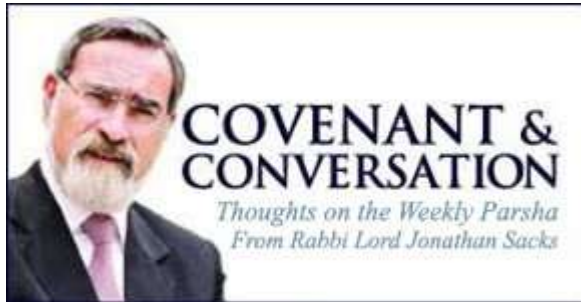


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PARSHAT MATOT
Priorities

The Israelites were almost within sight of the Promised Land. They had successfully waged their first battles. They had just won a victory over the Midianites. There is a new tone to the narrative. We no longer hear the querulous complaints that had been the bass note of so much of the wilderness years.

We know why. That undertone was the sound of the generation, born in slavery, that had left Egypt. By now, almost forty years have passed. The second generation, born in freedom and toughened by conditions in the desert, have a more purposeful feel about them. Battle-tried, they no longer doubt their ability, with God's help, to fight and win.

Yet it is at just this point that a problem arises, different in kind from those that had gone before. The people as a whole now have their attention focused on the destination: the land west of the river Jordan, the place that even the spies had confirmed to be "flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 13:27).

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they were travelling was ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would prefer to stay there, to the east of the Jordan, and propose this to Moses. Unsurprisingly, he is angry at the suggestion: "Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, 'Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why would you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them?'" (Num. 32:6-7). He reminds them of the disastrous consequences of the earlier discouragement on the part of the spies. The whole nation will suffer. This decision would show not only that they are ambivalent about God's gift of the land but also that they have learned nothing from history.

The tribes do not argue with his claim. They accept its validity, but they point out that his concern is not incompatible with their objectives. They suggest a compromise:

Then they came up to him and said, "We would like to build sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. But we will then arm ourselves and go as an advance guard before the Israelites until we have established them in their home. Meanwhile our children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan." (Num. 32:16-19)

We are willing, in other words, to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead. Not only this, but we are prepared to be the nation's advance guard, in the forefront of the battle. We are not afraid of combat, nor are we trying to evade our responsibilities to our people as a whole. It is simply that we wish to raise cattle, and for this, the land to the east of the Jordan is ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agrees. If they keep their word, they will be allowed to settle east of the Jordan. And so, indeed, it happened (Josh. 22:1-5).

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the Sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said: "Then they came up to him and said, 'We would like to build sheepfolds for

our flocks and towns for our children." Moses replied: "Build towns for your children, and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised" (Num. 32:24).

The ordering of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they spoke of their flocks first, their children second.[1] Moses reversed the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes:

They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: "Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks." (Commentary to Num. 32:16)

A Midrash[2] makes the same point by way of an ingenious interpretation of a verse in Ecclesiastes: "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left" (Eccl. 10:2). The Midrash identifies "right" with Torah and life: "He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand" (Deut. 33:2). "Left," by contrast, refers to worldly goods:

Long life is in her right hand;
in her left hand are riches and honour. (Prov. 3:16)

Hence, infers the Midrash, the men of Reuben and Gad put "riches and honour" before faith and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong. The Midrash continues: "The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to them: 'Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.'"

This turned out to be not a minor incident in the wilderness long ago, but rather, a consistent pattern throughout much of Jewish history. The fate of Jewish communities, for the most part, was determined by a single factor: their decision, or lack of decision, to put children and their education first. Already in the first century, Josephus was able to write: "The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls." [3] The Rabbis ruled that "any town that lacks children at school is to be excommunicated" (Shabbat 119b). Already in the first century, the Jewish community in Israel had established a network of schools at which attendance was compulsory (Bava Batra 21a) - the first such system in history.

The pattern persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In twelfth-century France a Christian scholar noted: "A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God's law - and not only his sons, but his daughters too." [4]

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. [5] In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organise the educational system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family:

The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys' school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son. The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her son's schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew - for her the two are synonymous. [6]

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became Rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshiva heads and chassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools. [7]

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilisation that has so predicated its very existence on putting children and their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues - Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor historical detail but a fundamental statement of Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary. Civilisations that value the young stay young. Those that invest in the future have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we

make to ensure that they carry our faith and way of life into the next generation.

NOTES

1. Note also the parallel between the decision of the leaders of Reuben and Gad and that of Lot, in Genesis 13:10-13. Lot too made his choice of dwelling place based on economic considerations - the prosperity of Sodom and the cities of the plain - without considering the impact the environment would have on his children.
2. Numbers Rabbah 22:9.
3. Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, ii, 177-178.
4. Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952), 78.
5. Salo Baron, *The Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), 2:171-173.
6. Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 87.
7. My book on this subject is Jonathan Sacks, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994).

* * *

PARSHAT MASAY

The Religious Significance of Israel

The long journey is nearing its close. The Jordan is almost within sight. We have read the long itinerary of stops along the way. Finally we are reaching the end of the list of encampments, and God tells Moses: "Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (Num. 33:53). This, according to Nahmanides (to Num. 33:53), is the source of the command to dwell in the land of Israel and inherit it.

With this we come to one of the central tensions in Judaism and Jewish history: the religious significance of the land of Israel. Its centrality cannot be doubted. Whatever the subplots and subsidiary themes of Tanach, its overarching narrative is the promise of and journey to the land.[1] Jewish history begins with Abraham and Sarah's journey to it. The four subsequent books of the Torah, from Exodus to Deuteronomy, are taken up with the second journey in the days of Moses. Tanach as a whole ends with Cyrus king of Persia granting permission to Jews, exiled in Babylon, to return to their land - the third great journey (II Chr. 36:23).

The paradox of Jewish history is that although a specific territory, the holy land, is at its heart, Jews have spent more time in exile than in Israel; more time longing for it than dwelling in it; more time travelling than arriving. Much of the Jewish story could be written in the language of Parshat Masei: "They journeyed from X and camped at Y."

Hence the tension. On the one hand, monotheism must understand God as non-territorial. The God of everywhere can be found anywhere. He is not confined to this people, or that place - as pagans believed. He exercises His power even in Egypt. He sends a Prophet, Jonah, to Nineveh in Assyria. He is with another Prophet, Ezekiel, in Babylon. There is no place in the universe where He is not. On the other hand, it must be impossible to live fully as a Jew outside Israel, for if not, Jews would not have been commanded to go there initially, or to return subsequently. Why is the God beyond place to be found specifically in this place?

The Sages formulated the tension in two striking propositions. On the one hand, "Wherever the Israelites went into exile, the Divine Presence was exiled with them." [2] On the other, "One who leaves Israel to live elsewhere is as if he had no God" (Ketubot 110b). Can one find God, serve God, experience God, outside the Holy Land? Yes and no. If the answer were only yes, there would be no incentive to return. If the answer were only no, there would be no reason to stay Jewish in exile. On this tension, the Jewish existence is built.

What then is special about Israel? In *The Kuzari*, Judah Halevi says that different environments have different ecologies. Just as there are some countries, climates, and soils particularly suited to growing vines, so there is a country, Israel, particularly suited to growing Prophets - indeed a whole Divinely-inspired people. "No other place shares the distinction of the divine influence, just as no other mountain produces such good wine." [3]

Nahmanides gives a different explanation:

God created everything and placed the power over the ones below in the ones above and placed over each and every people in their lands according to their nations a star and a specific constellation.... But the land of Israel, in the middle of the inhabited earth, is the inheritance of God.... He has set us apart from all the nations over whom He has appointed princes and other celestial powers, by giving us the land [of Israel] so that He, blessed be He, will be our God and we will be dedicated to His name. (Commentary to Lev. 18:25)

Though every land and nation is under the overarching sovereignty of God, only Israel is directly so. Others are ruled by intermediaries earthly and heavenly. Their fate is governed by other factors. Only in the Land and People of Israel do we find a nation's fortunes and misfortunes directly attributable to their relationship with God.

Judah Halevi and Nahmanides both expound what we might call mystical geography. The difference between them is that Judah Halevi looks to earth, Nahmanides to heaven. For Judah Halevi, what is special about the land of Israel is its soil, landscape, and climate. For Nahmanides, it is its direct governance by God. For both of them, religious experience is possible outside Israel, but it is a pale shadow of what it is in the land. Is there a way of stating this non-mystically, in concepts and categories closer to ordinary experience? Here is one way of doing so.

The Torah is not merely a code of personal perfection. It is the framework for the construction of a society, a nation, a culture. It is about what Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein called, in a memorable phrase, "societal beatitude." It contains welfare legislation, civil law, rules governing employer-employee relationships, environmental provisions, rules of animal welfare, public health, and governmental and judicial systems.

The Torah stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gnosticism and other world-denying philosophies that see religion as an ascent of the soul to ethereal realms of the spirit. For Judaism, God lives here, on earth, in human lives, interactions, and associations. The Torah is terrestrial because God seeks to dwell on earth. Thus the Jewish task is to create a society with the Divine Presence in its midst. Had Judaism been confined to matters of the spirit, it would have left vast areas of human concern - the entire realms of politics, economics, and sociology - outside the religious sphere.

What was and is unique about Israel is that it is the sole place on earth (barring short-lived exceptions like the Himyarites in the sixth century and Khazars in the eighth, whose kings converted to Judaism) where Jews have had the chance to create an entire society on Jewish lines. It is possible to live a Jewish life in Manchester or Monsey, Madrid or Minsk. But it is always a truncated experience. Only in Israel do Jews conduct their lives in the language of the Bible, within time defined by

the Jewish calendar and space saturated in Jewish history. Only there do they form a majority. Only there are they able to construct a political system, an economy, and an environment on the template of Jewish values. There alone can Judaism be what it is meant to be - not just a code of conduct for individuals, but also and essentially the architectonics of a society.

Hence there must be some space on earth where Jews practise self-government under divine sovereignty. But why Israel, specifically? Because it is, and has always been, a key strategic location where three continents - Europe, Africa, and Asia - meet. Lacking the extended flat and fertile space of the Nile Delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley (or today, the oil fields of Arabia), it could never be the base of an empire, but because of its location it was always sought after by empires. So it was politically vulnerable.

It was and is ecologically vulnerable, because its water resources are dependent on rain, and rains in the region are always unpredictable (hence the frequent famines mentioned in Genesis). Its existence could never, therefore, be taken for granted. Time and again its people, surviving challenges, would experience this as a miracle. Small geographically and demographically, it would depend on outstanding achievement - political, military, and economic - on the part of its people. This would depend, in turn, on their morale and sense of mission. Thus the Prophets knew, naturally as well as supernaturally, that without social justice and a sense of divine vocation, the nation would eventually fall and suffer exile again.

These are, as it were, the empirical foundations of the mysticism of Halevi and Nahmanides. They are as true today as they were in ancient times. There is a directness, a naturalness, of Jewish experience in Israel that can be found nowhere else. History tells us that the project of constructing a society under divine sovereignty in a vulnerable land is the highest of high-risk strategies. Yet, across forty centuries, Jews knew that the risk was worth taking. For only in Israel is God so close that you can feel Him in the sun and wind, sense Him just beyond the hills, hear Him in the inflections of everyday speech, breathe His presence in the early morning air and live, dangerously but confidently, under the shadow of His wings.

Shabbat Shalom.

NOTES

1. See D. J. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1978).
2. *Mechilta*, Parshat Bo 14.
3. *The Kuzari*, II:9-12.



Parshat Matot

"Shall Your Brothers Go To War While You Sit Here?"

"Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?" With these words Moshe hurls a devastating moral attack against the tribes of Reuven (Reuben) and Gad, an attack that reverberates until this very day, and is used as ammunition against those who live in the modern state of Israel yet choose to take advantage of the service deferments.

As the Jews drew nearer to the Promised Land, they came into possession of lush grazing land, and two tribes expressed a desire to make their homestead east of Israel. In short, they sought to trade their future portion in the land of their forefathers for the green pastures across the border. For them, the Promised Land would remain an unfulfilled promise - not because God did not want to keep His promise, but because they were less interested in what the Land of Israel had to offer than they were in the lucrative opportunity they saw on the outside.

Their request was met with a rhetorical question, a response so full of moral outrage that its critical tone was unmistakable: "Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here?" The historic moment in time should not be overlooked: the conquest of the Land of Israel and the very existence of a Jewish national entity in the Land of the Patriarchs hung in the balance.

Upon closer inspection, their wish not to be a part of the "Zionist" enterprise is not really analogous to those who live in Israel today and choose not to fight. We have become so accustomed to hearing these words used out of context that we fail to take note of the differences: Those who live in Israel, regardless of their political orientation or the degree to which they take part in national or military institutions, do not fit squarely into the moral attack hurled by Moshe against the two tribes who sought to remain outside the land. When considered in context, Moshe's charge against those who would choose the lush fields over the Land of Israel would be more appropriately directed at modern-era Jews who choose to remain in the diaspora rather than taking part in the rebuilding of the Land.

Moshe's response to the two tribes' request goes one step further, lending context and depth to his critique: "And why do you discourage the heart of the people of Israel from going over to the land which God has given them? This is what your fathers did, when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to see the land." (Bamidbar 32:7-8)

Moshe compares their request to the sin of the spies, perhaps the most nefarious episode endured during his tenure. He identifies the crux of the spies' perfidy not simply in the rejection of the Land of Israel, but in the fear they instilled in the hearts of the nation. This fear escalated into panic and led to a massive breakdown of faith and purpose. The spies' insidious report caused the nation to doubt their leaders, to lose sight of their goals. The entire community of Israel began to have second thoughts about the Land and their collective destiny. Can a similar charge be made against those who live in Israel today, even if they do not share the burden of protecting the Land and the People of Israel? I think not.

With this in mind I wish to put forth a few suggestions:

First, to those living in Israel who do not serve: By any moral and religious logic, those who live in Israel must offer their full support to our soldiers and their sacred mission. Too often, demagogues get caught up in their self-serving ideology and attack the State, the government, and the I.D.F. as if they are all part of an elaborate plot designed to uproot Jewish values. The role of the army is far more prosaic; they are indeed involved in elaborate plot - to protect the lives and freedoms of as many Jews as possible. This is a responsibility that must be shared by each and every one of us. Often old skirmishes and battles are conjured up, and present day reality is ignored,

rather than focusing on old internal battles, they should treat themselves to a healthy dose of present-day reality.

Among the rabbis who saw things differently, two come to mind: one was my revered teacher, Rabbi Yisrael Gustman, who, upon seeing the graves in the military cemetery on Mount Herzl, declared, "Kulam kedoshim," "They are all holy martyrs." Another is Rabbi Shlomo Zalman Auerbach. When a student asked the Rabbi's permission to take a short leave from the yeshiva in Jerusalem to travel to pray at the "graves of the righteous," Rabbi Auerbach told him that he need go no further than Mount Herzl, to the military cemetery. These great rabbis recognized that our brothers who went to war and did not return were holy. It behooves all those who remain in yeshiva and devote themselves to learning Torah, to bolster the spirit of those around them and aid in the national effort in any way they can. First and foremost, they must recognize the sanctity of the sacrifice others are making on their behalf, and the holiness of our brothers who have fought to secure their freedom to build and populate great centers of Torah learning in Israel - especially those who paid for these blessings with their lives.

As for those who have chosen the diaspora as home: Make sure that your choices do not instill fear in the hearts of those who dwell in Zion. Be active in your support: Send your children to Israel. Allow them to serve in the army if they express the desire to do so. Remember that this moral fortitude and bravery is the culmination of a proper education.

Consider the Israelis who give three years of their lives to military service, and then continue to disrupt their normal routine for a month or more each year for decades thereafter. Keeping that time-frame in mind, create a structure for donating resources or time to Jewish causes, and strengthen the spirit of those who live in Israel. Israel should be more than just a destination for vacations. It is the inheritance of all Jews, and a part of our personal and collective destiny.

* * *

Parshat Masay

Walking in Circles

There is something that may seem rather depressing about the start of the final parasha in the book of Bamidbar: The parasha begins with a retrospective of the various stops comprising the Israelites' forty-year ordeal in the desert. Knowing, as we do, that the original plan had been to leave Egypt, make a quick

stop at Sinai, and commence their glorious march to Israel, the stark contrast with the reality of their long sojourn, punctuated by death and despair, is tragic. It is clear to us, as it must have been to them, that for the most part, they were not really going anywhere. They were, in a sense, walking in circles; the main objective was NOT arriving at their desired destination.

Generally, we view the world in a linear fashion: There is a clearly defined beginning, and a clear end. We have objectives, and we expend time and energy approaching our goals along a linear axis, with the objective serving as the terminal point. This is the way that most of us see our lives; we gauge success by the progress made along the path that leads to the fulfillment of our objectives.

While Judaism does not reject this linear view of the world, it does have many cyclical elements as well. Our calendar marks the passing of days and years, and although each day is different and precious, every seventh day we return to the holy Sabbath. Likewise, we celebrate the appearance of the new moon, marking new months and holidays which return, like old friends or cherished family members, each year. The cyclical nature of the calendar makes many of the significant aspects of our lives more of a circle than a straight line.

The Jews traveling in the desert were not simply trying to get from Point A to Point B, from the land of Egypt to the Promised Land. Had that been the goal, we may safely say that the forty-year sojourn was a failure: A distance that could have been traversed in days took years. However, the desert experience went beyond the linear, goal-oriented view of history, incorporating the circular, cyclical approach in a very significant way. The goal-oriented, linear mindset governs our daily life as we rush from place to place, even though we are capable of altering our own perceptions of time and progress: A small delay in the daily commute is enough to thoroughly shake us up, but our experience of the same travel time when we are on vacation is completely different. Our perceptions become completely altered by the smallest change in our linear approach to time. This was made clear to me some years ago, when my wife and I travelled to South Africa. While the main purpose of the trip was to teach, we were able to take some time to see the sights. Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and its citizens took great pride in showing us around. Many things caught our eye, and I was particularly taken with one tree with beautiful lavender leaves. I snapped a few pictures to remember the beauty of this tree and to share it with my children. When

we returned home, I was shocked to see the very same trees not only grow on the university campus where I have been teaching for twenty-five years, but also in the neighborhood in which we have lived for nearly thirty years! Even though I pass beneath these very same trees on my way to and from my daily endeavors, I had never noticed them. Only when traveling, when I had no particular goal in mind other than to appreciate my surroundings, did I notice something beautiful that had been in plain sight all along, but had eluded me.

Seeing the world in a cyclical way is not about being without a destination; rather, the objective is the journey itself. Thus, in our most joyous celebrations, we dance in a circle. At weddings, and on Simchat Torah, we celebrate the circle of Jewish life, enjoying the journey and taking the time to see ourselves as part of that circle. Our sages explain that in the messianic future, the righteous will dance in a circle, and God Himself will stand at its center. Only then will we fully understand that the ultimate destination was the circle itself, and God is, and has always been, right there in the center, in our midst, all along.

Likewise, the weekly cycle that culminates in Shabbat is not meant to be destination-oriented. We are not meant to disregard the six days of the week that lead to Shabbat. Our goal should also include the six days between one Shabbat and the next, by allowing what we have gained on the seventh day - spiritually, emotionally, communally, intellectually - to energize and uplift each subsequent day of the week. By allowing some of the holiness of the Sabbath to "spill over" into our weekday consciousness, we begin to enjoy not only the destination - the holiness of Shabbat - but also the journey through our week that takes us there.

The story of the Israelites' travels in the desert is the story of a nation that was not yet ready to enter the Promised Land. The forty-year delay was not simply a punishment. In order to be worthy of the Land of Israel, the Israelites had to experience a journey that would help them grow, help them achieve spiritual and national maturity. They needed the time and space to achieve new modes of thinking and new modes of experience. Circling the desert was a wonderful introduction to the cyclical experience of the Jewish calendar and Jewish history. It afforded an opportunity to do more than simply arrive at the destination; it taught them to see and appreciate the trees along the way.



PARSHA MATOT

1. This parsha discusses the laws of vows. In what two places does the Torah record someone taking a vow (neder)?

In parshas Vayetzei, Yaakov vowed to build a House of God at the place where he slept, and to give one-tenth of all that he owns to God (Genesis 28:20). In parshas Chukas, when the Jews faced an unknown enemy, they vowed to consecrate all the spoils of war (Numbers 21:2).

2. What object, fashioned previously in the book of Numbers, is used in this parsha?

The trumpets were fashioned in parshas Beha'alosecha (Numbers 10:2) and are used in this parsha (Numbers 31:6).

3. In this parsha, who is described as having a "powerful mouth," but is killed by the sword?

Bilaam has a "powerful mouth," with the ability to bless and to curse (Numbers 22:6), but is killed by the sword (Numbers 31:8).

4. Which king of Midian has the same name as a person, who according to the Sages, is a nephew of Moshe?

One of the kings of Midian is named Chur. According to the Sages, Chur is the son of Miriam and thus the nephew of Moshe (Rashi - Exodus 17:10, Talmud - Sotah 11b).

5. In this parsha, who is described as "getting angry" (vayik'tzof)? What four other places - once each in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy - does the Torah describe someone as "getting angry"?

In this parsha, when the Jewish army returned from fighting Midian and brought back female captives, "Moshe got angry"

(vayik'tzof) with the commanders of the army (Numbers 31:14). In parshas Vayeshev, Pharaoh got angry at the Butler and Baker, throwing them in jail (Genesis 40:2). In parshas Beshalach, Moshe got angry at the men who left over manna from one day to the next (Exodus 16:20). In parshas Shmini, Moshe got angry at Elazar and Itamar for not eating from the offering after the death of their brothers, Nadav and Avihu (Leviticus 10:16). In parshas Devarim, Moshe recounted how God got angry at the nation following the report of the spies (Deut. 1:34).

6. In this parsha, which 6 metals are explicitly mentioned in the same verse?

Utensils made from gold, silver, lead, copper, iron, and tin were brought back from the war with Midian (Numbers 31:22).

7. In this parsha, what law involves fire and water?

The verse states that to kasher any utensil that was used with fire, it must be passed through fire, whereas those not used with fire may be kashered with water (Numbers 31:23).

8. In this parsha, what is divided in half?

The captured spoils of the war are divided, with half going to the soldiers who fought in battle, and half to the entire nation (Numbers 31:27).

9. In this parsha, which five types of jewelry all appear in the same verse?

Army commanders bring an offering consisting of five types of jewelry acquired in the war: anklet, bracelet, ring, earring, and clasp (Numbers 31:50).

10. In this parsha, which verse contain the names of nine different cities?

When the tribes of Reuven and Gad request to receive their share of land on the east bank of the Jordan River, they mention nine cities: Ataros, Divon, Yazer, Nimra, Cheshbon, Elaleh, Sevam, Nevo and Beon (Numbers 32:3).

11. In this parsha, which two people name a city after themselves?

Both Yair ben Menashe and Novach build cities that are named after themselves (Numbers 32:41-42).

* * *

PARSHA MASAY

1. In this parsha, what act does Moshe perform that he does not do anywhere else in the book of Numbers?

Moshe performs the act of writing. The Torah states that "Moshe wrote" all the encampments of throughout their sojourn in the desert (Numbers 33:2).

2. Where are date-palm trees mentioned in this parsha?

One of the first encampments in the desert is called Eilim, which had 70 date-palm trees (Numbers 33:9).

3. Which encampment mentioned in this parsha may allude to the holiday of Chanukah?

The 25th encampment is a place called Chasmonah (Numbers 33:29). Chanukah is celebrated beginning on the 25th day of the month of Kislev, the day the Jews rested after battling the Syrian-Greeks. The heroes of the holiday were the priests known as Chashmonim, linguistically similar to the name of the 25th encampment.

4. Whose date of death is the only one recorded in the Torah?

The death of Aharon the High Priest is recorded as the first day of the fifth month (Numbers 33:38) - Rosh Chodesh Av. This is the only mention of someone's date of death in the Torah. It is interesting to note that Av is also the month in which both Temples were destroyed, correlating to the Temple service performed by the kohanim, the descendants of Aharon.

5. In what context are thorns mentioned in this parsha?

The Torah warns that if the Jews do not conquer all the nations in the land of Canaan, those nations will be thorns in their sides (Numbers 33:55).

6. Which 3 seas are mentioned in this parsha?

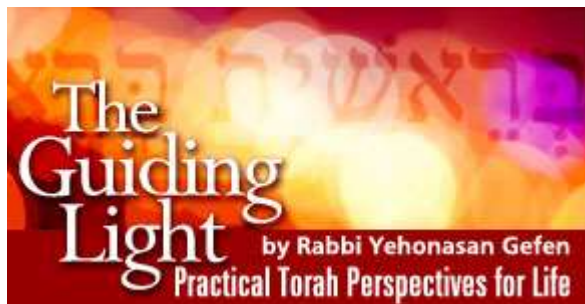
In describing the boundaries of the Land of Israel, the Torah mentions three seas: Dead Sea, Mediterranean Sea, and Sea of Galilee (Numbers 34:3, 6, 11).

7. Which law in this parsha involves iron? Where in the Torah is iron mentioned for the first time?

An "iron utensil" is one example given of a deadly weapon, which if used to kill another would warrant the death penalty (Numbers 35:16). In parshas Beraishis, the Torah introduces Tuval Kayin as one who sharpens copper and iron (Genesis 4:22).

8. Where is oil mentioned in this parsha?

Someone who accidentally kills is forced to flee to a city of refuge, where he must remain until the death of the High Priest - who is anointed with the sanctifying oil (Numbers 35:25).



PARSHAT MATOT
The Value of Life

One of the main incidents in this week's Torah portion is the war between the Jewish people and the Midianites. In the midst of the battle, the Jews encountered their great enemy, Bilaam who was there to collect his wages for causing the Jews to sin at Baal Peor. The Torah tells us "Bilaam the son of Beor they killed with the sword." (1)

It would seem that the death of Bilaam was a punishment for his efforts to harm the Jewish people in the desert. The Talmud, however, cites a far earlier crime that he committed as the reason for his untimely death. "Three were in that piece of advice [of how Pharaoh should treat the Jewish people], Bilaam, Job and Yisro: Bilaam advised [to harm them] and was killed;

Job was silent and was judged with suffering; Yisro escaped and merited that his descendants should sit in the Temple's chamber of hewn stone." (2) Bilaam was punished with death at the hands of the Jewish people because of his evil advice to Pharaoh many years earlier. Rav Chaim Shmuelevitz points out that this Talmud poses a great difficulty: It is clear that Bilaam deserved a far greater punishment than Job, because Job didn't commit an active crime, rather he remained silent. Yet, it would seem that Job's punishment was far greater than that of Bilaam. Whilst Bilaam suffered a quick death, Job had to endure suffering that no other man has ever experienced. How can this be understood?

Rav Shmuelevitz answers that life itself is the greatest gift possible and that any pain, no matter how bad, is infinitely greater than death. Consequently, Bilaam's punishment was far more severe than that of Job for Job still had the gift of life, whilst Bilaam lost it forever.

Rav Leib Chasman offers an excellent analogy to help understand this concept; imagine a man wins a huge prize on the lottery, and at that every moment, one of his jugs breaks. Would this minor inconvenience bother him at all at this time of great joy? The happiness that he experiences due to the lottery prize nullifies any feelings of pain that come in everyday life. So too, a person should have the same attitude in life - his joy at the mere fact of his existence should be so great that it should render any difficulties as meaningless, even sufferings as great as those that Job endured for they are nothing in comparison with the wonderful gift of life.(3)

Why is the gift of life so precious? The Mishna in Pirkei Avos can help answer this question: "One moment of repentance and good deeds in Olam Hazeah (this world) is greater than all of Chayei Olam Habah (the Next World), and one moment of peripheral pleasure in Olam Habah is greater than all of Chayei Olam Hazeah."(4) This Mishna seems to contradict itself - it begins by stating that Olam Hazeah is incomparably greater than Olam Habah and ends by saying the opposite!

The commentaries explain that the two parts of the Mishna are focusing on different aspects. The second part of the Mishna is comparing the pleasure that one can attain in the two 'worlds'. In that sense, Olam Habah is infinitely greater than Olam Hazeah - there is no earthly pleasure that can begin to compare with one moment of pleasure in Olam Habah. The pleasure there is that of connecting to God, the Source of all creation - all other pleasures are meaningless and transitory in comparison.

However, the first part of the Mishna is focusing on the ability to create more of a connection to God. In that aspect Olam Hazeh is infinitely greater because it is the place of free will in which we have the ability to choose to become closer to God by performing mitzvot. In Olam Habah there is no more opportunity to increase the connection to Him. We can now understand why life is so precious - each moment is a priceless opportunity to attain more closeness to God, the ultimate pleasure that will accompany us for eternity in Olam Habah. The Vilna Gaon expressed the value of Olam Hazeh on his deathbed. He held his Tzitzit and cried, saying, "How precious is Olam Hazeh that for a few prutot [a very small amount of an old currency] it is possible to gain merit for the mitzva of Tsitsit and to see the 'Divine Presence', whereas in Olam Habah it is impossible to gain anything." (5)

This idea is also demonstrated by the Talmud in Avoda Zara.(6) It tells of Elazar Ben Durdaya, an inveterate sinner. On one occasion, when he was about to commit a terrible sin, he was told that even if he repented his teshuva (repentance) will never be accepted. This 'sentence' affected him so deeply that he did repent and he died in a state of perfect teshuva. As his soul left him, a Bas Kol (a voice from Heaven) came out and said that Rabbi Elazar Ben Durdaya is ready to go into Olam Habah. The Talmud then says that when Rebbi Yehuda HaNasi (who is usually known as Rebbi) heard this story he cried out, "there are those that earn Olam Habah in many years and there are those that earn it in one moment." The commentaries wonder why Rebbi was so upset by this incident. He, a person who had struggled for many years in Divine Service, was surely destined for a far greater portion in Olam Habah than someone who earned Olam Habah for one moment of inspired teshuva!

Rav Noach Weinberg zt"l answers in the name of his father, that Rebbi was crying because he saw the power of one moment in Olam Hazeh; in one moment a person can earn infinite bliss, therefore he was crying at any failure to utilize each moment in the best possible way. Each moment is an incredible opportunity at creating more Olam Habah.

The Chofetz Chaim applies this concept to Jewish law.(7) He brings the Sefer Hachinuch who writes that there are six mitzvot that are constantly incumbent upon man(8) and that every second throughout a person's life a person can fulfill them by merely thinking about them. Consequently, there is no limit to the reward for performing these mitzvot. This can also help explain why Jewish law is so against ending a person's life

prematurely, even if he is unable to live a normal life. Rav Zev Leff points out that even a person in a coma may well be able to perform numerous mitzvot by his thought. He can fulfill the mitzvot that only require thought and moreover, the Rabbis teach us that if a person has a desire to perform a mitzvah but is prevented from doing so, he nevertheless receives reward as if he did indeed fulfill it. Therefore, every second more of life is a great opportunity to create more Olam Habah.(9)

We have seen how every second of life is infinitely precious. Yet we often think that little can be achieved in a few minutes here or there. However, experience has proven differently. The great Rabbinic leader of the Hungarian Jewish community in the 19th Century, the Chasam Sofer was once asked how he became such a great Torah scholar; he answered that he did so in 'five minutes'. He meant that by utilizing every available moment he was able to learn so much more. Rav Moshe Feinstein once had a very large smile on his face - he explained that he had just completed the whole of the Talmud. This was not a novel achievement for him, he was known to have finished it dozens of times, but this time was different. It comprised of his learning in the gaps at social events when people normally wait around for the next stage to take place. By consistently learning small amounts he eventually learnt all of the Talmud this way. There are people who are unable to learn for much of the day but they can use small amounts of time to attain surprisingly great achievements in learning.

We have seen how precious the gift of life is and the great value of every moment of life. Life is full of challenges and there are times when a person can feel despondent - but if he remembers that life itself is cause for joy then he can overcome any negative feelings: When the Alter of Novardok first started to build yeshivas, he was unsuccessful. He built yeshivas and they collapsed, he organized groups and they disintegrated. In addition, he and his approach were attacked by opponents. At that time he came to Kelm and his Rebbi, The Alter of Kelm noticed he looked sad and understood why. That Motsei Shabbos when a group had gathered to hear his talk, he stood at the podium and remained silent for a very, very long time. Then he banged his hand on the shtender and thundered, "It is enough for a living being that he is alive." Over and over he repeated his words until finally he told the group to pray the evening prayers. "That session" said the Alter of Novardok "dispelled my gloom and cleared my thoughts." (10) The Alter of Kelm taught the Alter of Novardok a priceless lesson - as long as one is alive, there is nothing to complain about.

NOTES

1. Mattos, 31:8.
2. Sotah 11a.
3. Sichos Mussar, Parshas Shemos, Maamer 29, Osher Hachaim, p.123.
4. Avos, 4:17.
5. Sichos Mussar, p.125.
6. Avoda Zara 17a.
7. Orach Chaim 1:1 Biur Halacha Diboar Hamaschil 'Hu Klal Gadol b'Torah'.
8. Sefer Hachinuch, Hakdama, Simuns 25, 26, 387, 417, 418, 432. The mitzvot are: To know that there is a G-d; Not to follow any other gods; to know that G-d is One; To love G-d; To fear G-d; Not to go after one's heart and eyes.
9. It should be noted that even if it were impossible for a person to perform any more mitzvot even in his thought, nonetheless all the laws pertaining to saving and ending a life remain. (Orach Chaim, Biur Halacha 329:2 Diboar Hamaschil 'Ela lefi Shaah'.
10. Zaitchik, Sparks of Mussar, p.145-6.

* * *

PARSHAT MASAY

Developing Sensitivity Through the Mitzvot

Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan, you shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge shall they be for you, and a killer shall flee there - one who takes a life unintentionally. (Bamidbar, 35:10-12)

Three cities shall you designate on the other side of the Jordan, and three cities shall you designate in the land of Canaan; they shall be cities of refuge. (Bamidbar, 35:14)

Three cities: Even though there were nine tribes in the land of Canaan and here there were only two and a half tribes, [yet] they have the same number of cities of refuge: This is because in Gilead [which was located in the two and a half tribes], there were many murderers. (Rashi, 35:14: sv.)

Parshas Massei discusses the cities of refuge; the places designated for unintentional murderers to reside in until the death of the Kohen Gadol. God instructs Moshe Rabbeinu to

designate three of the six cities of refuge on the side of the Jordan. Rashi, quoting Chazal,(1) points out that the population there was far smaller than in the land of Israel, therefore it is difficult to understand why so many cities of refuge were placed there. He answers that there were many murderers in that area and accordingly there was a need for a proportionally greater number of cities of refuge. The commentaries ask that this answer does not seem to suffice because it states that there were more deliberate murderers, yet they do not go to the cities of refuge - only people who killed through carelessness are sent there!(2) The Maharal answers that because there were so many deliberate murders in their vicinity they became less sensitive to the value of life in general. Consequently they were less careful to avoid harming others during potentially dangerous activities, and ultimately more accidental deaths occurred.(3)

The Maharal's explanation brings to light an important principle with regards to how we relate to the more heinous sins in the Torah. A person may think that sins such as murder and idol worship are of no relevance to him because he has no yetser hara in those areas. Whilst this may be true, we learn from the Maharal that even a person who has no inclination to murder may be subject to a slight lack of sensitivity to the seriousness of such a sin, and as a result he will be slightly less careful when engaged in potentially dangerous activities. In this way we see that when the Torah commands a person not to kill it is insufficient to merely not kill others. It is also imperative that he should develop such a high level of sensitivity to the value of life that it will permeate all areas that are related to the value of life.

Indeed many mitzvot and laws reflect the idea that there are more subtle levels to each mitzvah. For example, the early commentaries teach us about the concept of avizrayhu (4) to the most serious sins. These are extensions of the basic mitzvah to include other forms of behavior that are manifestations of the same flaw that are found in the sin. For example, the Gemara tells us that embarrassing someone in public is akin to murdering them.(5) Rabbeinu Yonah takes this Gemara literally and rules that it is also forbidden to embarrass a person publicly even to save one's own life. The question is that the only mitzvot that one must die rather than transgress are murder, idol worship and immorality so how can Rabbeinu Yonah add embarrassing someone? He answers that it is an avizrayhu of murder; in this way we are being taught that the pain caused to a person when he is embarrassed is somewhat akin to that of being killed and therefore it assumes the severity of the sin of murder.(6) There are other prohibitions in the Torah and

Rabbinical sources that reflect the same principle as the more serious sins but on a far more subtle level. For example, the prohibition to not steal is expanded to also apply to *gezel sheina* (stealing one's sleep by wrongly waking them up) and *geneivas daas* (tricking people).(7)

The Rambam applied this concept to all mitzvah observance. He made this point in response to a question from a righteous man before Yom Kippur. The man approached him with regards to the confession of our sins that we make on Yom Kippur. He argued that he did not commit many of those sins, and therefore it would be falsehood for him to say the *vidui* (confession). The Rambam replied that, in fact the man had committed all the sins in the *vidui*. He explained that the confession does not only refer to the actual sin, but also to the numerous layers of each sin that are relevant to even the greatest people. This involves a total revulsion of all manifestations of the sin, even the most subtle. For example a person may have never actively committed the sin of immorality but any slight impure thoughts in that area constitute a transgression in that sin. Thus the Rambam taught that for a person to be totally *shalem* (complete) in any mitzvah requires constant self-development.

The prohibition to not kill may not seem relevant to most of us, yet the Maharal teaches us that it teaches us to develop our sensitivity to such a level where we are so careful with other people's lives that accidental deaths become unheard of. The same applies to all mitzvot and teaches us that they are not merely rules to be kept, rather each mitzvah teaches important principles that must be applied on many levels.

NOTES

1. Makkos, 9b.
2. See Ramban, 35:14, Tosefos, Makkos 9b, for answers to this question. In this essay we will focus on the approach of the Maharal.
3. Gur Aryeh, Bamidbar, 35:14.
4. This is most commonly translated as accessories.
5. Bava Metsia, 59a.
6. Shaarei Teshuva, 3:139.
7. Whether transgressing of *gezel sheina* and *geneivas daas* constitutes an actual transgression of 'do not steal' is subject to discussion. Regardless the point here is

that the root reasons for the prohibition to not steal objects or money clearly also applies to these other sins.

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