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The Disciples of Aaron

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally printed in the 1960 RCA Manual)

כיון שמת אהרון ונתעלם מהם ירדו משה ואלעזר והיו כל ישראל עומדין וחרדין ומצפין לראות מפני שהיה אוהב שלום ורודף שלום - ילק"ש רמז תשפ"ז
הלל אומר: הוי מתלמידיו של אהרון, אוהב שלום ורודף שלום, אוהב את הבריות ומקרבן לתורה - אבות פ"א מי"ב

The death of Aaron, recorded in this morning's Sidra, is described in stirring and dramatic detail in the Midrash. The people mourned for Aaron even more than they later did for Moses, for Aaron was a man who loved peace and pursued peace. It was an eternal tribute to the first High-Priest of Israel that Hillel bade us regard ourselves as the disciples of Aron by emulating his noble qualities. They are four in numbers, and deserve to be spelled out clearly for all of us who so earnestly desire the ideals Aaron cherished.

Ohev shalom. To the man who is ambitious and opportunistic, peace is only a truce, a poor second-best to total victory for his own ruthless pursuits. In order to be a disciple of Aaron, you must not seek peace merely for its utilitarian value, not merely because it is the best arrangement under the conditions that prevail, but because you love peace, because peace is the normal, most desirable state of the world. One of G-d's names is: Shalom. Shalom is a positive virtue in its own right, not merely the absence of strife. Hence, one must not only hate war but love peace. Peace is the kind of harmony that leads to perfection; Shalom leads to shalom.

Rodef shalom. To pursue peace means not to be satisfied with finding it, but actively to engage in seeking it out, in creating it where it is lacking. Aaron was a pursuer of peace. The Rabbis tell of Aaron going first to one antagonist and then to the other and telling each how the other regrets the state of enmity and wishes that bygones would be bygones. As a result of his active efforts, peace would reign.

There is yet another explanation of this felicitous phrase given by a Hasidic teacher. Peace, he says, is a virtue only

when it unites decent people with each other. But peace amongst people of evil design can only lead to greater harm to the world. Therefore one must "pursue" peace, in the sense of chasing it away, when it concerns corrupt and malicious people. If we fail to "pursue" peace in this sense, then the Arab League might prove a more serious threat to Israel, the Chinese and Russians too powerful for the survival of democracy, and the gangsters of the country more influential than the forces of righteousness.

Ohev et ha-beriyot. The love of fellow man can come from many sources. I may love my fellow human because he is human. In a deeper sense, that means I love another man because I love myself, I see myself in him. There is nothing wrong with that kind of humanistic approach. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" implies we must first love ourselves. But there is always the danger that one does not really love himself. There is the danger that this kind of love exists only where I feel a kinship of some kind between myself and the other man. But where there are pronounced differences in color or belief or background or opinion, this kind of love breaks down. Hence, Hillel tells us, we must be disciples of Aaron who loved et ha-beriyot-creatures. He loved men because they were created by G-d. In loving man he loved G-d, for the love of created and Creator were intimately bound up with each other in his eyes. And when we love a man because he is G-d's creature, then no differences between us can affect that love adversely. "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself, I am the Lord."

U'mekarvan le'Torah. The love of fellow creature may be expressed in many ways. Charity, respect, consideration, economic assistance, appreciation--all are signs of such love. But greatest of all is helping your fellow creature find meaning in life, assist[ing] him to appreciate why he is alive and how to spend his life in a manner that is worthy and dignified. The highest form of ohev et ha-beriyot is

therefore *mekarvan le'Torah*. The "Netziv" of Volozhin used to say that this Mishnah urges us to love not only those who are devout and scholars, *benei Torah*, but--perhaps especially-- those who are distant from Torah. For the

Tanna pleads with us to love people and bring them close to Torah--which means that they originally were distant from Torah, and only through our love were brought close!

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Put It in the Book

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z"l

In parshas Masei, Moshe records the forty-two journeys that the Jewish nation traveled from the time they left Egypt until they were about to enter the Holy Land. The Torah tells us, "Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys by the word of God 'al pi HaShem'" (Bamidbar 33:2). There is a dispute among the commentators as to the meaning of the last three words of this verse, 'al pi HaShem,' which we have translated as 'by the word of God.' Rabbi Avrohom Ibn Ezra explains that this phrase refers back to the word - 'lemaseihem' - 'according to their journeys.' And is telling us that the journeys in the wilderness were done based on God's word, as the Torah tells us in parshas Beha'aloscha, "according to the word of God would they encamp, and according to the word of God would they journey" (Bamidbar 9:20). The Ramban, in his commentary, does not accept Ibn Ezra's explanation, because we already know this fact from the verse in parshas Beha'aloscha. Rather, the words 'al pi HaShem' refer back to the beginning of the verse, so that the Torah is telling us that Moshe wrote down the journeys according to the word of God. This explanation, however, is also difficult, because, as we know, the entire Torah was written down by Moshe according to the word of God. Why, then, was there a need to point that this particular section of the Torah was written in this way?

Rav Nissan Alpert, z"l, in his *Limmudei Nisson*, without mentioning the Ibn Ezra or the Ramban, explains our verse in a way that conforms with both approaches, and answers the questions we have mentioned. He writes that Moshe recorded the journeys in a way that highlighted the fact that they were, in fact, directed by God. Over the course of their journeys in the wilderness, the people may have lost sight of this central factor. They witnessed the same events that Moshe did, but it was only by way of his recording them in the Torah through God's dictation to him that the people were able to look at them in retrospect and fully understand the extent to which divine providence guided them. In a similar way, says Rav Alpert, the rabbis, with their 'ruach ha-kodesh,' or spiritual vision, looked

at the events that preceded the destruction of the second Temple, trying to understand what led to that tragedy. They pointed to the incident of Kamtza and Bar Kamtza, in which the host of a party publicly shamed a man he disliked who was nevertheless invited due to a mistake in identity, as exemplifying the kind of fraternal hatred that was the root cause of the destruction. Just as it required the fine-tuned spiritual vision of the rabbis to understand those events, so too did it require the dictation of God to Moshe to present the journeys in the wilderness in the proper perspective.

Ramban, as mentioned, explains that the words 'al pi HaShem' refer back to the beginning of the verse, which tells us that Moshe wrote the journeys down. Rav Mordechai Gifter, z"l, in his *Pirkei Torah*, raises the question of why there was a need to point out in regard to the recording of the journeys that it was done through God's dictation, and offers a number of answers. The most plausible of these answers, I believe, is that the journeys were written down in a separate book. Although Rav Gifter does not mention this, Ramban himself says something similar in connection with the 'Sefer Milchamos HaShem,' or the 'Book of the Wars of the Lord,' referred to in parshas Chukas (Bamidbar 21:14). Ramban, in his commentary to that verse, writes that there was separate book, now lost, in which the various battles waged by the Jewish people against its enemies were recorded. In a similar way, then, Moshe wrote a separate book in which he recorded the journeys of the nation in the wilderness. Given this explanation, however, Rav Gifter finds difficulty in explaining what purpose it served. I believe, however, that a look at the Ramban's commentary to the verses immediately following the record of the journeys in the wilderness can provide us with an answer to that question.

After recording the journeys the nation went on, the Torah tells us that they encamped in the plains of Moav, and God then told Moshe to command them that when they cross the Yardein (Jordan) and enter the land of Canaan, they should drive out the inhabitants of the land,

and destroy their idols. The Torah then says, “you shall rid the land and you shall settle in it, for to you have I given the land to possess it” (Bamidbar 33:40). The Ramban, in his commentary to this verse, and at greater length in an addendum to his commentary on the Rambam’s *Sefer haMitzvos* (Book of Commandments), writes that this verse constitutes a positive mitzvah, to conquer the land of Israel and settle it. This commandment, he says, devolves on the nation as a whole, as well as on each individual in the nation. In the book of *Devorim*, the Torah constantly cautions us not to attribute any success we encounter in the Holy Land to our might. Rather, we must always remember that it is God who gives us the strength to

pursue our endeavors. We can therefore understand why the command to conquer the land and dwell in it follows immediately after the recording of the journeys in the wilderness. The people need to know that just as, in the wilderness, God’s providence was the driving force in all that happened, so, too, in Eretz Yisroel, God is the One who controls events. Perhaps for this reason Moshe was told to record the journeys in a separate book, to serve as a constant reminder to the people as they fulfilled the commandment of conquering the land and settling it, that it was God Who was guiding them in this process, just as He guided them throughout their journeys in the wilderness.

Don’t Mind Your Shivrei Luchos

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jul 12, 2018)

In this week’s Parsha, Moshe sent Pinchas with an army to battle Midyan. And the pasuk says about Pinchas: *U’klei ha-kodesh ve-chatzotzros ha-truah be-yado*. Rashi asks: What are these *Klei ha-kodesh*? And he responds that they were the Aron and the Tzitz. Rashi quotes Chazal that there were two Aronos. One contained the unbroken Luchos Shnios that always stayed in the Kodesh Kodashim of the Mishkan. The other encased the shattered pieces of the First Luchos—*Shivrei Luchos*—that represented the Shechina accompanying them in their military expeditions and battles. Chazal tell us that they always took the Aron to milchama. And the pasuk says: *Hashem Elokecha mis’halech be-kerev machanecha le-hatzilcha u-la-seis oyivecha lefanecha*. The third Belzer Rebbe—Rav Yissachar Dov Rokeach (with the same name as the current Belzer Rebbe)—asks the obvious question. Why were the First Luchos broken? Because, as the gemara says, when Klal Yisroel made an Eigel ha-Zachav just 40 days after Ma’amad Har Sinai, they were like a *kala aluva she-zinsa be-kerev chupasa*—a *chutzpadik* bride, unfaithful during her wedding celebration. Hashem was very indignant, and therefore Moshe broke the Luchos. So why would they want to bring it out to the battlefield if it serves as a reminder of the chet ha-Eigel? If I go to a china shop and break something, I wouldn’t want to bring it around everywhere I go to remind me of my failure. So how does it help to take the broken Luchos to milchamos? The Belzer Rebbe gives a beautiful answer. We all know that everyone

messed up plenty in life. But they did not carry the Shivrei Luchos as a memento—a testament of sorts to the chet ha-Eigel. On the contrary, we carry these broken Luchos in an Aron to remind us that even if we did the worst sin—worshiped Avoda Zarah at Har Sinai—Hashem still loves us, and we are still the *Am ha-Nivchar*. Hashem still rests His Shechina amongst us. We are still special, valuable, and have potential even after we messed up. And the Shivrei Luchos are still a cheftza of kedusha and represent a ma’ala of Klal Yisroel. When you go out to war, you are nervous, and you become *ha-ish ha-yorei ve-rach ha-leivav*. You start worrying and lose your morale because of everything you did wrong. You say to yourselves: Who are we that Hashem should care about us after we messed up with this or that? Therefore, the Torah tells us to bring those broken Luchos with us to remind us that even if it’s true that we messed up, it’s ok. And it doesn’t mean that it’s ok to mess up *lechatchila*. Nevertheless, Hashem still rests his Shechina amongst you. And it’s very wonderous then why we have two Arons and two sets of Luchos. You need Luchos shleimos in the Mikdash because your mess-ups cannot turn into a *lechatchila*. There must be someplace that is Kodesh Kodashim—an ideal of doing everything perfectly. If you are not striving for perfection of a malach, you don’t have the right goal in mind. None of us is perfect. But we should know what the Ideal is. It’s not a compromise, and it is not mediocrity. The unbroken Luchos represent the Ideal. But at the same time, we ought to know that we

can and do mess up—both a yachid and the tzibur. And nonetheless, Hashem still rests his Shechina amongst us and gives kedusha to the Luchos Shenios. And if we take

this understanding to the battles that we fight in this world, then, im yirtze Hashem, we will remember that Hashem is with us, and we will be inspired to win them all.

Keeping Our Word

Rabbi Yosef Goldin

Am Yisrael are at the banks of the Jordan River, bordering Eretz Israel. Preparations are being made to enter the land- the new generation of leaders has been appointed, and instructions regarding the eventual division of the land, *chiluk ha'aretz*, have been given. The nation is ready for final instructions before embarking upon their next stage of the journey.

Moshe calls the leaders of each tribe together, and we would expect him to pass on a message crucial to their impending journey. And yet, what does Moshe convey to them? The laws of nedarim, oaths and vows. “If a person takes a vow to Hashem, or takes an oath to make something forbidden to him, he should not violate his word, according to what comes from his mouth he should do.”

Why here, and why now? While we all can acknowledge the importance of keeping our word, why are these laws relevant to Am Yisrael specifically at this moment, as they prepare to enter Eretz Yisrael?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, in his Weekly Column Covenant and Conversation, suggests that G-d wants to share a powerful message with the nation during these pivotal moments. As the Jewish nation prepares to enter the land and create a new, free society, Hashem relays to them what will be a fundamental building block of this society:

“The institution of promising, of which vows and oaths to G-d are a supreme example, is essential to the existence of a free society. Freedom depends upon people keeping their word... Freedom needs trust. Trust needs people to keep their word, and keeping your word means treating words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct... That is why, as the Israelites approached the Holy Land where they were to create a free society, they had to be reminded of the sacred character of vows and oaths.”

The foundation of any free and moral society involves the ability to trust one another, to rely on one another, and to work together for the common good of society. Such trust can only be achieved when people believe in the power of their words, and the importance of keeping their word. Without that basic courtesy, the building blocks of any society fall apart. Hashem therefore highlights the message of nedarim- the importance of keeping one’s

word- specifically as they enter the land, in order to stress that this character trait is an essential component in the creation of a proper society.

Rabbi Sacks then notes a prime example from the continuation of Parshat Matot, the agreement between Moshe and Bnei Gad/Reuvein. Although Moshe initially admonishes the two tribes for requesting to remain on the Eastern side of the Jordan, eventually they come to an agreement whereby the tribes of Gad/Reuvein will lead Bnei Yisrael in conquering the land before returning to take their portion on the other side of the Jordan. Fundamental to this entire agreement, notes Rabbi Sacks, is the assumption that both sides will keep their word- that Bnei Gad/Reuvein will fulfill the condition, and that Moshe/Yehoshua will give them the land that they have requested. “Everything depends on their keeping their word. All social institutions in a free society depend on trust, and trust means honoring our promises, doing what we say we will do. When this breaks down, the very future of freedom is at risk.”

Unfortunately, in the societies around us, we are witnessing what happens when the basic foundation of trust and truth is broken. The hyper-politicized tensions that currently exist in both Israel and the US are a result of a basic lack of trust between both sides of the aisle. The absence of basic trust and respect leads to a breakdown of the very fabric of our society- no one can be believed, and each side views the other with suspicion. Only by working together to rebuild that trust can our societies climb out of this vicious cycle in which we find ourselves.

From a parenting perspective, the importance of building trust through the strength of our word is incredibly important and often overlooked. Particularly when our children our young, we tend to feel that we have a license to be less than truthful in the way that we speak. To note a few examples:

1) We are in the middle of doing something important, and our children ask us to play with them. We respond by saying that we will be there “in two minutes”, when we know very well that in all likelihood, we won’t be available

for at least ten minutes.

2) Our young child asks for a treat or a toy, and we tell him that he can have it later- expecting that he will forget about it later.

3) We aren't able to take our child to an event to which they were hoping to go to- but we promise that next time we will take them, without really thinking about when that next time might be, or whether we will actually be able to do so.

4) A child misbehaves, and we warn them that if they act that way again, they will receive a specific punishment or consequence. The child does it again, and yet we don't follow through with the stated punishment.

In each of these cases, our intentions may be entirely innocent. We don't intend to actively mislead our kids, and we often justify not fulfilling our word- we didn't really mean what we said, the kids will forget anyway, etc. And yet, in these and other similar situations, we fail to develop a crucial aspect of the parent-child relationship- trust. We assume the child will forget, but maybe he won't. And even if most of the time the child does forget, the underlying message we give him and ourselves, whether we intend

to or not, is that our word is not binding- not something that can be relied upon. When that occurs, a basic lack of trust develops in the parent-child relationship. While at a younger age, the lack of trust may not be an issue, as our children get older, mutual trust will be one of the most important aspects of the parent-child relationship.

Instead, we must strive to view our word as sacrosanct. We should only promise or commit to things we believe we can, and intend to, keep. Doing so will teach our children the importance of the spoken word, and the power of commitment. In this way, we will not only strengthen the trust within the parent-child relationship, but also raise children who will contribute such trust to society at large.

To end with Rabbi Sacks beautiful words:

“Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate G-d by using language to create. Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honored faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.

So never break a promise. Always do what you saw you are going to do.”

Keeping One's Priorities in Order

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In Parshas Matos, the first of this week's double parshios (*chutz la'aretz*), the Torah teaches us about a startling exchange between the Bnei Gad, Bnei Reuven and Moshe Rabbeinu. It is year forty of desert wanderings. The nation stands poised to imminently enter the Land, while Moshe is fast approaching his death on Ever la'Yarden, the eastern side of the Jordan River.

Representatives of the tribes of Reuven and Gad approach Moshe with an audacious request. Given that the land on Ever La'Yarden is lush pasture land for flocks, and these tribes are wealthy in sheep and cattle, and in need of lush grazing land to support their flocks, they appeal to Moshe and Elazar ha'Kohen and say:

אִם-מִצְאֵנוּ חַן בְּעֵינֶיךָ--יָתֵן אֶת-הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת לְעַבְדֶּיךָ, לְאֶחְזָה אֵל-תַּעֲבֹרֵנוּ, אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן.

if we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not bring us across the Yarden (River).

In shock over their request, Moshe immediately retorts: Shall your brothers go to war (upon entering Canaan) and you will remain here (in imagined safety, tranquility and stability)?! Is this not what your forefathers did - when they rejected the Land - and they turned the hearts of the

nation away from the Land, and from G-d!

To quell Moshe's concerns, the representatives strike a deal with him: גִּדְרֹת צֹאן וּבְנֵיהָ לְמִקְנֵנוּ פֹה וְעָרִים לְטַפְנוּ - *Enclosures for the flock we shall build here for our livestock and cities for our children* (Bamidbar 32:16). To which Moshe counteroffers: בְּנוּ-לָכֶם עָרִים לְטַפְכֶם, וּגְדֹרֹת לְצִנְאֹכֶם; וְהֵי צֹאן מִפִּיכֶם, תַּעֲשׂוּ *build for yourselves cities for your children, and enclosures for your flocks, and what has come from your mouth shall you do* (ibid, v.24).

Note that they put protection for their animals before that of their children, while Moshe reversed the order and instructed them to first care for the well-being of their children, and only after that, for their animals. From here the Sages (Tanchuma) derive that: הָסִים הָיוּ עַל מְמוֹנָם יוֹתֵר מִבְּנֵיהֶם - they were more concerned with their money than their sons and their daughters, for they put mention of their livestock ahead of their children. Moshe said to them, this is not right: עֲשׂוּ הָעֵקֶר עֵקֶר וְהַטְּפִל טְפִל - *make that which is essential essential and that which is secondary secondary!* First build cities for your children and afterward, enclosures for your flocks (quoted by Rashi to v.16).

Rabbi Yissocher Frand teaches, “When we look at this

incident, we say to ourselves, ‘How foolish can people be? How warped can their values be? How can anyone put the welfare of his cattle before the welfare of his children?’

“Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident, something bizarre that happened thousands of years ago. It is an everyday phenomenon. People become focused on their livelihood, on developing a business, on advancing professionally, on building a practice, and their kids get lost in the shuffle. They don’t realize that they are making the exact same mistake as the tribes of Gad and Reuven. But it is true. It happens all too often.

“Rashi writes (32:24) that the tribes of Gad and Reuven did not return home to the Trans-Jordan until after seven years of conquest and the seven years of apportionment. By choice, they remained in Eretz Yisrael for an additional seven years longer than Moshe commanded them to be there. They were away from home for a full fourteen years. The little children the fathers left behind were teenagers, practically adults, when their fathers returned. The Medrash tells us that their fathers were shocked to find that their sons had long hair, and that they were indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors.

“This may be the tragic result when one gives priority to their wealth over their children” (Rabbi Frand on the Parashah, p.244-245).

There is a well-known saying, author unknown: “No one on their deathbed ever said: Gee, I wish I had spent more time in the office.” While work is ennobling, important, rewarding, and most certainly a necessary part of life - And Hashem Elokim took the man, וַיִּנְחֵהוּ בְּגֵן-עֵדֶן, לְעֲבֹדָהּ וּלְשָׁמְרָהּ, -and He placed him in Gan Eden to work it and to guard it

The Way We Treat Hashem’s Children

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

God commanded Moshe, נקום נקמת בני ישראל מאת, נקום המדיינים – to take “*Benei Yisrael’s* revenge from the Midyanites” (31:2). Midyan had conspired to lure *Benei Yisrael* to sins of idolatry and immorality, leading to the catastrophe of *Ba’al Pe’or*, when God sent a plague which killed 24,000 men from *Benei Yisrael*. God now told Moshe to wage war against Midyan to avenge this cruel plot.

Interestingly, Hashem refers to this war as נקמת בני ישראל – “*Benei Yisrael’s* revenge.” The war is depicted as *Benei Yisrael’s* “score to settle,” so-to-speak. But when Moshe then relayed this command to the people, he said, לַחַת נִקְמָת, לה – that this war was being waged to for the purpose

(Bereishis 2:15) - one’s children cannot be the casualties of one’s work.

Reuven and Gad placed the priority of wealth over that of children, and for this they suffered the consequences. Nechama Leibowitz a’h points out that their focus was solely on their flocks, as evidenced by the opening pasuk of the narrative, which begins and ends with the word מִקְנֵה. As the pasuk says: וּמִקְנֵה רַב הָיָה לְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וְלְבְנֵי-גָד עֲצוּם מְאֹד ... And abundant livestock was to the sons of Reuven and the sons of Gad, very much... and behold (Trans-Jordan) was a place for livestock (32:1) (NL, as quoted in *Unlocking the Torah Text*, Bamidbar).

Why did Moshe conclude his counter-offer by telling them: וְהֵיטֵא מִפִּיךָ, תַּעֲשֶׂוּ - and what emanates from your mouth you shall do (v.24)? The Ksav Sofer answers, “Moshe knew with whom he was dealing. People who could even think of protecting their money before they protect their children cannot be trusted. They are so intent on their wealth that they can, and may, do anything. Therefore, Moshe had to exhort them to keep their word. Rav Tzadok Ha’Kohen m’Lublin (d.1900) notes that the desire for money is greater than any other material desire, since it is in the only one without limit... The quest for wealth can never be satiated, as a person always dreams and desires of acquiring more and more... All too often, the children are the price of the wealth” (Rabbi Frand on the Parashah, p.244-245).

A number of years ago in Mishpacha magazine, I read the following: “How do children spell LOVE? T.I.M.E.” Let us learn from Moshe’s rebuke to Bnei Gad and Reuven and ensure our ikar is ikar and tafel is tafel - and let’s be sure we know what is tafel and what is the ikar.

of “God’s revenge against Midyan” (31:3). This war was fought as revenge on behalf of Hashem, and also on behalf of *Benei Yisrael*. It was both Hashem’s revenge and *Benei Yisrael’s* revenge.

The Alter of Kelm comments that this shows that *Am Yisrael* and God are, in a sense, one and the same. If a person acts cruelly to a child, he is acting cruelly to the child’s parents, too. Even if that person treats the parents kindly, they will resent him for the way he mistreated their child. Conversely, if a person mistreats his fellow, the fellow’s child will not like him. The same is true of God and *Am Yisrael*. The Torah here is communicating that if a person mistreats

Am Yisrael, he is mistreating Hashem's children – and so he is mistreating Hashem, as well. And thus נקמת בני ישראל is also 'נקמת ה'. Avenging what Midyan did to *Benei Yisrael* is, essentially, avenging what they did to Hashem.

Rav Nachman of Breslav develops this idea, as well. He adds that the enemies of the Jewish Nation who persecute and wage war against us are, in effect, waging war against Hashem Himself, because we are His children. However, Rav Nachman emphasizes, this notion must also affect the way we treat one another. Just as our enemies are viewed as acting against God Himself, we, too, are considered to be acting against Him if we mistreat our fellow Jew. If we are insensitive or unkind to another Jew, then we are being

insensitive and unkind to Hashem.

Rav Nachman's disciple, Rav Nasan, develops this notion further, in the context of the obligation to judge our fellow favorably. He writes that even if a person might appear to us as irredeemably bad, as bereft of any goodness, we must trust that there is an element of goodness within him – and we are to plumb the depths of his character to find it. Every Jew possesses within him a חלק אלוהי ממעל, a divine spark, an element of Hashem Himself. Necessarily, then, every Jew has a dimension of sanctity and goodness. Hence, if we insult our fellow, we are insulting Hashem Himself. If we act harshly to a fellow Jew, we are acting harshly to Hashem Himself.

Violent Speech and Violent Deeds

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Homo Sapiens are unlike any other creature. Brushed by the hand of God, we are formed in His image. We, alone, possess intelligence, consciousness, freewill, freedom of conscience, and creativity. With these remarkable tools we are expected to perfect a world which God intentionally left imperfect. Gifted with divine tools, we partner with Him in relandscaping our world.

Chief among our gifts is the power of speech. Most living creatures communicate with one another, however, in most instances, their communication is extremely rudimentary. They communicate basic needs such as the location of food, migratory paths, or reproductive opportunities. Human beings, on the other hand, possess cognitive, creative, and abstract speech. Collaborative speech allows us to share mutual interests and better organize our common resources. Abstract communication allows us to convey theories about religion, science and self-consciousness. Through interpersonal communication we construct deep relationships, which adorn our lives and redeem us from the confinement of solitude.

Speech in Jewish Law

In Jewish law, the power of speech is best exemplified by the laws of oaths or nedarim, enumerated in parshat Matot. By verbalizing an oath, we can impose human prohibitions upon otherwise neutral items, thereby redefining the halachik map. By example, articulating an oath or a neder not to consume an apple, converts that fruit into a forbidden item. God may not have banned the item, but human speech can. Such is the power of a human tongue,

gifted with divinely empowered speech.

For this reason, the laws governing oaths and the management of oaths were delivered to the heads of tribes, and not directly to the general population. Speech is too powerful to be handled by those who don't fully appreciate its potency. Wise people, who appreciate the gift of speech, are expected to regulate it in themselves and properly calibrate it in others.

Angry Tongues

Just the same, human speech can turn ugly. Our speech is never more foul, than when it turns aggressive and violent. At its best, communication unifies us. At its worst, it becomes weaponized, contentious, and divisive. We inhabit a world which is drenched in acrimony and angry communication. Rage encircles us, whether in the form of road rage, workplace rage, domestic rage, or sports rage – just to name a few of the most popular arenas in which our rage is brandished.. Why has speech become so toxic and our discourse so antagonistic?

Anonymity and Invisibility

Ideally the internet should act as a “communication bridge”, enabling the seamless and rapid exchange of information and ideas. However, as with every technology, it can also expose the dark side of human nature. In the real world, there are natural “curbs” against verbal vitriol and hostile communication. In the real world we are sensitive to public perception and how our communication is viewed by others. Additionally, in the real world we encounter the “subjects” of our comments and are more likely to be courteous. The

internet cloaks us with a veil of anonymity, while it also renders the subjects of our speech, invisible. Without these natural checks and balances which are built into normal communication, we are free to say whatever we want and however we want to say it. The internet has removed “social accountability” which, ideally, should serve as a “brake” against runaway verbal aggression.

Echo Chambers, and Radicalization

Encountering different viewpoints also softens our language. Acknowledging and validating different views makes us less likely to aggressively vilify people who hold opposing views. Unfortunately, and again ironically, the internet shrinks our exposure and limits our encounters. The internet, with its information algorithms has confined us to echo chambers in which our news is filtered to reflect our own positions and interests. Constant exposure to our own opinions and to those who agree with us, radicalizes our views rather than balancing them. Unconditional belief in our own absolute truth invites hostility to those who question those truths and are thereby our enemies who possess dangerous views.

Verbal aggression is addictive. It debases the public discourse, creates a society of incivility, and soon starts to infect our communities and even our personal relationships. And it quickly leads to physical violence....

Violent Speech and Violent actions

In parshat Emor, the Torah portrays the crime of a Jewish man who blasphemed. Immediately, the Torah restates the laws forbidding physical violence- both against animal and man. These laws had been listed elsewhere, yet they are restated after this affair. Blasphemy is a form of violent speech- in this instance directed against God. Concerned that aggressive language will lead to violent behavior, the Torah cautions against any physical violence. Violent speech always causes violent behavior.

Our world isn't just tainted by angry speech, it has also become very violent. In the early 2000's we faced the blight of ideological violence driven by militant fundamentalism.

Unfortunately, we currently inhabit a world of non-ideological violence, in which violent acts are committed purely to vent anger and frustration. The United States continues to suffer spates of mass shootings and has witnessed a significant increase in the rate of violent crime. In Israel we have witnessed previously unheard-of outbursts of physical violence against policemen, teachers, and medical staff. Violence always escalates, and minor acts of aggression soon morph into large-scale acts of violence.

Civil communication

Israel is about to begin its fifth round of elections. Elections are polarizing experiences, as politicians exaggerate their positions, attempting to distance themselves from their opponents and gain votes.

Often, politicians disparage or even demonize their political adversaries. Sometimes this leads to actual physical confrontations.

Who should you vote for? That is obviously a very personal question. Perhaps, though, when deciding who to vote for, we should factor in the level of respect and dignity a candidate displays. Typically, we vote for politicians who reflect our ideologies or who endorse our preferred policies. Perhaps we should also consider the tone and character of their rhetoric. Politicians who regularly insult their opponents and who employ crude and dehumanizing language are critically harmful to our social fabric. Long-term, politicians who conduct themselves with civility and respect for others, may be more beneficial, even if their policies aren't exactly identical to our own. In a world of rage, insult and verbal aggression, role models who restore civility and grace are absolutely vital to the overall health of society.

Violence guts any society and must be eradicated at all levels. Civility must start in our social discourse. If that discourse becomes toxic and antagonistic, we will find ourselves living very angry lives and suffering contentious relationships. Beware the long-term damage that violent behavior inflicts. In almost all instances, it just isn't worth it.

The Massacre of the Midianites: Does Judaism Countenance Genocide?

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

At the conclusion of parashat Balak, (Numbers 25), we were informed that Balaam finally realizes that the Jews could not be defeated by his curses or even by overwhelming military might. So, Balaam resorts

to the old time-tested method of defeating the Jews—he calls upon the Midianite women to seduce the Jewish men. This, of course, provokes G-d's wrath, resulting in the death of 24,000 Jewish men in a plague.

In the first of this week's two parashiot, parashat Matot, G-d tells Moses to mobilize the Jewish soldiers and exact vengeance upon the Midianites. Parenthetically, despite the fact that Moses is told that upon the completion of this mission he will die, Moses does not hesitate, and quickly attends to G-d's command.

One thousand soldiers from each of the 12 tribes are dispatched, and all the male Midianites are killed, including the prophet Balaam. The women, children, and the flocks, however, are spared.

Moses expresses anger at the officers, demanding to know why they allowed the female Midianites to live, after all, the Midianite women had been so instrumental in Israel's sinfulness. Moses then instructs the army to kill all the surviving male children, and any Midianite woman who had lain with a man.

After a brief interlude in which the Torah deals with the issue of kashering the looted utensils, a full account is taken of the booty. G-d instructs the people how to properly divide the spoils, giving the greatest share to the soldiers who fought in the battle, who put their lives on the line.

Although students of the Torah often encounter difficult parshiot and complex concepts, this particular parasha is especially challenging. After all, how can the children of Israel, who are known in Rabbinic literature (based on Beitzah 32b), as רַחֲמִימִים בְּנֵי רַחֲמִימִים, "compassionate people, descendants of compassionate people," simply kill women and children?

The rabbis of old were troubled by this as well. They provided insight into this issue by insisting that the Jewish army is indeed a compassionate army. Maimonides elucidates this contention in his Mishna Torah, Laws of Kings, Chapter 6:1 & 4. Citing the verse from Deuteronomy 20:10, וְקָרָאתָ אֵלֶיהָ לְשָׁלוֹם—You shall call out to her [the enemy city] in peace, Maimonides posits that the Jewish army must always call out to its enemies in peace. Even the seven native Canaanite nations, whom G-d commanded to annihilate—man, woman, child, and cattle, must first be given the opportunity to surrender and accept Jewish dominion. If they refuse, only then, may they be attacked.

The reasoning behind this is that Jewish law assumes that the Canaanite people are "non-Noahides," who do not even abide by the seven fundamental Noahide commandments, which Judaism considers to be the lowest-common-denominator of "civilization." Belief in

a monotheistic Deity, prohibition of blasphemy, murder, theft, adultery, eating an animal's limb while yet alive, and the injunction to set up basic courts of law. A people that cannot abide by even these basic precepts, cannot live alongside the Jewish people or even with non-Jews who do adhere to the Noahide principles. Hence, if the non-civilized enemies refuse the overtures of the Israelites to live in peace and accept the Noahide principles, they may be attacked. Nevertheless, even when they may be attacked, Jewish law mandates that they may not be completely surrounded in battle, but that at least one escape route must be left open for those who wish to flee.

Especially because we live in an exceptionally tolerant society, we must not allow ourselves to become, as Lionel Trilling put it, "so open-minded that our brains fall out!" Moral societies require minimum standards of civilization to properly function. Society cannot simply operate under conditions of moral or ethical anarchy, and barbaric behavior by our neighbors, cannot be countenanced.

Judaism aspires for the day when all of G-d's children will recognize the monotheistic G-d and hopes for a time when the entire world will be established under the Almighty's dominion.

Optimally, this transformation to universal morality is to be accomplished through persuasion, exposure and education, rather than through coercion or war. Unfortunately, this is not always possible, especially when confronted by people who do not accept even the basic tenets of discourse and intellectual exchange. There comes a point where only power, indeed military power, becomes a pragmatic and effective response. However, before resorting to that regrettable alternative, we must be certain that all other means of persuasion have been exhausted. Judaism does not wish to harm any human being. Consequently, if the enemy wishes to flee and establish residence far away from the Jewish people, and other moral non-Jews, they are encouraged to do so.

As difficult as this law may appear, the alternative is far worse. As the Midrash Rabbah on Ecclesiastes 7:16 states: "Those who are compassionate at a time when they should be cruel, will ultimately be cruel at a time that calls for compassion." Establishing a moral world order is hardly an easy task. In the effort to achieve utopia, painful decisions must be made. As hard as it may be, we are not free to walk away from this responsibility, and we must labor diligently to accomplish this sacred task.