples on the surface reveal that below, a real struggle is taking place. An earlier example of this is Avraham's negotiation with Bnei Het and Efron the Hittite for the field and cave of Mahpela, as mentioned above. (Parashat Hayyei Sara, available in the archive.)

Let us note the differences between Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein's version of the agreement, and Moshe's version:

1) **FIRST TASK:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein state that their first task will be to build protective structures things for their precious possessions (cattle and children); according to Moshe, their first task will be to lead the charge into Eretz Yisrael.

2) **CITIES OR CORRALS:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein state that their first task in building structures to hold their possessions will be to build corrals for their beloved cattle; only afterward do they mention building cities for their children. According to Moshe, their first task is to build cities for their children, and only then to build corrals.

3) **BEFORE WHOM?:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein offer to lead the charge "Lifnei Bnei Yisrael" ("before Bnei Yisrael"); Moshe describes their task as to lead the charge "Lifnei Hashem" ("before Hashem").

4) **WHOSE VICTORY:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein describe the eventual triumph over the Canaanites as something *\*they\** will accomplish — *\*they\** will accompany the other tribes "until **\*\*WE\*\*** have brought them to their place" — while Moshe describes the conquest as something for which Hashem is truly responsible — "The Land will be conquered before **\*\*Hashem,\*\***" "Until **\*\*He\*\*** drives out His enemies from before Him."

5) **WHEN TO RETURN:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein state that they will not return to their own land until all of Bnei Yisrael have received their piece of the Land — "Until Bnei Yisrael inherit (*hit-nahel*), each man his inheritance" — while Moshe says they should return as soon as the Land is captured, and not wait until it is distributed to each person as his inheritance (*nahala*).

6) **NAHALA OR AHUZA:** Bnei Gad and Bnei Re'uvein refer to the land they desire as a "nahala" — an inheritance ("For our inheritance has come to us on the other side of the Jordan, to the West") — while Moshe refers to it as an "ahuza," a

“holding,” not an inheritance.

What do all of these differences add up to? What is the real debate between Moshe and Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein?

### **TRIPLE PLAY:**

Moshe’s “corrections” to the proposal of Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein carry three separate messages. Conveniently enough, Message A leads to differences 1 and 2 above, Message B leads to differences 3 and 4, and Message C leads to differences 5 and 6.

#### **MESSAGE A: FAILURE IN BEIN ADAM LA-HAVERO** (interpersonal responsibilities):

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein clearly have their priorities completely confused. While it is true that chronologically, they must build cities for their children and corrals for their animals before they depart to form the battle vanguard, Moshe must remind them that this is not supposed to be their primary orientation at this point. It should not be the first thought in their heads and the first thing out of their mouths. Yes, chronologically, but no, as a mentality. These people have just taken care of themselves, assuring their receipt of the land of their choice; their primary focus at this point ought to be fulfilling their responsibilities toward others, entailed by what they have just received. They should be most conscious of their responsibility to aid the other shevatim in battle, not thinking first about the tasks they will undertake to assure the safety of what is theirs. “You have just taken care of yourselves,” Moshe says to them; “it is time to turn your attention to taking care of the others, who have provided you with this land. Taking care of your own things should be a footnote to your serving as the vanguard — not the other way around!”

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein also fail at *bein adam le-havero* in putting their cattle before their families: in thinking aloud about what they must do next, they first mention building corrals for their sheep, and only then remember that they must also build cities for their wives and children! Moshe must reverse the order, implicitly scolding them for reversing their priorities by putting money ahead of family.

#### **MESSAGE B: FAILURE IN BEIN ADAM LA-MAKOM** (relationship with Hashem):

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein do indeed describe the land they desire as a land “conquered by Hashem,” giving credit to Him for the victory. But this attribution is merely strategic, a way of making their request appear part of Hashem’s plan and therefore unrefusable. When they volunteer to lead the charge into Eretz Canaan, they promise to remain with the other shevatim “until **WE** have brought them to their place,” i.e., until WE have conquered everything and provided each person with his portion in the Land. And, significantly, their promise is to venture forth “before Bnei Yisrael.” Moshe powerfully reminds them that the victories to come, those in Eretz Yisrael, may be attributed to no one but Hashem: they are to venture forth “before Hashem” — this phrase appears *seven* times in total in our section — not “before Bnei Yisrael”; the Land will be conquered not by the brave vanguard, but “will be conquered before Hashem.” The conquest takes place almost passively, so to speak; the Land simply “is conquered,” without a human actor. The vanguard is needed not to wield its swords with might and valor, but only to demonstrate its faith in Hashem’s promise to help the people inherit the Land. “Lo be-hayil, ve-lo be-kho’ah, ki im be-ruhi.”

#### **MESSAGE C: FAILURE IN RELATIONSHIP TO ERETZ YISRAEL:**

Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein make strenuous efforts to equate the land they want, which is not part of Eretz Yisrael, with Eretz Yisrael proper. They want to both “downgrade” the break they are making with the rest of the nation and “upgrade” the status of the land they have chosen, so they attempt to draw parallels between these two pieces of real estate. First, they refer to their chosen land as a “nahala,” an inheritance, exactly the term which is used to refer to Eretz Yisrael. Moshe corrects them: perhaps they have acquired an “ahuza,” a permanent possession, but they have certainly not “inherited” (“nahala”) a thing. The land they inhabit is not part of the Land, not part of the Jewish “heritage” promised to the Avot. It is, at best, an annex, an “ahuza.”

Second, they insist on remaining with the rest of the shevatim not just through the end of the conquest, but until all of the

people have actually received their pieces of the Land. Once this “inheritance” (“yit-nahel,” “nahalato”) process is completed, they will return to their own land. Since they want to claim that what they have received is a “nahala” as well, it is only fair that they remain with the others until they, too, have received their nahala. They are willing to make this sacrifice for the sake of upgrading the status of their holding (“ahuza”). Moshe knows what they are up to, and knocks them down a few pegs: they need not be so generous, he tells them; it will be enough for them to stick around just until the conquest is over. Moshe is telling them that no “nahala” has taken place here, and therefore they have no obligation to stay around until each person receives his own nahala within Eretz Yizrael proper.

Other indications also bespeak the attempt to equate the land under discussion with the Land to be entered: twice, Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein refer to the land they want as “the other side of the Jordan” — first, “Grant us this land . . . do not take us over the Jordan,” and later, “For our inheritance has come to us across the Jordan, to the West.” From their perspective, the difference between the land and the Land is really nothing; they are both simply opposite sides of the Jordan River. Our inheritance is on this side, yours is on that side. We’d rather stay here, on this side of the river. The river, for them, is not so much a border as it is a landmark.

But Moshe refuses to accept this sneaky equation of the “two sides of the Jordan”: twice during his response to Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein, he refers to the Land as “the Land that Hashem has given to them.” It is not just “land,” on this side of the river or that side, it is The Land Hashem Promised To Our Forefathers, The Land In Which They Lived, The Land He Offers To Us. Do not deny what you are rejecting, Moshe says.

Perhaps some of us are clever enough to always formulate what we say in a way which is both advantageous to us and also does not expose our hidden aims. But when most of us speak, anyone with a sharp ear can tell a lot about what we are really thinking and feeling, the same way we have studied the conversation of Moshe and Bnei Gad and Bnei Re’uvein.

May what our tongues reveal about us reflect well-ordered priorities about our responsibilities to other people, to Hashem, and to the values of the Torah.

Shabbat Shalom

\*\*\*\*\*

**THE TANACH STUDY CENTER [www.tanach.org](http://www.tanach.org)**  
**In Memory of Rabbi Abraham Leibtag**  
**Shiurim in Chumash & Navi by Menachem Leibtag**  
\*\*\*\*\*

**PARSHAT MAS'EI**  
***The Borders of the Land of Israel***  
**I**

What are the precise borders of the Land of Israel?  
From the story of Bnei Gad & Reuven in Parshat Matot (chapter 32), it seems as though the borders of Israel are rather 'expandable', while in Parshat Mas'ei (chapter 33) they appear to be quite fixed. In the following shiur, we examine the biblical roots of this complicated topic.

**INTRODUCTION**

Two clichés, both based on psukim in Tanach, are commonly used to describe the expanse of the borders of the Land of Israel:

- (A) 'from the Nile to the Euphrate'
- (B) 'from Dan to Beer Sheva'

The discrepancy between these two borders is immense! According to (A), Eretz Yisrael encompasses almost the entire Middle East, while according to (B), Israel is a tiny country not much bigger than the state of Rhode Island.

So which cliché is more 'correct'?

**THE BORDERS IN PARSHAT MAS'EI**

We begin our study with chapter 34 in Parshat Mas'ei, for it contains what appears to be a very precise description of the borders of the Land of Israel:

"And God spoke to Moshe saying: Command Bnei Yisrael and tell them, when you enter Eretz Canaan, this is the land which shall become your inheritance - **Eretz Canaan according to its borders**. Your southern border, from Midbar Tzin..." (see 34:1-13).

Over the centuries, many attempts have been made to identify each location mentioned in this chapter. In regard to the eastern and western borders, i.e. the Mediterranean Sea (34:6) and the Jordan River (34:11-12), there really isn't much to argue about. In regard to the southern border, most commentators agree that it follows a line from the southern tip of the Dead Sea until El-Arish, i.e. slight south of the Beer Sheva-Gaza line in the northern part of the Negev.

However, in regard to the northern border, we find a variety of opinions:

The 'minimalist' opinions identify the northern border in the area of today's Southern Lebanon, i.e. along the Litani River - until it meets the Metulla area (what used to be called the 'good fence'). On the other hand, the 'maximalist' opinions identify the northern border somewhere up in Turkey and Northern Syria.

**THE EASTERN FRONTIER**

To complicate matters, the 'eastern border' of the Land of Israel presents us with another problem. Even though Parshat Mas'ei states explicitly that the Jordan river forms the eastern border of Eretz Canaan, the 'deal' that Moshe Rabbeinu makes with 'bnei Gad u-bnei Reuven' (see 31:1-54) clearly indicates that that it is possible to **expand** this eastern border to include what is known today as Transjordan.

As you review that story, note how Moshe Rabbeinu grants the area of Transjordan to the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and Menashe as their official inheritance - even though it's only on the condition that they fulfill their vow to help everyone else conquer the western bank! [The fact that this area indeed becomes their 'official inheritance' can also be proven from Yehoshua chapters 13->14, and 22.]

=====

So why are the borders of Eretz Yisrael so ambiguous? Are

they vast or small? Are they fixed or expandable? Are certain parts of the 'Holy Land' holier than others?

To answer this question, and to understand why this topic is so complicated, we must return to Sefer Breishit and carefully examine the psukim that describe the land that God promised to the Avot.

**THE LAND PROMISED TO AVRAHAM AVINU**

Recall from Parshat Lech Lecha, that when God first chose Avraham Avinu to become His special nation, at that same time He also promised him a special land. [See Breishit 12:1-7. See also Breishit 13:14-17, 15:18, 17:7-8.]

[If you'd like to see additional sources regarding the promise of the Land to our forefathers, see Breishit 22:17-18, 26:2-5, 28:3-4, 28:13-14, 35:11-12, 46:1-4, 48:4 & 21.]

In God's first three promises to Avraham, note how He describes the land in very general terms, without any precise borders. For example:

- 1) In **Ur Kasdim**:  
"Go forth from your native land & from your father's house to the **land which I will show you**" (see 12:1).
- 2) At **Shchem**:  
"I will assign **this land** to your offspring" (see 12:7).
- 3) At **Bet-El**:  
"Raise your eyes and look out from where you are... for I give all the **land which you see**" (see 13:15).

However, later on in Parshat Lech Lecha, when Avraham Avinu enters into two covenants ['britot'] with God concerning the future homeland of his progeny, we finally find a more detailed definition of the land. However, as we will now show, each covenant appears to describe a different set of borders!

**1) At BRIT BEIN HA-BTARIM: / 'HA-ARETZ'**

Let's begin by quoting the pasuk in 'brit bein ha-btarim' where God promised the Land to Avraham, noting how it details the borders:

"On that day God made a covenant with Avraham, saying: to your offspring I assign **this land**, from the **river of Egypt** [the Nile] **to the river**, the river **Euphrates**, the Kenites, Knizites ...(the ten nations)" (Breishit 15:18-20).

The land defined by these borders is immense! It extends in the northeast from the Euphrates River that flows from northern Syria to the Persian Gulf, and in the southwest from the sources of the Nile River in Ethiopia down to the port city of Alexandria! [Undoubtedly, this covenant is the source for the popular phrase 'from the Nile to the Euphrates'.]

**2) At BRIT MILA: / 'ERETZ CANAAN'**

Two chapters later in Sefer Breishit, we find how God enters yet another covenant with Avraham, and once again He mentions the land as part of that covenant, yet its description is quite different:

"And I shall establish My covenant between Me and you, and your descendants... and I assign the land in which you sojourn to you and your offspring to come, all the **land of Canaan**,..., and I shall be for you a God" (see 17:7-8).

Note how according to this covenant, the 'promised land' is much smaller. Although this is the first time in Chumash where we find the expression **Eretz Canaan**, the borders of Canaan, son of Cham, have already been described in Parshat Noach:

"And the border of the Canaani was from Sidon (the Litani valley in Lebanon) down the coastal plain to Grar and Gaza, [and likewise from Sidon (down the Syrian African Rift)] to Sdom, Amora... [area of the Dead Sea]" (see Breishit 10:19).

[Note that this is the only border which is detailed in

the genealogies of Breishit chapter 10, most probably because it is needed as background information to later understand Parshat Lech Lecha!]

This biblical definition of Eretz Canaan correlates (more or less) with the general locale in which the forefathers sojourned - 'eretz megurecha' (see 17:8). In the various stories in Sefer Breishit, we find how the Avot lived [and traveled] in the area bounded by Beer Sheva and Gerar to the south (see 21:22-33, 28:10, 46:1), and the area of Shchem and Dotan (37:12-17) to the north. Further north, recall as well how Avraham chased his enemy as far north as **Dan**, in his battle against the Four Kings (see Breishit 14:14)!

[Undoubtedly, this border reflects the popular phrase: 'from Dan to Beer Sheva'. This phrase is used several times later in Tanach to define the people living in the Land of Israel. For example: "And all of Israel, from Dan to Beer Sheva, knew that Shmuel was a trustworthy..." (See Shmuel Aleph 3:20, see also Shoftim 20:1 and Melachim Aleph 5:4-5).

## TWO BORDERS / TWO TYPES OF KEDUSHA

In summary, the source for the conflicting borders of Eretz Yisrael appears to lie in these two different definitions of the Land, one in **brit bein ha-btarim** and the other in **brit mila**. Therefore, we assume that these different borders reflect the different purpose of each covenant.

To appreciate their difference, we must return to our study of Sefer Breishit, and the purpose of those two covenants.

In our study of Sefer Breishit, we discussed its theme of 'bechira' - i.e. how God entered a relationship with Avraham Avinu in order that his offspring would become a 'model nation' in a special land, whose purpose would be to bring the 'Name of God' to all mankind. Towards that goal, God fortified that special relationship with two covenants - 'brit bein ha-btarim' and 'brit mila', each one reflecting a different aspect of the future relationship between God and His nation.

The very first time that God spoke to Avraham, He had already 'promised' the concept of a nation and a land (see 12:1-8, 13:14-17). However, the details of **how** that nation would form and ultimately inherit the land only unfold several chapters later.

### BRIT BEIN HA-BTARIM

After Avraham's military defeat of the Four Kings (and hence his first **conquest** of the Land / see chapter 14), chapter 15 describes how God initiates a 'covenant' - better known as brit bein ha-btarim - that reinforces His original promise from chapter 12. However, even though that covenant reassures Avraham that his offspring will indeed **conquer** ('yerusha') the Land one day; God also informs Avraham at that time that it won't happen immediately! Instead, some four hundred years will pass, during which his offspring must endure slavery in a foreign land; and only afterward will they gain their independence and conquer the 'promised land'. [See Breishit 15:1-19, especially 13-18.]

As you review the psukim that describe brit bein ha-btarim, note how the land is consistently referred to as 'ha-**aretz**' (and not Eretz Canaan!), and its borders will extend from the 'Nile to the Euphrates' - the land of [then occupied by] the ten nations (see 15:18-20).

Hence we conclude that this covenant reflects the **historical / national** aspect of Am Yisrael's relationship with God, for it emphasizes that Avraham's children will become a sovereign nation at the conclusion of a long historical process (better known as Yetziat Mitzrayim).

Finally, note as well that throughout this covenant, the word **yerusha** is consistently used to describe the future **conquest** of the land, and Hashem's Name is 'shem Havaya'.

### BRIT MILA (Breishit chapter 17)

Several years later, immediately prior to the birth of his only son from Sarah, God enters yet another covenant with Avraham - better known as brit mila. In preparation for this covenant, God

first changes Avram's name to Avraham and then promises that He will enjoy a special relationship with his offspring - 'lihyot lachem le-Elokim' - to be 'a close God for them'. [See Breishit 17:3-9.]

This covenant seems to reflect a more 'personal' relationship between God and His people, not only at the national level, but more so at the personal - family level; a special intimacy with the Divine. In this covenant, note how the Promised Land is referred to as **Eretz Canaan**", and the future inheritance of the land is referred to as 'achuza' (in contrast to the use of the word 'yerusha' in brit bein ha-btarim).

Hence, we can conclude that there are two aspects in regard to the 'kedusha' (sanctity) of Eretz Yisrael:

#### (A) The NATIONAL aspect

The 'kedushat ha-**aretz**' of brit bein ha-btarim relates to the **conquest** of the land (yerushat ha-aretz) and the establishment of a national entity - a sovereign state. This kedusha is only realized once Bnei Yisrael attain sovereignty, as was the case in the time of Yehoshua. For example, the obligation to give tithe from the land (i.e. 'trumot u-ma'asrot') only begins once the land is conquered.

[See Rambam, Hilchot Trumot, first chapter!]

#### (B) The PERSONAL aspect -

The kedushat Eretz Canaan of brit mila already existed in the time of the Avot and remains eternal. This kedusha reflects God's special Providence over this land (see Vayikra chapter 18), no matter who is living in the land. This intrinsic kedusha is forever present no matter who is sovereign over the Land, be it Persians, Romans, Crusaders, Turks, British etc. [Let's hope that there will not be a need to add any others to this list in our own generation.]

The following table summarizes our analysis thus far:

	THE VAST BORDERS	THE LIMITED BORDERS
	=====	=====
PHRASE:	Nile to the Euphrates	from Dan to Beer Sheva
COVENANT:	Brit bein Ha-btarim	Brit mila
NAME:	ha-aretz	Eretz Canaan
ASPECT:	National	Personal
ACQUIRED BY:	yerusha=sovereignty	achuza

### YERUSHA & ACHUZA

To clarify this distinction, let's take a closer look at two key words that describe our acquisition of Eretz Yisrael in each covenant:

- (A) In brit bein ha-btarim - yerusha (Br.15:3,4,7,8);
- (B) In brit mila - achuza (Br.17:8).

In Chumash, the word 'ye-**ru-sha**' implies conquest, which leads to sovereignty, i.e. military control over an area of land. [Not to be confused with its popular usage, 'ye-**ru**-sheh', usually referring to an inheritance that one receives from a parent.]

This sovereign power can then apportion that land, or sell it, to its inhabitants. Once acquired in this manner, the purchaser of this land can then sell or give his portion to anyone he may choose. Usually, if the owner dies, the land is automatically inherited by his next of kin. In Chumash, this type of ownership is known as achuza (and/or nachala).

For example, when Sarah dies Avraham must acquire an 'achuzat kever' - a family burial plot (see Breishit 23:4). He must first **purchase** the plot from the Hittites, for at that time they are the sovereign power. Accordingly:

- (A) Brit bein ha-btarim, the national aspect, uses the word yerusha for it foresees Am Yisrael's **conquest** of the Land.
- (B) Brit mila uses the word achuza for it emphasizes one's **personal connection** to the land.

### AT THE CROSSROADS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

Based on our understanding of these two covenants, their conflicting borders can be reconciled.

Avraham Avinu was chosen to be a nation that would become a blessing for **all** nations (see Br. 12:3). In that promise, the special land set aside for that nation is called ha-aretz. In brit bein ha-btarim, ha-aretz is defined as the land between the Nile and Euphrates. These two rivers don't necessarily need to be understood as borders; rather as 'limits' of expansion! Let's explain why.

Never in the history of mankind have these rivers marked the border between two countries. Instead, these rivers were the underlying cause for the formation of those two **centers** of ancient civilization - i.e. Mesopotamia ('nehar Prat') and Egypt ('nehar Mitzrayim'). [See 15:18-21.]

Therefore, as brit bein ha-btarim reflects the **national** aspect of our relationship with God, its borders - or the 'limits of its expansion' - reflect our nation's destiny to become a blessing to **all** mankind. We are to become a nation 'declaring God's Name' at the crossroads of the two great centers of civilization. The location of this land between these two rivers enables that goal, and hence reflects this aspect of our nation purpose.

### THE 'KERNEL'

The more precise geographic borders of this special land are defined in brit mila as Eretz Canaan - 'the land in which our forefathers sojournd'. Because this land is destined to become the homeland for God's special nation, it possesses intrinsic kedusha. It is this sanctity which makes the land sensitive to the moral behavior of any of its inhabitants (see Vayikra 18:1-2,24-28).

Hence, the most basic borders of Eretz Yisrael are those of 'Eretz Canaan', i.e. 'from Dan to Beer Sheva', as promised in brit mila. These borders constitute a natural geographic area; Eretz Canaan is bordered by the Mediterranean Sea on the West, the Negev desert on the South, the Syrio-African Rift (Jordan River) to the East, and the Lebanon Mountain Range to the North [the Litani River valley].

Once this 'kernel' area is conquered, in potential its borders can be (but do not have to be) extended. The limits of this expansion - from nehar Mitzrayim to nehar Prat (as set in brit bein ha-btarim) could be understood as '**limits**' rather than 'borders'; as each river represents a center of ancient civilization.

After conquering Eretz Canaan, Am Yisrael can, if necessary, expand its borders by continuous settlement outward, up until (but not including) the two ancient centers of civilization, Egypt and Mesopotamia.

### EXPANDING KEDUSHA

This interpretation explains why Transjordan does not acquire kedushat ha-aretz until Eretz Canaan is conquered. Bnei Gad & Reuven must first help conquer the 'kernel' area of Eretz Canaan. Afterwards, this kedusha can be 'extended' to Transjordan. [Note the use of the phrase 'lifnei Hashem' in Bamidbar chapter 32, especially in 32:29-30.]

When Bnei Gad & Reuven follow the terms of their agreement with Moshe, not only do they help Bnei Yisrael conquer Eretz Canaan, they also facilitate Transjordan becoming an integral part of Eretz Yisrael ('ha-aretz').

### THE RAMBAM'S DEFINITION OF ERETZ YISRAEL

In his Yad HaChazaka, the Rambam must provide a 'halachic' definition of Eretz Yisrael, for many mitzvot apply only in that Land. He does so in the first chapter of Hilchot Trumot & Ma'asrot [in Sefer Zraim]

As trumot & ma'asrot are laws that apply only in Eretz Yisrael, the Rambam must provide a precise definition of its borders. Although one would expect a geographical definition, to our surprise we find instead a 'political' one!

"Eretz Yisrael - which is mentioned anywhere (in Yad Hachazaka) - includes those lands that are **conquered** by a King of Israel or by a 'navi' with the backing of the majority of Am Yisrael ..." (see 1:1-2).

Note how Rambam defines the borders of Eretz Yisrael as the area under Israeli 'conquest' [= yerusha]. Whatever area within the Land is under Am Yisrael's sovereignty is considered 'halachically' as Eretz Yisrael.

Based on the above shiur, we can understand the reason for this strange definition.

Certainly, Jewish sovereignty doesn't make any geographic area 'holy'. As Rambam himself explains in the third halacha, it is only if this conquest takes place within an area of 'the land that was promised to Avraham Avinu - i.e. the borders of Eretz Canaan as promised to Avraham at brit mila, and defined in Parshat Mas'ei. However, this area reaches its fullest level of kedusha only once Am Yisrael conquers it.

Then, once this 'kernel' area is conquered, Am Yisrael can expand its borders up until Bavel [= nehar Prat] and Mitzrayim [= nehar Mitzrayim]. However, as Rambam explains in the third halacha, this expansion can take place only after the 'kernel' area of Eretz Canaan is first conquered.

Finally, in the fifth halacha, Rambam uses this to explain why the kedusha of the Land [= 'kibbush rishon'] was annulled when the first bet ha-mikdash was destroyed. Because the kedusha of the land (in relation to trumot u-ma'asrot) is a function of its conquest (yerusha or 'mi-shum kibbush'), therefore as soon as Bnei Yisrael lost their sovereignty, the kedusha of the land was lost as well ['batla kedushatah']. Similarly, during the second Temple period, because the land was not conquered, rather it remained under the sovereignty of other nations (e.g. Persia, Greece and Rome), the kedusha never returned. Instead, Ezra instituted a rabbinic kedusha to obligate the produce of the land with trumot u-ma'asrot, because the original kedusha did not return.

I recommend that you review this Rambam inside (see also the final halacha of perek aleph), and note how these laws relate directly to the primary points of our shiur.

### 'LAND FOR PROGRESS'

We have shown that our relationship to the Land of Israel, just as our relationship with God, exists at both the national and individual level. God chose this special land **in order** that we fulfill our destiny.

While kedushat Eretz Yisrael at the individual level may be considered a Divine **gift**, its kedusha at the national level is most definitely a Divine **challenge**. To achieve its fullest borders and to be worthy of them, we must rise to that challenge.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

### =====

### FOR FURTHER IYUN

#### A. MITZVAT KIBBUSH ERETZ CANAAN

Our interpretation enhances our understanding of the Torah's presentation of the mitzva to conquer Eretz Yisrael in Parshat Mas'ei (Bamidbar 33:50-56). First, Bnei Yisrael are commanded to **conquer** the land = yerusha:

(A) "**ve-horashtem** et kol yoshvei ha-aretz mipneichem...

**ve-horashtem** et ha-aretz vi-yshavtem bah, ki lachem natati et ha-aretz lareshet otah."

Only once the land is conquered, can it then be apportioned to each family, according to the tribal households:

(B) "**ve-hitnachaltem** et ha-aretz be-goral le-mishpechoteichem... le-matot avoteichem **titnachalu**..."

The conquest is referred to as 'ye-ru-sha', while the distribution of the land afterward is referred to as 'nachala':

Yerusha is achieved by the joint effort of military effort by all twelve tribes [Yehoshua chapters 1-12]. Afterwards, nachala is achieved when each tribe settles and establishes communities in its portion [Yehoshua chapters 13-19].

Note that the word nachala could be considered synonymous with achuza; achuza is usually used when purchasing a piece of land, as when Avraham buys a burial plot and field from Efron



(see Br. 23:9,16-20), while nachala is usually used in reference to a family inheritance.]

## PARSHAT MATOT [Parshanut]

The opening pasuk of Parshat Matot is simply a 'gold mine' for those who enjoy the study of "parshanut" [the Hebrew word for biblical commentary].

In this week's shiur, we discuss how the classical commentators grappled with the difficulties that arise when studying Bamidbar 30:2.

### INTRODUCTION

There are two classic approaches to the study of "parshanim". The simplest is simply to read the pasuk, and then immediately afterward, to read the commentary; thus enhancing one's understanding and appreciation of what the Torah is telling us.

Another approach is to read each pasuk carefully while considering its context, but before reading any commentary - to attempt on your own to consider any problems that arise, and then to contemplate possible answers. Then, after you have thought through all the various possibilities, to read the various commentaries, noting if they raised the same (or similar) questions and/or answers.

Even though the latter approach is quite tedious, it usually leads to a much better appreciation and understanding of the various commentaries.

In the following shiur, we will employ this method, as we study the opening pasuk of Parshat Matot.

### LOTS OF QUESTIONS

Let's begin by taking a look at the first pasuk, and then making a list of questions that arise:

"And MOSHE spoke to the Heads of the Tribes of Bnei Yisrael saying: THIS is the 'DAVAR' [translation unclear] that God has commanded: If a man makes a vow or takes an obligation...." (see 32:2-3)

The first obvious question that catches almost everyone's attention relates to the fact that these laws about "nedarim" [vows] are directed specifically to the "rashei ha'matot" [tribal leaders]. In contrast to most all other laws in the Bible, that are directed to the entire nation - for some reason, these laws are different.

Before we attempt to answer this question, let's note some other related questions that come to our attention:

- When did God inform Moshe about these laws? Were they only given now in the fortieth year, or had God told them to Moshe at an earlier time?  
[Note that this set of laws doesn't begin with the classic 'opening pasuk' of "va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe lay'mor... daber el Bnei Yisrael..." - And God spoke to Moshe saying...]
- Were these laws supposed to be kept 'secret' from the rest of the nation, i.e. were they intended **only** for the 'leaders'; or was everyone supposed to know them?
- Even if these laws were given to Moshe at an earlier time, why are they recorded specifically at this point in Sefer Bamidbar?
- Why does Moshe introduce these laws with the introductory phrase "ZEH HA'DAVAR"? (see 30:2)

With these additional questions in mind, let's return to our opening question.

### EXCLUSIVITY

Let's begin by discussing why Moshe presents these laws directly to the tribal leaders, and not to the entire nation.

In Sefer Vayikra, we find several instances where a set of laws are given to a 'select' group. For example, note how the laws of how to offer a sacrifice in Parshat Tzav are given directly to the "kohanim" (see Vayikra 6:1-2). However, there the reason is obvious, for only the kohanim need to know those laws.

How about these laws concerning "nedarim" in Parshat Matot?

There are two possible directions to we can entertain. Either:

1. They are indeed intended to be heard **ONLY** by the tribal leaders - if so, we must attempt to understand why the laws of "nedarim" are special in this regard.
2. The entire nation is supposed to hear these laws - if so, we must explain why the tribal leaders receive them first.

Let's see how we find these two approaches in the classic commentators. Let's begin with Rashi's commentary on 30:2: "He [Moshe] gave honor to the princes to teach them first, then afterward he taught [these laws] to Bnei Yisrael..."

Note how Rashi, in his opening line, assumes that the reader was already bothered by this question; and he immediately provides an answer. He follows the second approach, i.e. the entire nation heard these laws as well - but explains that the princes were taught first, as an honor to the tribal leaders.

This explanation immediately raises another question: How about when all of the other mitzvot were taught - were they also first taught to the "rashei ha'matot", and to the people later on?

Rashi claims that this was indeed the common practice - and proves his claim from a pasuk in Sefer Shmot, that describes what transpired when Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the second Luchot:

"...And how do we know that all of the other mitzvot were taught in this manner? As the pasuk states [when Moshe descended from Har Sinai with the second luchot]: Then Aharon and all of the PRINCES of the congregation approached him [i.e. Moshe], and Moshe spoke to them [re: the laws]. Then AFTERWARD, ALL of BNEI YISRAEL came forward and Moshe COMMANDED them concerning ALL of the laws that God had instructed him on Har Sinai (see Shmot 34:29-32)."

[Note that we've included the entire quote of 34:32 (even though Rashi only quoted half of it). That's because Rashi takes for granted that you know the continuation (which is key to understand his "pirush"). As a rule of thumb - whenever Rashi (or any commentator) quotes another pasuk - look up that pasuk in its entirety and pay careful attention to its context.]

Even though Rashi has established that ALL of the mitzvot were given in this manner (first to the princes and then to the people), our opening question still remains, but now in a different form. If indeed this was that manner that all the laws were transmitted - why does the Torah emphasize this point specifically in regard to the laws of "nedarim"?

Rashi deals with this question as well, explaining that the Torah does this intentionally in order that we infer a specific halacha:

"...And why is this mentioned here? To TEACH us that a vow can be annulled by a SINGLE judge - if he is an EXPERT, otherwise a group of three "hedyotot" [non-experts] is required to annul a vow."

In other words, by informing us that Moshe first gave these laws to the "rashei ha'matot", we can infer that there is something special about their status in regard to these laws of "nedarim" that follow. This allowed Chazal [the Sages] to conclude the special law that an expert judge ["yachid mumche"] can annul such vow on his own.

To strengthen his interpretation, Rashi then raises the possibility of the first approach (i.e. that these laws were given exclusively to the tribal leaders) - in order to refute it:

"... OR - [possibly] Moshe made have told these laws **ONLY** to the tribal leaders [and hence not to all of Bnei Yisrael] - -- it states here ZEH HA'DAVAR (32:2) and it states in regard to SHCHUTEI CHUTZ [offering a sacrifice outside the Mishkan] the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR (see Vayikra 17:2) - just like those laws were directed not only to the priests, but **ALSO** to the entire nation [as it states "speak to Aharon, his sons, and ALL BNEI YISRAEL" (17:2); so too these laws [of NEDARIM were given not only to the princes but also to ALL of Bnei Yisrael.]"

Rashi completes his commentary by adding two additional points concerning why the Torah records how Moshe introduced

these laws with the phrase "zeh ha'dvar..."

"We learn from here that Moshe was prophet of a higher level than other prophets could say only: "KOH amar Hashem" - [thus God said] - but only Moshe could state precisely "ZEH HA'DAVAR..." - THIS was the word of God..."

Finally, Rashi concludes this commentary with another "halacha" that Chazal infer from this pasuk concerning HOW (i.e. in what manner) the judge must pronounce the annulment of a vow.

### PSHAT vs. DRASH

As usual, Rashi's commentary anchors itself on several MIDRASHIM (see Sifri 153, and Nedarim 88a). In other words, he explains the pasuk based on statements made by earlier commentators, as recorded in the Midrash.

In contrast, other commentators such as Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and Ramban will usually anchor their interpretation in what they feel is the simple understanding ["psbat"] of the pasuk - even if that understanding may contradict a Midrash. Nonetheless, they will usually consider the opinion raised by the Midrash with the utmost respect - but they do not automatically accept it.

Let's see how this will help us understand the interpretations advanced by Rashbam and Ramban, as they relate to the topics discussed by Rashi. Afterward, we will discuss Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and Seforno.

### RASHBAM

Rashbam, clearly bothered by all of the questions that we raised above, approaches all of them from a very different angle. His first consideration is the juxtaposition of these laws to the laws of Tmidim u'Musafim that were found at the end of Parshat Pinchas.

In essence, Rashbam considers this section of laws concerning "nedarim" as a direct continuation of the laws that concluded Parshat Pinchas; and hence, we no longer have a strangely worded introductory pasuk, since it isn't introductory! Carefully follow how he presents his key points:

"I was asked a question in the city of Loshdon, Aniyob (somewhere in France): 'According to pshat - where else do find such a parshiya that begins in this manner, [where Moshe commands mitzvot] but does not begin with VA'YDABER HASHEM EL MOSHE... [informing us first that God told these laws to Moshe]?' -

and this was my [Rashbam's] answer:

Above [at the end of Parshat Pinchas/ 29:39] it states:

"These [korbanot] you shall bring on your holidays in ADDITION to your VOWS [nedarim & nedavot...]"

[This paus teaches us that] you must offer all of your voluntary korbanot [that you had taken upon yourself by a **vow**] during one of the three pilgrimage holidays - in order that you do not transgress the commandment of 'keeping a promise on time [ba'al t'acher"/ see Mesechet Rosh Ha'shana 4a.]

Therefore, Rashbam maintains that God told Moshe these laws of "nedarim" at the same time that he told him the laws of the korbanot of the holidays in Bamidbar chapters 28->29. Since those laws began with "va'yadaber Hashem...", there is no need to repeat that phrase once again. Instead, the Torah tells us that after Moshe told the people the laws of the korbanot (see 30:1):

"he [Moshe] went to the tribal leaders - WHO are their JUDGES - to tell them to teach these laws concerning NEDARIM to ALL of Bnei Yisrael. When he did this, Moshe told them: God has just commanded me to tell you that everyone must offer the NEDARIM and NEDAVOT during the holidays (see 29:39), therefore should anyone make a vow [neder]... they should not BE LATE in fulfilling it..."

First of all, note how beautifully Rashbam explains the phrase "LO YACHEL DEVARO". Usually, "yachel" is translated - he should not PROFANE (or break his pledge/ JPS). Based on his interpretation, Rashbam translates "yachel" as DELAY, and brings excellent examples from Breishit 8:10 and Shoftim 3:25.

[Note also how he boldly states that according to pshat, any other translation of "yachel" here is a MISTAKE!]

In summary, Rashbam claims that chapter 30 is simply direct continuation of chapter 29, for one is obligated to fulfill his vows (chapter 30) on the holidays (chapter 29). By recognizing this point, note how Rashbam manages to answer ALL of the questions raised in our introduction, and adds a brilliant translation for the word "yachel" within this context.

If you don't read him carefully (while paying attention to the opening questions), you won't appreciate how clever his pirush is!

[Note as well how the division of chapters makes a 'futile' attempt to solve Rashbam's opening question, by starting chapter 30 with the last pasuk in Parshat Pinchas. [Did you notice this?]] Note how CHAZAL's division according to parshiyot must be correct, i.e. beginning the new topic in 30:2 - BECAUSE 30:1 forms the completion of 28:1-2, and hence SHOULD be the LAST pasuk in chapter 29 instead of the first pasuk in chapter 30.]

### RAMBAN

Ramban begins his commentary dealing with the same question that bothered Rashbam, but offers a very different answer! [Note also how Ramban also takes for granted that the reader has already been bothered by these questions.]

"The pasuk does not tell us first that God told these laws to Moshe... like it says by SHCHUTEI CHUTZ and most all other parshiyot, INSTEAD we are told this at the END of this parshiya! [There we find a summary:] "These are the laws that GOD COMMANDED MOSHE... (see 30:17)"

Note how clever this Ramban is! He answers the question by paying careful attention to the **conclusion** of this unit. [Again, this is a classic example of the comprehensive nature of Ramban's approach.]

Ramban brings a parallel example from SHCHUTEI CHUTZ (see Vayikra 17:1-2), clearly in reaction to Rashi's pirush (which he will soon argue with), even though he doesn't quote Rashi directly!

[Ramban expects that the reader of his commentary is already familiar with Rashi, as he himself was!]

But even without this concluding pasuk (i.e. 30:17) Ramban proves that we need not be bothered by the fact that Moshe's instruction to the "rashei ha'matot" is not prefaced by "va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe...". Ramban brings two other examples where commandments by Moshe that begin with ZEH HA'DAVAR are not prefaced with a "va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe...":

[Furthermore], in Parshat Shmini it states ZEH HA'DAVAR (see Vayikra 9:6 and its context) without a preface that God had commanded this, and in relation to keeping the manna [next to the aron] it states ZEH HA'DAVAR... (see Shmot 16:32)"

Once again, we see the comprehensive nature of Ramban's methodology, always considering parallel occurrences of similar phrases or patterns.

After explaining WHO these tribal leaders are (possibly those leaders mentioned later in Bamidbar 34:17-29), Ramban offers an interpretation which is exactly the opposite of Rashi's, claiming that indeed these laws were given intentionally ONLY to the tribal leaders:

"And the reason for Moshe saying these laws to the "rashei ha'matot" - BECAUSE there is no need to teach all of Bnei Yisrael that a father (or husband) can annul the vow of his daughter (or wife). Maybe these laws need to kept 'hidden' so that people will not take their words lightly (should they know that their promises can be annulled). However, the judges and leaders of Israel MUST know these laws..."

Note how Ramban prefers the 'simple pshat' of the pasuk over Chazal's interpretation (i.e. the Sifri quoted by Rashi) - and provides a very good reason that supports his preference.

On the other hand, Ramban does accept the halacha that Chazal infer from these psukim, relating this to the special style that the Torah uses to record this commandment:

"And this does HINT to the MIDRASH CHAZAL that tribal leaders have special privileges in relation to nedarim that a "yachid mumche" (expert) can annul a vow on his own..."

Ramban concludes his commentary by noting, as Rashbam did, the thematic connection to the laws of Tmidim u'Musafim (based on 29:39), nevertheless reaching a different conclusion.

### IBN EZRA

Ibn Ezra also deals with the thematic connection between these laws of "nedarim" and the 'neighboring' topics in Sefer Bamidbar. However, instead of looking 'backward' to the halachik sections of Parshat Pinchas, he looks forward to what transpires in the stories that are recorded in Parshat Matot, i.e. the war against Midyan and the story of Bnei Gad and Reuven (chapters 31 & 32).

"In my opinion, this parshiya was given AFTER the war against MIDYAN (chapter 31), and that is why THAT story is recorded immediately afterward! [Ibn Ezra then brings an example of this style from Bamidbar chapter 12.]

This interpretation is also very creative, for it claims that these laws were actually given in reaction to an event that took place at that time! As you study this Ibn Ezra, note how he also deals with most all of the above questions, yet offers very different answers. Let's take a look:

"Then, (after that battle) the pasuk tells us that Bnei Gad and Reuven came to Moshe and Elazar and the PRINCES and requested [to keep Transjordan / see 32:1-5]. At the conclusion of their discussion, [when the deal is finalized] it states:

"Then Moshe gave instructions [concerning Bnei Gad] to Elazar and Yehoshua and the RASHEI AVOT HA'MATOT L'BNEI YISRAEL" (see 32:28),

after Moshe had just forewarned Bnei Gad u'Reuven that '**whatever you PROMISE - you must keep**' " (see 32:24)..."

Ibn Ezra prefers both this thematic (making and keeping promises) and textual ("rashei ha'matot") parallel to chapter 30, in order to explain the location of this parshiya at this point in Sefer Bamidbar; over Rashbam's and Ramban's parallel to Parshat Pinchas.

Note also how Ibn Ezra agrees with Rashi that the "rashei ha'matot" were supposed to relay these laws to Bnei Yisrael; however he provides a different proof, based on the LAMED in L'BNEI YISRAEL in 30:2!

### CHIZKUNI

Chizkuni opens with yet another creative answer to our original question. He states:

"k'dei l'hachirach et ha'am" - in order to enforce this upon the people"

Like Rashi, he agrees that these laws were indeed intended to be taught to EVERYONE (arguing with Ramban). However, Chizkuni provides a different reason for why the "rashei ha'matot" are singled out. Unlike Rashi who claims that it is an issue of 'honor', he claims that they are taught first, for it is their responsibility to enforce these laws. Chizkuni understands that the Torah wants the leaders to make sure that unnecessary vows are annulled (by those who can), OR that the leaders should make sure that the people keep their promises.

Afterward, Chizkuni continues by quoting from both Ibn Ezra and Rashi.

### SEFORNO

Finally, Seforno adds a very creative explanation for the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR. He claims as follows:

In the original commandment at Har Sinai - "Do not to make an oath in God's Name (and not fulfill it) lest God's Name be desecrated" (see Vayikra 19:12) - one may conclude that this would refer to anyone making a vow.

Here in Parshat Matot, claims Seforno, the Torah makes an exception. That law applies only to males - for they are 'their own bosses' ["b'rshut atzmo"]. However, a wife or a daughter, because

she is under the jurisdiction of her father (or husband), should she not fulfill a vow, it would not be such a terrible desecration of God's Name, for the person hearing this vow being made immediately realizes that she may not be able to fulfill it. As the potential "chillul Hashem" is less, the Torah provides a special avenue through which she can annul her vow.

This original interpretation (even though it may sound a bit chauvinist) takes into consideration the details of these laws in relation to a similar law recorded earlier, and explains both the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR as well as the nature of the specific details of these laws.

### NEXT TIME

Hopefully, our shiur has highlighted how "parshanut" can be better understood by spending a little time first considering possibilities, instead of just reading right away what each one has to say. In other words, if you study Chumash the same way the commentators themselves did (thinking first), you'll have a better chance of appreciating the treasure that they have left us.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem

## **Parshios Matos & Masei: (Siyyum on Sefer Bamidbar)**

by Rabbi Yitz Etshalom

### **I. TRIBAL INTEGRITY AND FAMILY INTEGRITY**

The very last presentation in Sefer Bamidbar is a dialogue between Mosheh and the chieftains of Menasheh regarding the land which will soon be inherited by the five daughters of Tz'lofchad, a (dead) member of the tribe.

If we look back to chapter 27, we find that the daughters of Tz'lofchad approached Mosheh with a concern regarding the maintenance of their father's memory in Eretz Yisra'el:

"Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against Hashem in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." (Bamidbar 27:3-4)

Following the assumption that, as daughters, they would not inherit their father's lot in the Land, his name would be lost among the tribe of Menasheh.

Indeed, God affirms the implication of their approach to Mosheh and responds:

"The daughters of Tz'lofchad are right in what they are saying; you shall indeed let them possess an inheritance among their father's brothers and pass the inheritance of their father on to them." (ibid. v. 7)

Now, some time later (after the presentation of the war with Midian, the negotiations with the Reubenites and Gadites along with many Halakhot), the chieftains of Menasheh register a concern with Mosheh in response to the Divine solution on behalf of Tz'lofchad's family:

"...and my lord was commanded by Hashem to give the inheritance of our brother Tz'lofchad to his daughters. But if they are married into another tribe of the B'nei Yisra'el, then their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestors and added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so it will be taken away from the allotted portion of our inheritance. And when the Yovel of the B'nei Yisra'el comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they have married; and their inheritance will be taken from the inheritance of our ancestral tribe." (Bamidbar 36:2-4)

To this challenge, Mosheh responds immediately (without consulting with God - unlike his response to the daughters of Tz'lofchad):

Then Mosheh commanded the B'nei Yisra'el according to the word of Hashem, saying, "The descendants of the tribe of Joseph are right in what they are saying. This is what Hashem commands concerning the daughters of Tz'lofchad, 'Let them marry whom they think best; only it must be into a clan of their father's tribe that they are married'..."

From a straight reading of these verses, it is clear that Mosheh had already been commanded regarding the matrimonial limitation to be imposed on the daughters of Tz'lofchad (and he did not turn to God for more instruction at this point) - but he delayed presenting them until the chieftains approached him. (Alternatively, we could posit that the entire Halakhic schema was presented as one to Mosheh and, from him, to the tribe - but that it was, for some reason, related in the Torah's narrative as separate - and separated - incidents. In any case, the question is the same, to wit:)

Why are these two presentations isolated from each other?

### **II. B'NEI GAD AND B'NEI RE'UVEN**

Another question of "placement" may be asked regarding the other significant "land-allotment challenge" at the end of Bamidbar. Chapter 32 is devoted to the "doubled condition" made with the members of the tribes of Gad and Re'uvan (and, later on, a few Menashe-ite families. Two interesting side points, beyond the scope of this shiur, relate to the role of this tribe to the end of Bamidbar. First of all, why did they jump on the Gad-Re'uvan "bandwagon" in the middle of the

negotiations with Mosheh? Second, note that they are the tribe of Tz'lofchad; thus, they are involved in all of the "land-allotment" issues at the end of Bamidbar...something worth investigating).

B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uven had a lot of cattle and found the East Bank of the Jordan to be plentiful for their needs - and they approached Mosheh, asking him to be allowed to remain there, without crossing over the Jordan river. Mosheh ultimately "struck a bargain" with them: If they would agree to be at the vanguard of the fighting force in Eretz Yisra'el, leaving their families and cattle behind while they fought, they would be allowed to inherit on the East Bank. Besides the fascinating Halakhic discussions revolving around the "doubled condition" (see Mishnah Kiddushin 3:4, the discussion in the Bavli ad loc. and in Rambam, Ishut Ch. 6), there is simply a question about chronology/sequence here. The land which these two (plus) tribes chose to inherit was the land formerly occupied by Sichon and Og. We read about the successful wars against these two mighty kings at the end of Parashat Hukat - back in Chapter 22. Why didn't B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uven approach Mosheh then? Or, alternatively, why is their approach and subsequent negotiations recorded here?

We will try to answer each of these "placement" questions with a common approach - one which will also serve as a (hopefully) fitting Siyyum to our study of Sefer Bamidbar. First - a much more basic question about the Sefer.

### **III. LEKHTEIKH AHARAI BAMIDBAR - ?**

Throughout Sefer Bamidbar, we are given one basic picture of the B'nei Yisra'el (both the generation of the Exodus and their children, the generation of the conquest). It is not a pretty picture, as we read of one sin after the other, one complaint after the other. There is very little - it seems - to recommend this nation, based on the narratives in Bamidbar. The only positive remarks about them come - perhaps surprisingly, perhaps not - from the arch enemy, the prophet Bil'am.

Several of the events about which we read - notably the incident with the scouts ("spies") the Korach rebellion and the incident at Shittim (Ba'al P'or) - lead to explicit Divine threats to destroy the people (or so it seems to Mosheh - see Bamidbar 16:21-22 and Rabbenu Hannanel ad loc.). Even though each of these threats was averted, the "mega-question" must be asked:

How did the B'nei Yisra'el survive the desert? How were we not consumed by our own sins?

In order to address this question, we must first review the basic events of Sefer Bamidbar and note the division of the Sefer:

A: Chapters 1-10:

Establishment of the Relationship between the tribes and the Mishkan and readiness to march into Eretz Yisra'el.

1-4: Census

1-2: General Census

3-4: Levite Census

5-6: Assorted Laws relating to Sanctity of the Camp

7: Dedication of the Mishkan

8-10: Preparation for leaving Sinai

8: Sanctification of the Levi'im

9 (1-14): Celebration of Pesach, Institution of Pesach Sheni

9 (15-23): Description of the 'Anan

10 (1-10): The Trumpets of Assembly

10 (11-28): Beginnings of Travel

10 (29-34): Invitation to Hovav

10 (35-36): Misplaced Parashah (see Rav Soloveitchik's shiur)

B. Chapters 11-25: "The Troubles"

11-12: Challenges of Leadership

11:1-3: Mit'onenim ("complainers")

11:4-35: Mit'avim ("lusts")

12: Mosheh, Miriam and Aharon (Lashon haRa')

13-14: Scouts ("Spies")

13 - 14:39: M'raglim (Scouts)

14:40 - 45: Ma'pilim (those who tried to enter the Land prematurely)

[15: Various Laws]  
 16-17: Korach  
 [18: Laws of Gifts given to Levi'im and Kohanim]  
 [19: Laws of The Red Heifer]  
 20 - 21:10: Dissolution of Leadership  
 20:1: Death of Miriam  
 20:2-13: "Mei M'rivah" - the decree against Mosheh and Aharon  
 [20:14-21: Edom]  
 20:22-29: Death of Aharon  
 [21:1-3: K'na'ani War]  
 21:4-10: Complaints, the Snakes and the Copper Serpent  
 [21:11 - 22:1: War with Sichon and Og]  
 [22:2-24:25: Bil'am]  
 25: Ba'al P'or  
 25:1-6: The Sin and the Plague  
 25:7-15: Pinchas  
 25:16-18: God's command to avenge the seduction

[As can be seen, this section is overwhelmingly represented by stories of challenge, rebellion and sin. Those sections which do not fit this category have been bracketed; the reasons for their inclusion in this part of Bamidbar are generally local and deserve a separate treatment.]

C: Chapters 26-36:

Establishment of the Relationship between the tribes and their places in Eretz Yisra'el.

(Note the similarities between this section and section A. The interested reader is directed to Aviah Hakohen's shiur on this topic, which can be found in Megadim 9:27-40)

26: Census  
 27:1-11: Daughters of Tz'lofchad and Laws of Inheritance  
 27:12-23: Appointment of Yehoshua' as Mosheh's successor  
 [28-30: Various Laws  
 28-29: "T'midin uMusafin" (regular and holiday offerings)  
 30: "N'darim" (vows)]  
 31: War with Midian  
 32: Negotiations with B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uven  
 33:1-49: Travelogue  
 33:50-35:34: Laws relating to Conquest  
 33:50-56: Destruction of Pagan Worship-sites  
 34:1-15: Borders of the Land  
 34:16-29: Naming of Tribal Representatives for Division of Land  
 35:1-8: Levite Cities  
 35:9-34: Cities of Refuge  
 36: Interaction with Chieftains of Menasheh

Now that we have seen the basic division of the Sefer - we may also find some information which will help us answer our "larger" question.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY NOTE: CHIASMUS AND BOOKENDS

As we discussed at length in an earlier shiur, it is possible to discern a chiastic literary structure ("ABCBA") in many sections of Tanakh. Without going into the many details of how this may be found in Bamidbar (the reader is again referred to the article by Hakohen, cited above), there is one piece of the chiasmus which will help us understand an underlying theme in Sefer Bamidbar.

If we accept the notion that the first and third sections ("Before" and "After" the Troubles) are chiastically related, it follows

that the events at the end of the first section should be mirrored at the beginning of the third section.

One more bit of methodology before proceeding:

One of the basic assumptions of this shiur is that the Torah utilizes linguistic associations, made by either repeating a phrase several times in one narrative or by using a relatively rare word or phrase in two places, serving as a link. The Torah informs us much more about the relationship between the two linguistically-related narratives (or legal sections) than just the words - each can inform about the other, and the comparison can lead to significant contrasts.

One clear example of this was dealt with in this year's shiur on Parashat Balak. The Torah clearly creates an association between the Bil'am/donkey trip and the Avraham/donkey trip ("The Akedah"). By setting up this comparison, the Torah is able to subtly demonstrate the wide gulf that separates Avraham from Bil'am (see Avot 5:19).

This type of association has a source in the world of Halakhic exegesis: "Gezerah Shavah". When two areas of law employ a common phrase which is either (seemingly) superfluous or is a relatively rare use of those words, associations may be made which allow us to apply the known legal parameters, obligations and restrictions of one area to the other. For instance, the Torah uses the verb L\*K\*cH (lit. "take") when describing betrothal: "If a man shall Yikach (take) a woman..." (Devarim 24:1). The Torah uses a similar verb in describing Avraham's purchase of the Cave of Machpelah (B'resheet 23:13). The Rabbis were able to use this association to infer that money is a valid form of Kiddushin (betrothal). In other words, what we know about one instance (Avraham) of Lekichah(money), we can apply to the second (marriage) ambiguously presented source.

In much the same way, if we can identify two narratives which employ rare phrases or words (for example), this may indicate that the two are meant to be linked and viewed as a unit - or each against the backdrop of the other.

## **V. REVERSING THE DIRECTION OF LEGAL TRANSMISSION**

We are accustomed to a "top-down" (or "Top-down") form of legal transmission - God speaks to Mosheh, instructing him to transmit the information to the B'nei Yisra'el.

There are two instances where this direction is reversed - and they are both found in Sefer Bamidbar.

In Chapter 9 (near the end of the first section):

Now there were certain people who were unclean through touching a corpse, so that they could not keep the Pesach on that day. They came before Mosheh and Aharon on that day, and said to him, "Although we are unclean through touching a corpse, Lamah Nigara' (why must we be kept) from presenting Hashem's offering at its appointed time among the B'nei Yisra'el?" Mosheh spoke to them, "Wait, so that I may hear what Hashem will command concerning you." (Bamidbar 9:6-8)

In this case, Mosheh had reminded the people that they should bring the Pesach offering (it was one year since the Exodus). Several people approached him with their problem - on the one hand, they were impure and unable to participate in the offering; yet, they did not want to be left out of the national celebration. Instead of God initiating the instruction, the initiative came from these people who despaired of being left out of the congregation.

God's response affirmed their position, and the laws of the "Second Pesach" (Pesach Sheni) were given.

Near the beginning of the third section of Bamidbar, we find a curiously similar interaction. Mosheh is about to distribute the Land, via the lottery, to the tribes.

Enter the daughters of Tz'lofchad:

"Our father died in the wilderness; he was not among the company of those who gathered themselves together against Hashem in the company of Korah, but died for his own sin; and he had no sons. Why should the name of our father be taken away (Lamah yigara') from his clan because he had no son? Give to us a possession among our father's brothers." (Bamidbar 27:3-4)

Again, the initiative came from individuals who were concerned that as a result of the normative legislation, some level of

inclusion will be threatened (in the first case, their inclusion among the people; in this one, the integrity of their father's house within the tribe).

Again, God's response affirms their basic position - daughters inherit their father's estate if there are no sons.

Note also the use of the rare root G\*R\*A' in both of these stories. It means "to be left out" and underscores the concerns of both groups. Note that the only other contexts where it appears in legalistic literature (besides Bamidbar 36 - see below) is in a husband's obligations to his wife (Sh'mot 21:10) and in the prohibitions against diminishing any of the Mitzvot (D'varim 4:2, 13:1). The integrity of the family, as well as God's word, must be maintained and not diminished.

These "bookends" may help us understand the nature of Sefer Bamidbar and answer our earlier question - since they frame the middle section of the Sefer. First - one introductory note.

## **VI. REDEMPTION DEMANDS UNITY**

When Mosheh was a young man in Egypt, he went out to see how his brothers were faring. When he saw the harsh treatment one was receiving at the hand of an Egyptian taskmaster, Mosheh slew the Egyptian. The next day, Mosheh went out and found two of his brothers fighting. He was discouraged and tried to keep them from hurting (or even threatening) each other. The Midrash is sensitive to Mosheh's concerns and casts them in a prescient light:

"Mosheh was afraid and said: 'How did this matter become known?'" He said to them: "You are guilty of Lashon haRa' (gossip - for how did these two Hebrews find out that he had saved the life of another Hebrew by killing the Egyptian?) - how will you be redeemed?" (Midrash Tanhuma Sh'mot #10).

Mosheh was distressed because at the beginning of his mission to lead the B'nei Yisra'el out of Egypt, he noted their fractiousness - fighting and gossiping. This concerned him because he felt that such a people would never be successfully redeemed. In other words, regardless of whatever other merit is necessary to earn God's salvation, if the people do not get along with each other, there is no hope.

On the other hand, the Midrash tells us, no matter how low the B'nei Yisra'el sink in their ritual behavior, as long as they stand united, nothing can defeat them:

Rebbi says: Great is peace, such that even if Yisra'el are worshipping foreign gods but they are at peace with each other, God declares (as if to say) "I cannot defeat them", as it says: Ephraim is joined to idols - let him alone. (Hoshea 4:17). However, if their hearts are divided [against each other], what does the verse say? Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt. (Hoshea 10:2). (Midrash B'reshet 38:6).

Note also the famous statement in the Yerushalmi:

R. Aba bar Kahana said: The generation of David were all righteous, but, since they were guilty of infighting, they would go out to war and be defeated...however, the generation of Ah'av were idolaters, but, since were not guilty of infighting, they would go out to war and prevail. (JT Peah 1:1)

## **VII. THE "SINS OF THE DESERT"**

Guided by the great desire of inclusion in national and tribal celebrations and holdings, as expressed by the impure men and by the daughters of Tz'lofchad, we can now re-examine the many sins that make up the bulk of the middle of Bamidbar and understand the success of B'nei Yisra'el to "come out of it alive".

As terrible as some of these sins were, culminating in the vile idolatry of P'or, we never find the B'nei Yisra'el turning against each other. Indeed, the reaction to the "bad news" of the scouts was "let us appoint a captain and return to Egypt". As awful and self-defeating as that plan was, it reflected an awareness of common destiny - instead of scattering or settling in, the people's desire to remain together (which could have been accomplished, according to this hysterical outburst, even in Egypt) was manifest and constant.

We even look at the most direct attack to Mosheh's leadership - the Korach rebellion. What was his rallying cry? Kol ha'Edah kulam K'doshim - ("The whole congregation is holy" - see our shiur on this topic) - a misguided and misleading populism, no doubt, but one which served to unite the people, rather than turn them against each other.



We can now respond to the "large" question. B'nei Yisra'el were successful in surviving a sinful period in the desert because their sins did not turn them against each other and they seemingly avoided Sin'at Hin'am (groundless hatred) and the like.

We can now turn to our more detailed questions, focused on the end of the Sefer.

## **VIII. THE REQUEST OF B'NEI GAD AND B'NEI RE'UVEN**

We can now understand the terrible threat posed by [Mosheh's initial understanding of] the request made by B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uvén. Since the saving grace of the people throughout the desert was their unity and sense of common destiny and mutual responsibility, the "abandonment" of the B'nei Yisra'el by these two tribes was a dire threat indeed. (See Yehoshua Ch. 22 for the denouement of the B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uvén agreement; note how seriously the leaders of the B'nei Yisra'el respond to their separation.)

On this level, the most reasonable place for their request would have been at the end of Parashat Hukat, immediately after the defeat of Sichon and Og. It would have been appropriately placed there if these two tribes had not demonstrated their willingness and desire to maintain a common destiny with the rest of the B'nei Yisra'el by forming the vanguard of the conquest. It would have belonged to the "Troubles" section of Bamidbar.

That is not how events unfolded. Just like the impure men and the daughters of Tz'lofchad, the B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uvén initiated a request for inclusion (note that they presented the "compromise" plan to Mosheh, not the reverse. This is similar to the inverted order of legal instruction as seen in the two "bookend" cases).

As such, this Parashah belongs "away from the troubles" - in the third section of Bamidbar. Instead of viewing their request as another "sin of the desert", we understand it as an opportunity to demonstrate even greater inclusion and national responsibility.

[There is another reason why the B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uvén delayed their request until now - it was only after the success against Midian that they felt that the beginning of the conquest was underway - note the common Halutz in both the Midian war and the B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uvén compromise].

[One interesting note about the negotiations between Mosheh and the two tribes. As S'forno points out at Bamidbar 32:28 and 33, Mosheh wanted the two tribes to delay their "conquest" of the East Bank until after the conquest in the promised Land. They insisted on taking the Land now, and Mosheh conceded this point, in order to avoid further dispute with them.

What was the reason for this dispute? We could answer based on the notion of Kibbush Yachid. As the Rambam (MT T'rumat 1:3) points out, any land outside of the "commanded borders" which is conquered, even if done by the King and with the support of the people and the Sanhedrin, is considered Kibbush Yachid (individual conquest) if it was done before the complete conquest of the Land within the commanded borders. Land which is the result of Kibbush Yachid is only quasi-sanctified with the sanctity of Eretz Yisra'el.

Therefore, if the two tribes took the Land now, it would forever remain Hutz la'Aretz - outside of the borders of Eretz Yisra'el. On the other hand, if they waited to "take" it until after the complete conquest, it would be an expansion of Eretz Yisra'el and would have the full holiness of the Land.

Mosheh had every reason to want these two tribes to wait for their conquest; Mosheh knew he was to be buried in this area (see Bamidbar 27:12-13). If their conquest waited, he would end up buried in Eretz Yisra'el - but only if they waited. Nevertheless, in order to avoid further dispute, Mosheh ceded on this point and allowed them to take the Land in advance of their conquest of the West Bank. A tremendous bit of "Mussar" about how far we should be willing to go to avoid "Mah'loket"!]

## **IX. MENASHEH'S CHIEFTAINS REVISITED**

We can now answer our first question with ease: Why did Mosheh wait to transmit the final bit of information regarding the daughters of Tz'lofchad and their matrimonial limitations?

This Parashah is, indeed, a perfect conclusion to the book of Bamidbar. Although Mosheh had already been given the instructions regarding these details, it took the approach of the chieftains with their concern for tribal integrity (note, again, the use of the rare root G\*R\*A' - see above) to merit the transmission of this law. There were conflicting concerns here: The integrity of the family within the tribe (the claim of the daughters) as against the integrity of the tribe within the nation (the claim of the chieftains). The response could only come when, just like the impure men, the daughters of Tz'lofchad and the B'nei Gad and B'nei Re'uven before them, the chieftains of Menasheh were willing to approach Mosheh to demonstrate their concern for the integrity of the group.

## **X. POSTSCRIPT**

This sense of common destiny - what Rabbi Soloveitchik zt"l refers to as B'rit Yi'ud, is the secret to Jewish survival - and what allowed us to successfully enter and conquer Eretz Yisra'el. As we enter the nine days of mourning for our Beit haMikdash, let us remember that, in the words of Rav Kook zt"l: Just as the Temple was destroyed due to Sin'at Hinam (groundless hatred), it will only be rebuilt through Ahavat Hinam (groundless love).

Text Copyright © 2010 by Rabbi Yitzchak Etshalom and Torah.org. The author is Educational Coordinator of the Jewish Studies Institute of the Yeshiva of Los Angeles.