



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Matot-Masei 5783

The World United

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered on July 19, 1969)

This is the week when the world will be achieving-- hopefully, in safety--one of the greatest triumphs of the human race: the landing of man on the moon. Only time will tell whether this herculean marshalling of technological resources was an act of supreme wisdom, or one of the greatest follies of modern times, spending 24 billion dollars and 10 percent of the national budget on a project that did not deserve it. But no matter what time will show, right now one great paradox stands revealed: on the one hand, the ability of thousands upon thousands of individuals to cooperate in order to send one spaceship to the moon; and, on the other hand, the anomaly of disunity--for not one but two spaceships are approaching the moon, those of the United States and of Russia.

It is a symbol of the fragmentation of the human community that the two superpowers had to undertake separate efforts: Russia, in an obvious and clumsy effort to distract from the American achievement sends Luna 15 to the moon, and the American Congress has nothing better to do than to pass a special act requiring that the United States flag be planted on the lunar surface. How much more promising it would have been had all nations been able to cooperate in pooling their technical resources in achieving this great triumph!

But, my dear friends, lest we despair too quickly because of this discord in the family of nations, there remains one consoling thought: the great powers are not always riven by rivalry and torn by dissent. There are times, when, after all, all the great nations of the world can come to one common option. It is good to know that within the last few weeks the United Nations Security Council, representing the combined opinion of mankind, finally achieved unanimity: it was united against Jerusalem; all nations were agreed that Israel ought to get out of the Holy City. Russia and Hungary, the United States and Yemen--powers of proven peaceful intentions, lovers of Jerusalem all, with vital

interests in the Holy City--all are agreed that Jerusalem should go to the Arabs, and Israel must make no attempt to unify it. How comforting that the world, unable to work together scientifically, can at least achieve unity with regard to the Middle East. How proud we Jews ought to be that it is we who have occasioned this show of concord.

If I may now cross the border back from serious sarcasm to sardonic cynicism, this event of a world united at least gives us a new insight, a new peshat, in a verse in Psalm 122: ירושלים הבנויה כעיר שחברה לה יחדיו "Jerusalem that is built like a city that is compact all together." The Sages taught us that this means that rebuilt Jerusalem will be such that נעשים לה חברים, that people will become friends on her account. Heretofore we thought that the meaning of this tradition was that all Jews would be unified in love of Jerusalem. Now the United Nations has given us a new interpretation: not only Jews, but the "Goyim," are united on Jerusalem: that Israel must get out of it.

So let us not ask why we fast on תשעה באב when Jerusalem is ours once again.

We fast, first of all, because the heart of Jerusalem, the Holy Temple, is still in ruins.

Second, we fast because of the spiritual hurban, the religious cataclysm, the distance from God and Torah that afflicts the hearts of Jews throughout the world, a disaster from which we still have not begun to emerge.

We fast, third, because of Jews who are enslaved behind the Iron Curtain.

Fourth, we fast because of Jews who are free, living in the Free World, who act like slaves--to their passions, to their ignorance, to the iron hand of conformity and assimilation.

But now we may add a fifth reason: we grieve this תשעה באב because of this act of unconscionable injustice of the entire world community against the people about whom it was said עם לבדד ישכון, the People of Israel which destiny

has decreed must always march on the path of history in loneliness and in solitude.

I would, on this account, add a sixth reason for תשעה באב this year. In Psalm 137--על נהרות בבל, the Psalm which speaks of the exiles who refused to entertain their tormentors by singing the songs of Zion on foreign soil--we ask of God: זכור ה' לבני אדום את יום ירושלים האומרים ערו, ערו, עד היסוד בה. "Remember O Lord against the children of Edom the day of Jerusalem, when they said, destroy it, destroy it, until you have exposed its very foundations." But what we ask of God we must first demand of ourselves. We must remember the sin of Edom against Jerusalem. Edom has always been a symbol of the Western world, descendants of Rome, the Christian civilization. And they have sinned against Jerusalem.

One can understand the Arabs' enmity against Israel and its attitude to Jerusalem. They are, after all, passionate and irrational, hysterical because of blind nationalism and the sting of defeat. The Arabs are naturally misled by their own innate penchant for extravagant rhetoric and hyperbole. But Russia? Great Britain? France? The United States? What drives them to such antagonism against Israel on the matter of Jerusalem? There is a difference between a crime of passion and crime in cold blood. And Edom has sinned against Jerusalem in cold blood.

We Jews, therefore, this year, in our magnanimity and Jewish charity, must fast--for God to forgive the sins of Edom against Jerusalem.

On the day that we mourn the destruction of the Temple and the Holy City, we ask forgiveness for Edom--forgiveness for raising no protest when all synagogues were destroyed in the Holy City from 1948 to 1967, but becoming irate when Israel blows up the house in which was born the leader of the terrorist who has made it his mission to kill aimlessly;

-forgiveness for failing to take note of the fact that for twenty years no Jews were permitted access to the Western Wall; but becoming exercised about Israel's rule over Jerusalem, when it permits all religion access to their shrines;

-forgiveness for accepting it as a matter of everyday fact that urban renewal in the major cities of their countries requires displacement of slum populations and granting government the right of eminent domain; but reacting with moral indignation and censure when Israel attempts the same in Jerusalem;

-and, above all else, forgiveness for Edom for making

it a principle of its foreign policy since World War II to advocate the unification of Berlin--and oppose the unification of Jerusalem; for risking world war so that unity shall come to that city which is the אבי אבות הטומאה, the very source of moral contamination and a reproach to mankind, but resisting the reconciliation of the עיר הקודש, the eternal city of holiness and sanctity. זכור ה' לבני אדום את יום ירושלים האומרים ערו, ערו, עד היסוד בה. Remember O God--and we fast so that You may forgive as well.

The flight of man to the moon is a historic occasion. There is no doubt about that. Perhaps the fact that our generation is so acutely aware of the historicity of events and so keenly self-conscious, makes this epic seem even more portentous than it is. But we must not allow the moon to eclipse the earth, and the issues of space to obscure the issues of great moment here amongst men.

While, as humans, we Jews join all mankind in prayers for the safety of the astronauts, we have our own private grief and our hurts that we cannot forget. After one thousand eight hundred ninety nine years we deserve some respite. Two years ago we thought we had it. But it has not yet come.

A world religious leader has proposed that when man lands on the moon tomorrow, there be placed on the lunar surface a plaque containing the following verses from Psalm 8:

*When I behold Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers
The moon and the stars which Thou hast established
What is man that Thou art mindful of him,
And the son of man that Thou thinkest of him
Yet Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels
And hast crowned him with glory and honor.
Thou hast made him to have dominion over the works of
Thy hands;
Thou hast put all things under his feet...*

*O Lord, our Lord,
How glorious is Thy Name in all the earth!*
Those words are remarkably appropriate for the event. Certainly we Jews concur in such sentiments.

However, we strongly recommend to the leaders of all the nations not only the end of Psalm 8, but also verses from the end of Psalm 9. They read, in part:

*Sing praises to the Lord, who dwells in Zion;
Declare among the people His doings.
For He Who avenges blood that was innocently shed,
remembered them;
He has not forgotten the cry of those who*

are humbled
Be gracious unto me, O Lord,
Behold, my affliction and embarrassment at the hands of
them that hate me,
Thou that lifts me up from the gates of death;
That I may tell of all Thy praise in the gates of the daughter
of Zion, Jerusalem,

That I may rejoice in Thy salvation.
The nations are fallen into the pit that they made;
In the trap that they planted for others is their own foot
tripped...
Arise, O Lord, let not man prevail;
Let the nations be judged in Thy sight.
Read more at www.yu.edu/about/lamm-heritage.

Leadership of the Land

Dr. Erica Brown

This week's double-Torah reading, Mattot-Masei, contains one of the strangest laws of the entire Torah: a detailed description of the city of refuge as a place where an accidental murderer can live to escape capital punishment. The accidental murderer is consigned to an interstitial space - a place not of his own choosing that signifies his removal from society for murder while, simultaneously, acknowledging his innocence. It is a difficult place to be, a place of guilt and limbo, but a place of life, nonetheless. Someone has died. Someone is responsible for that death even if it was unintended.

The playwright David Mamet wrote a book of his own Torah interpretations, *Five Cities of Refuge*, with the help of Rabbi Lawrence Kushner. There, he invites us to visualize life in a city of refuge: "What must it have been like to live in a city of refuge, this place of neither acquittal nor punishment? Every single person you'd meet, every single day, had accidentally murdered another human being... They were all united by shame; they all had innocent blood on their hands. And there was no escape either." They conclude: "Perhaps it was no different from life in any city, anywhere, anytime." Cities of refuge had other residents who were not guilty of manslaughter, but it's not clear if you could tell them apart. Casual encounters with shopkeepers and neighbors must have had a small charge of danger and mystery.

The chapter that discusses these laws concludes with a general warning: "You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I God abide among the Israelite people" (Num. 35:33-34). Keep the land pure by keeping yourselves pure. Devote yourselves wholly to God by remaining spiritually clean through good

moral choices.

Understand that the land is a reflection of its inhabitants. It cannot withstand hypocrisy. This exhortation reaches a crescendo in the book of Leviticus: "Thus the land became defiled; and I called it to account for its iniquity, and the land spewed out its inhabitants" (Lev.18:25). Land that cannot withstand human destruction will spit out its residents. What happens to the spilled blood of those who are murdered? It seeps into the ground, as God told Cain after the very first murder: "What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to Me from the ground!" (Gen. 4:10).

This outcry is more than an environmentalist's creed. In the Hebrew Bible, the land and those who reside in it do so in equipoise, a counterbalance of forces that are delicately aligned and dependent on human behavior and an aspiration of purity or freedom from moral contamination.

Purity, like sacrifice, submission, and sin itself are words central to all major faiths but alien to modern sensibilities.

In her book *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas introduces her subject by stating that, "rituals of purity and impurity create unity in experience. So far from being aberrations from the central project of religion, they are positive contributions to atonement." The impurity of sin distances us from God, from others, and from ourselves. Douglas believed that, "ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose a system on an inherently untidy experience." Nothing is morally messier than murder. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik, in his article *catharsis* contends that the sinner needs to withdraw, acknowledge that the sin has distanced himself from God, confess and repent so that he can bridge that lonely abyss.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that, "There are aspects of

Judaism that never change, wherever and whenever we are. The laws of purity and impurity, permitted and forbidden, sacred and secular – these have barely changed through the centuries” (Numbers, Covenant and Conversation). We no longer observe many of these laws because we do not have a Temple. But these laws are still studied because they teach us about how we demarcate experiences in the attempt to achieve holiness as individuals and as a society.

There is no greater breach for sacred societies than murder. The Talmud is explicit about this: “Due to the sin of bloodshed, the Holy Temple is destroyed, and the Divine Presence leaves Israel, as it says: ‘So you shall not pollute the land wherein you are; for blood, it pollutes the land; and no expiation can be made for the land for the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it. And you shall not defile the land which you inhabit, in the midst of which I dwell; for I the Lord dwell in the midst of the children of Israel’ (Num. 35:33–34). However, if you defile the land, you will not inhabit it, and I will not dwell in it.”

One midrashic reading of these verses helps us understand why the city of refuge was critical to the creation of a holy community. When it states in Numbers 35:34 that “I the Lord dwell in the midst of the children of Israel,” one midrash suggests that even when the Israelites are impure, the Divine Presence remains among them (Sifrei Bamidbar 160:15. See also BT Yoma 56b-57a). When you are marked by a sin so great it disturbs the universe, you can feel that you are your sin. There is no escaping from the terror of self-loathing. You do not feel that God is with you. You are wrecked by shame and guilt for a murder you never intended. But in a city of refuge, you are with others who share this burden. Your vulnerability is acknowledged. You can express other parts of your being. You know that the Divine Presence is with you.

Beyond Yourself

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

Parshas Mattos begins with the laws governing the taking of vows and their dissolution. Rav Amnon Bazak, in his *Nekudas Pesicha*, suggests that these laws are connected to a verse at the end of the previous parsha, Pinchas. Referring to the section on sacrifices brought to the mishkan and the Beis HaMikdash daily as well as on Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh and Yom Tov, the Torah there says, “These you shall do for God on your

We have no modern-day equivalent of the city of refuge. The most we can do is create environments that feel both safe and accepting and also inspire personal and communal growth. In her *HBR* article, “The Best Leaders Aren’t Afraid to Be Vulnerable” (July 22, 2022), Janice Omadeke asks “How do you create a culture where your team feels empowered to be honest, share without fear of retribution, and ask for what they need?” She observes that, “The perception of what it means to be vulnerable has shifted from the grand gesture to the small act of bravery.” Leaders have to model that bravery to “open the door for people with less formalized power to safely emulate your behavior.”

Omadeke suggests two ways to open that small, important door of vulnerability. 1) Be honest about your own struggles. You cannot expect others to share their obstacles and frustrations, if you cannot do so. This means asking for help when you need it or mentioning the difficulty of a task. It may mean sharing a hardship in your life outside of work or volunteering that may be getting in the way of your best performance. 2) Do the difficult thing — even when others are hesitant. What Omadeke means by this is “standing up for your values and beliefs, publicly and privately.” This means speaking up and challenging groupthink. It means being a voice for others who may be mistreated in the workplace or society. And it means respectfully addressing uncomfortable issues that are papered over in leadership.

No one can live free of sin and without regrets. The city of refuge was a place where those guilty of manslaughter could continue to live despite sin and regret and be accepted and productive. One role of leaders today is to create similar environments of shelter and psychological refuge so that others may live.

What step can you take as a leader in creating a spiritual city of refuge for yourself and others?

appointed festivals, besides your vows and our free-will offerings...” (Bamidbar 29:39). Since the Torah mentioned that one may vow to bring a sacrifice, it goes on to explain the process of taking vows. However, I believe that the section of vows also has a connection to the section which follows it, describing the war that the Jewish nation waged against the nation of Midian. Besides the fact that people are prone to make vows during a time

of distress, such as war, and, in fact, the rabbis tell us that it is proper to do so in such times, I believe that there is an intrinsic connection between the subject of vows and the specific battle against Midian, as I will try to demonstrate.

When commanding Moshe to wage war against Midian, God told him, “Take vengeance for the children of Israel from the Midianites ; afterwards, you will be brought in into your people” (Bamidbar 31:2). Thus, Moshe’s death was contingent upon the execution of the war against Midian. The Torah then says that Moshe spoke to the people and told them to arm men for the war. Rashi comments that even though Moshe knew that his death depended on this war taking place, he did not delay in carrying out God’s command, but acted immediately, with joy. Moshe thus acted with ‘mesiras nefesh,’ or a sense of self-sacrifice, in carrying out this war. Why was it necessary for there to be this sense of mesiras nefesh in this particular war?

Rav Avrohom Halevi Schorr, in his work *HaLekach VeHalibuv*, notes that when, after the war, Moshe berated the officers for not having killed the women of Midian, he said, “ Did you let every female live ? See now, they were the ones who caused the children of Israel, by the word of Bilaam to commit a transgress against the Lord in the matter of Peor..” (Bamidbar 31:15-16). The words’ to commit a transgress’ - are, in Hebrew, ‘*limsor ma’al*’, meaning, literally, to give oneself over to a transgression, although the usual words used for the term ‘to commit a transgression’ are ‘*limol ma’al*.’ Rabbi Schorr cites Rabbi

Dovid Kimchi, known as the Radak, who writes, in his dictionary *Sefer HaShorashim*, that the use of the word ‘*limsor*’ - to give over - instead of ‘*limol*,’ indicates that the Midianites acted with mesiras nefesh, giving themselves over to commit a transgression. Thus, they acted with a sense of self-sacrifice when they caused the Jews to sin. Therefore, says Rabbi Schorr, in order to combat this factor, the Jews needed to have a sense of self-sacrifice in their battle of vengeance against Midian.

Based on Rabbi Schorr’s comment, we can explain why there was a need for Moshe to know that he would die after the war against Midian was waged. By reacting to his awareness of this fact by immediately making arrangements for the war, Moshe was acting with a sense of self-sacrifice, thus providing the element that was necessary to be victorious in the war, and setting an example for the rest of the people to act in a similar way. In this context, we can understand why the laws of vows were given as a prelude to this war. The laws of vows provide a mechanism by which a person can, through his own speech, create obligations upon himself that go beyond those imposed upon him by the Torah. This mechanism, therefore, provides a person with the means to go beyond his usual obligations, and thereby generate a spirit of self-sacrifice in his service of God. Since it was exactly this spirit of self-sacrifice that was needed to defeat the enemy in the war against Midian, it was appropriate to command these laws immediately before Moshe was commanded to wage that war.

The Journey of Emunah

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given in the Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on July 7, 2021)

The second of this week’s Parshios starts with *Eile ma’asei Bnei Yisroel asher yatzu me-Eretz Mitzaryim le-tzivosam be-yad Moshe ve-Aharon*. And we know that it proceeds to list the forty-two stops on the journey of Am Yisroel to Eretz Yisroel. Why did Torah have to list the entire itinerary of the journey through midbar Sinai? Rashi offers two pshatim. In one pshat, from Rav Moshe ha-Darshan, he explains that the purpose of the list is to show chasadim of Hashem-how merciful He was. Because if you look at it closely, you will see that it was not such a difficult journey. There were a lot of small masaos that were all packed together in the first and last year. And then they got to stay in certain places for a long time

during the 38 years of wandering in the desert. They were well settled, most of the time—it’s not like they trekked all those years. So despite the gezeirah of forty years of wandering the desert, we didn’t do much of that. HaShem was very nice to us and gave us the best quality of life He could in midbar Sinai. The second pshat, from Midrash Tanchuma, relates how much HaShem loves us. For example, if I am a madrich, and I have to take a guy to Terem (urgent care center), it can be annoying. I have to take the bus, the light rail, and then I am stuck there. And I am glad to forget about it afterward. But if you love someone—like a father bringing his son to the doctor so he can save his life—because you are so worried about

him, every step matters. Oh, here you had a little fever; and there you felt a little better. It shows the chibah. HaShem is going over all the steps because He cared so much about us at all those times. The common denominator of Rashi's pshatim is that it is from the perspective of HaShem. Either to show how nice Hashem was to us or how much He loves us.

But some of the other meforshim, such as Seforno, say that it's to show the greatness of Am Yisroel. They followed HaShem through all of these masaos in the midbar, even though it was very hard. Sometimes it looked like they were going backward, or there was no reason to travel, and they didn't understand why they had to be there. *Lechteich acharai ba-midbar eretz lo zarua*. It was to show the greatness of Klal Yisroel. They didn't just follow HaShem in the midbar in a straight path, which would have been enough of a shevach. They followed HaShem wherever the cloud took them in the midbar, wherever HaShem said—all forty-two stops. They kept their Emunah even when it looked like they were going nowhere. And they camped even when it looked like there was no reason to stop there.

I am not much of a Kabbalist, but we know that all pi sod these forty-two places correspond to the forty-two letters of one of the esoteric names of HaShem that correspond to the deepest levels of reality. I am not privy to any of that, but I think that even on the pshat level, these forty-two masaos speak to all of us. We all have journeys in our lives. And the goal of our journey is always the promised land, as it were, in a metaphorical sense. (Actually, the physical Eretz Yisroel should also be the goal of everyone's journey. Certainly, *be-zman ha-zeh* when it's not dangerous to travel.) We are all trying to journey to that ideal destination of where we want to be. We all start in our Mitzrayim. It's a very complex journey, and it is easy to give up on the way. I believe that so many people who give up on ruchnious do not do so because they don't care about it or because they are evil people who do not value spirituality. It is because, frankly, the journey is indeed quite arduous. There are many stops on the way, and sometimes it looks like we are stopping for no reason. Sometimes it seems you are traveling backward. Sometimes you stop at a place where the waters are bitter, the food is not good, or it's frustrating for every other reason in the world. Life's journey is very, very hard. We have more than forty-two masaos on our journey. And what Seforno is telling us here is: I know that the journey is very hard, but *le-fum tzaara agra*. Imagine the shevach of someone

who goes through this journey, frustrated here and going nowhere there, and everything gone awry at the third place. And instead of giving up, they say: I believe that HaShem runs the world and that there is a purpose to this journey and even though I don't understand why—I am going in the opposite direction, and everything seems to be going wrong—nevertheless, I believe this is a necessary stop to get to my destination, for reasons I have not yet fathomed. They keep following HaShem. They keep following what they see that HaShem wants from them, even while getting lost in the desert for many, many years and through many masaos. What a tremendous shevach it is if someone does not give in to the temptation to give up but sees every failure and frustration, every step backward, as part of their journey instead of a failure. This is the shevach of Am Yisroel—instead of giving up, they saw it as part of the journey. And that's a challenge for us every year on Parshas Ma'asei, as it always comes out right in the middle of the Three Weeks. And this fits with a beautiful chasidish vort I heard, on the pasuk *kol rodfe-y-ha* (רודפיה) *hisiguha bein ha-metzorim*. You can also read this word as *kol rodef Y-ah* (יה-רודף). Whoever seeks out HaShem can find Him during the Bein ha-Metzorim. How do we do that? Bein ha-Metzorim is a time of everything going wrong—all the failures and churbanos. But the way to find HaShem is if we look at our life and the history of Am Yisroel, and we see all the failures and churbanos, and we see how everything went 100%, 180 degrees, wrong. And yet, we see that it's part of a journey. HaShem is just waiting for us. He wants us. Why do I get such a low place? Because HaShem wants your Avodah of being in such a bad place, being misgaber on your yeitzer hara of ye'ush, and making this part of your journey. People who have an easier time do not have this zechus. HaShem wants a different Avodah from them. So if every time something is hard, everything goes wrong, and things go backward, we can look at it and say: There are forty-two masaos—and this is part of the journey. HaShem just wants me to go after Him into the midbar—lechtech acharai ba-midbar. HaShem wants me to see this as part of the journey and keep having faith in Him, myself, and our relationship. And eventually, *kol rodef Y-ah* (יה-רודף) *hisigucha bein ha-metzorim*. The harder the journey, the more awesome the destination. And in the end, *im yirtzeh HaShem*, we will get to our destinations, both personally and collectively, as Klal Yisroel. And we will see our personal and Am Yisroel's Promised Land. Shabbat Shalom.

Holiness of Speech, Building Bridges into Heaven

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The parsha discusses the topic of nedarim and shevuos. A person can take an oath to do or not to do a particular action. The Torah says there is an obligation to keep one's word and a prohibition against violating it. This mitzva applies to both men and women.

The parsha starts with an unusual opening. Normally, a parsha that discusses a new mitzva would begin with the phrase, "*Vayedabeir Hashem el Moshe leimor.*" Hashem would speak to Moshe, and then Moshe would teach the information to the Jewish People. This parsha, however, starts with the words, "*Vayedabeir Moshe el roshei hamatos*" (Bamidbar 30:2). In this case, Moshe did not speak directly to the people, but rather to the heads of the tribes. Rashi quotes Chazal, who explain that Moshe addressed the heads of the tribes and then afterwards did indeed address the Jewish People. This actually serves as the model for how Moshe communicated all the other mitzvos to Bnei Yisrael. Why specifically in the discussion of oaths and vows does the Torah mention in a special way that Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes?

Rashi says that this teaches us a special rule. The Torah expects Jews to keep to their promises. Sometimes, though, a person may make a vow or promise during an emotional fit. If a person takes a vow or promise and afterwards regrets it, he is not stuck forever with the vow. When the person calms down and wants to escape the vow, he has a way out. He can go to a single expert, a *yachid mumcheh*, and have the vow rescinded. He can also go to a group of three people to revoke the vow. With expressed regret, a person can ask to be released from the vow. This explains why Moshe delivered a special instruction to the heads of the tribes, who were of course Torah scholars. They needed to know this rule that they are able to revoke the vows of individual people.

Adding Mitzvos

The Avnei Neizer questions this explanation. The cancellation and annulment of these vows is a special license given to great Torah sages. However, the original vow itself can be taken by any Jew, even an uneducated Jew. If he takes a vow, he is obligated by two mitzvos in the Torah not to desecrate his words by violating it.

Why did the Torah specifically mention the heads of the tribes when it gives the ability and responsibility to every Jew to make a vow? The Torah is not discussing the

revocation of vows when it tells us that Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes!

The Avnei Neizer gives an original answer. There is a serious issue in the two mitzvos, both to keep and not desecrate a vow. The Torah is a complete package with 613 commandments. The Torah is inviolate, a singular and unchangeable Torah, which Hashem gave to the Jewish People at Sinai. This Torah includes two mitzvos: not to add a mitzva to the Torah, and not to delete a mitzva from the Torah.

This is one of the fundamental differences we have with those who purport to add and/or subtract from the Torah in creating their new religions. So, how does the Torah grant a license to every person to add his own personal obligations to the 613 mitzvos that Hashem already gave to him?

Through a shevua, an oath, a person can create many new obligations. For example, if a person wants to go on a diet, he can take an oath: "I will not eat ice cream for the next twelve months." According to Torah law, he now has a double mitzva not to eat ice cream for twelve months. A person can take any kind of vow. It is possible for people to add so many new obligations. Isn't this against the principle that we cannot add to the Torah?

Eternal Mitzvos

The Avnei Neizer answers that vows are different because regular Torah mitzvos are eternal. One certainly shouldn't add to them. They will never cease. Jews will always have to keep all 613 mitzvos, and they will never change. This is a fundamental principle of Judaism, as the Rambam writes. There is no canceling of any mitzva.

Regarding nedarim, however, we find a fundamental difference. The novelty of vows is that even though the Torah gives a person license to create a new obligation or prohibition, he can always get out of it. He can go to a chacham, a sage of his day, and ask him to cancel the vow. He can give an excuse, "When I made the neder, I felt emotional. I didn't realize how difficult this vow would be to keep." Then he can be released from the vow.

These obligations that a person imposes upon himself with his speech actually can be canceled or annulled. Therefore, they are not like any other mitzvos of the Torah, which cannot be canceled. Shabbos is always Shabbos, and always will be Shabbos. Christianity and Reform

and Conservative Judaism are mistaken. Any movement that wants to cancel even the smallest part of a mitzva is mistaken. No mitzvos of the Torah can be canceled. But personal vows and oaths can be canceled by going to a chacham.

When did the Torah forbid adding to the Torah? When someone imposes an eternal change, a new eternally binding mitzva, presented as God's will. A vow, though, is clearly a man-made prohibition. Just as man created the obligation himself, man can revoke it. Since it is imposed by man and can be revoked by man, it does not violate the commandment not to add to the Divine Torah.

Here it emerges that the only reason we are allowed to make vows in the first place is because of this release procedure. This is why Moshe addressed the *roshei matos*, the Torah scholars, the heads of the tribes, and informed them of their special license to nullify the *nedarim* that the people would make. This was the necessary introduction to the entire concept of vows, because it is what enables people to make vows in the first place.

Personal Holiness and Man-Made Mitzvos

The Shem Mishmuel adds his own amazing approach. He asks a deep philosophical question. The Torah gives every person the ability to take an oath. He will then be obligated by the Torah to fulfill that promise. The Shem Mishmuel focuses his question on the source of a person's power to create prohibitions on himself.

Hashem can place prohibitions and obligations on us. He is our God, Creator of the world, our King and Father. He has given us this world, and He controls our use of it. But from where does puny man derive the power to impose obligations and prohibitions? Hashem gave us the ability to place mitzvos upon ourselves, and even upon other people. For example, I am able to make an oath that no one else is allowed to wear my watch. If someone violates this prohibition and wears the watch, he violates a Torah-level prohibition. From where does a person derive this ability and power to impose Torah prohibitions and obligations?

The answer is that the human being is a holy creature. We are endowed by our Creator with holiness. He created us *b'tzelem Elokim*, in the image of God. Hashem is the holiest entity of which we can conceive. People are also holy. People are like *klei shareis*, the holy vessels of the Beis Hamikdash. The rule in the Beis Hamikdash is that *klei shareis* sanctify whatever comes into contact with them.

For example, if you pour some *chullin* (non-holy) grape juice into a holy vessel, the grape juice becomes holy. The holy cup in the Beis Hamikdash can sanctify simple grape juice.

The Shem Mishmuel says that the human being is a vessel endowed by his Creator with holiness to serve Him. We are different than animals; we are spiritual and sanctified. In what part of the human body is our holiness most concentrated? What is our holiest human power that distinguishes us from animals? It is speech, which emanates from the mouth of the person. Speech actually emanates from within the body, uniting the emotions and thoughts. Speech expresses the entirety of the human persona: body, spirit, and soul. Since speech comes from within, it has special *kedusha*. Just like the *klei shareis*, the human being sanctifies that which is inside of him. This is the basic and fundamental idea of the power of speech. Speech itself is a holy item, a product of the holy human being. This is why a person must fulfill his promises and vows. Just as one may not profane the holy things of the Temple, a person must not desecrate the holy speech that his own holy being utters. This is the secret of the power of the *neder* and *shevua*. This is the source of our power to create Torah-level obligations.

Are We Really Holy?

But, I ask, are we truly holy beings? Is my speech really a holy product? Is it so holy that it can have the power to create a *neder* and a *shevua*? Who actually has this great level of *kedusha*? How many of us have, unfortunately, desecrated our *kedusha*? Who has taken the holy essence that God gave us and changed it into a profane and desecrated being? We have used our actions, thoughts, and emotions for negative things. Perhaps we have lost the power of holiness to create the *neder* and *shevua*. Our mouths are not as holy as the Torah presumes. We have said foolish and, perhaps, even disgusting things. How could such a dirty, defiled, and broken *kli* produce the holy speech of the *neder*?

The answer is that, even though as individuals we may have desecrated and degraded our own personal *kedusha*, every Jew is still part of the holy collective of Israel. This holiness cannot be desecrated by an individual. A person can desecrate his personal holiness. But he or she is still a Jew. *Yisrael af al pi shechata Yisrael hu* (Sanhedrin 44a). Even when an individual Jew sins and desecrates his or her personal *kedusha*, he or she cannot desecrate the *kedusha*

that he or she shares with all the other Jews of the world. That holiness remains for every Jew by dint of the fact that he or she was born Jewish.

The Untouchable Holiness of Klal Yisrael

Don't we see this incredible reality? How many people do we know who were raised without the practice of Torah and mitzvos? They did not have the chance to develop their personal holiness. In fact, many of our brothers and sisters have been raised in a totally profane lifestyle, where personal holiness is a completely foreign concept. Nonetheless, many of these Jews have succeeded in returning to Torah and mitzvos. What enabled them to choose to come back?

The holiness of the collective of Klal Yisrael brought them back. Every Jew has this holiness, no matter what his or her lifestyle may be. We therefore count every Jew for the minyan on Yom Kippur. The kedusha of Am Yisrael is inviolate, so great and wondrous that it cannot be desecrated, no matter what the individual does.

The Shem Mishmuel sees a symbol of this concept in the Beis Hamikdash. The *ketores* (incense) that was brought in the Beis Hamikdash included one unusual ingredient, the chelbena. Chazal say (Krisos 6b) that, on its own, the chelbena has a terrible smell. However, together with the rest of the ketores, the chelbena contributed a positive aroma. When you mix it together with the rest of the ketores, it becomes *rei'ach nichoach*, a wonderful smell.

The chelbena represents Jewish sinners. Even if the individual has desecrated his personal holiness, he still retains the kedusha of Am Yisrael. He is connected to other Jews. Furthermore, he is connected to the great holy leaders, the tzaddikim of our generation. Those people do have personal holiness, and they share it with the rest of the nation. They are the *roshei hamatos*. This is the drip-down theory of holiness. The holiness of a righteous person is not just for himself. He shares it with the rest of his people, because we are *k'ish echad b'leiv echad*. We share in their holiness; we share the holiness of Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam. The personal holiness of a tzaddik is the national treasure of the whole Jewish People, like the heart that contributes health to the whole body. The national holiness of the tzaddikim enables each and every Jew to muster the requisite holiness to make a shevua.

This is why Moshe emphasized the *roshei matos* at the beginning of the parsha. They are the great masters of good deeds who share their personal kedusha with the whole

people. There is a spillover of kedusha from our Torah leaders to every single Jew. The *roshei matos* provide the guarantee that every Jew has the ability to sanctify his or her speech. This is the secret of the ability of the Jew to create holy obligations through speech.

This concept of national holiness corresponds to the fifth level of the soul, *yechida*, the one master-soul of Klal Yisrael. This level of soul has so much kedusha that it can never be desecrated. The *tzaddikim* and *anshei ma'aseh* give life to this level of soul.

Tilting Towards Holiness

The Shem Mishmuel makes a play on words in the pasuk: "*Vayedabeir Moshe el roshei hamatos.*" The word *l'hatos* means to tilt. The word *mateh*, then, which means tribe, can also mean to tilt or incline.

God resides in heaven, and we live on earth. In order for us to connect, we need a bridge between us. When that bridge exists, the Jewish People shares in the holiness of God Himself. This bridge can begin from Hashem and come down to us. It could also begin with us and go up to Hashem. There are *matos*, two kinds of inclines. There is a road leading from heaven down to earth. And there is another kind of road beginning on the ground and working its way up to heaven. The *roshei hamatos* are the people who build these bridges, these inclined planes, which connect man to God. They are the masters of the incline.

There are two kinds of *tzaddikim*. One kind of *tzaddik* builds a bridge from heaven downward which, so to speak, leads Hashem into this world. The other kind of *tzaddik* builds a bridge from the ground up. He brings people up to God.

These are the two *tzaddikim* who took us out of Egypt. Moshe brought heaven down to earth. He went up into heaven and brought God's Torah down to earth. When he brought the *luchos* down from heaven, he brought Hashem into this world. The Zohar calls him *shushvina d'malka*, the one who accompanies the king. Aharon is called *shushvina d'matronisa*, the one who accompanies the queen. The queen represents the Jewish people, for we are God's bride (see, for example, Rashi Shemos 19:17). He brings the Jews from earth up to heaven. Aharon was a man of the people. He was with them daily, and his holiness inspired Jews to live holy lives. These are the two types of great Torah leaders.

Throughout the ages, Jews always had these two kinds of leaders. In the times of the Beis Hamikdash, there were

always two leaders: the king and the kohen gadol. The king leads from heaven to earth, and the kohen gadol from earth to heaven. In the Sanhedrin, the high court of Jewish law, there is the chief justice—the *nasi*—who leads the Jews from heaven to earth, and the assistant chief justice—the *av beis din*—who leads the Jews from earth to heaven. (You, the reader, are invited to figure out how this model works.)

The reason Torah scholars are able to release us from our vows is because our vows are rooted in their holiness in the first place. Without the greatness of our Torah leaders, who share their holiness with us, we would not be able to make vows in the first place. This is why the *roshei hamatos*, who connect heaven and earth, have the power to rescind the vow.

This is true in Jewish marriage as well, as seen in sources such as in *Hadar Zekeinim* and *P'nei Dovid*. Marriage is called *kiddushin*, “holiness.” In rare, special circumstances, the greatest of rabbis in the Sanhedrin can annul *kiddushin* without a divorce. What gave the individual husband and bride the original *kedusha* to make their holy bond in the first place? The holiness of the *tzaddikim* within the Jewish People. Since they are the source, they are able to revoke the marriage in certain extraordinarily dire circumstances. They are the ultimate source of Jewish marriage, of the *kedusha* of Am Yisrael.

The Immense Power of Release

The Midrash says that, after the *eigel*, Hashem took an oath to destroy the Jewish People. But Moshe released Hashem from the oath, and so the Jews survived in the desert. What

was the source of Moshe’s power to annul God’s oath?

God’s oath is also a function of His connection to us. If He wouldn’t be connected to us at all, He would not get angry with us, give us blessings, mete out punishments, or swear about anything regarding us. He would have nothing to do with us. But, because of great *tzaddikim* like Moshe and Aharon, He maintains His connection to us. Even though we have our individual failings, Hashem remains loyal to us. However, when the nation as a whole fails and acts inappropriately, Hashem becomes infuriated, as it were.

Sometimes, He may express oaths of destruction against us. But then the *tzaddik* comes and says, “My connection is what keeps You and the Jewish People connected in the first place. Therefore, I release You from Your oath. It is my connection, and I release You from it.” This is how Moshe released God from the oath of destruction that He uttered against the Jewish People.

These amazing ideas of the *Shem Mishmuel* should inspire us. We must realize the holiness of our personal speech. We should feel that we are holy beings. We have to feel the holiness of being Jewish and behave accordingly. A Jew is a child of God. Our Father is holy, we are holy, and our nation is holy. We should be holy in our actions and especially in our speech. We should try to be that *tzaddik*, that righteous person, who fosters a holy connection to Hashem. We can be like Avraham or Sara, Moshe or Miriam. With our own holy actions, we can become a *kli shareis*, a holy vessel in the service of God.

The Power of Words & Churban BHM”K

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Parshas Matos, the first of this week’s double parshios of Matos-Masei, begins with the Torah instructing us regarding the laws of vows and oaths, both for a man and a woman. While these mitzvos are complicated and intricate (and far beyond the scope of this *dvar torah*), we can still derive crucial lessons from the Torah’s focus on the power of the spoken word. The *sedra* begins with Hashem instructing Moshe to instruct the heads of the tribes of the nation saying: **אִישׁ כִּי-יָדַר נֶדָר לֵה, אֹו-הִשָּׁבַע שְׁבַעַה: כָּכֹל-הִיִּצָּא מִפִּי, יַעֲשֶׂה לְאִסֹּר אִסָּר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ--לֹא יִחַל, דְּבָרוֹ: כָּכֹל-הִיִּצָּא מִפִּי, יַעֲשֶׂה** - *If a man makes a vow to Hashem or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out*

of his mouth, he shall do (Bamidbar 30:2-3; see Bamidbar 30:2-17 for the entire first perek of the parsha).

A person’s words have tremendous value and power. What one says, he must do. What one promises, he must uphold. What one utters to undertake, he must fulfill. We see then, that the spoken word carries weight far beyond simply ‘speaking words’. While it is the airways, throat, tongue, palate, teeth and lips that form our words, and our mind that gives rise to these words, the words themselves have great impact and import. They affect ourselves, our *neshamos*, and all those around us, to whom we speak and with whom we interact.

The old adage “sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt (or harm) me,” (which first appeared in the mid 1800’s!) is the opposite of the Torah perspective and wholly untrue in both halacha and haskafa. Our words, in fact, potentially can and do hurt others, R”L, and are all too often uttered without us considering the impact these words have. From the Torah’s viewpoint, though our words are puffs of air that physically dissipate once spoken, their effect remains, often forever.

Rav Joseph B. Soloveitchik, the Rav, zt”l, teaches that, “Judaism believes that words per se are the most powerful weapon G-d has provided man. Judaism believes in the power of the mind and the majesty of the word. Through the word, G-d created the world. G-d did not need words to create the world, but He chose the word as the instrument of creation in order to teach us that we can create the world through the word - and can destroy the world through the word. The word can be the most creative power in man’s hands, but it can also be the most destructive power given to man. That is why Judaism is almost merciless with regard to lashon ha’rah, evil speech, and why it takes so seriously the issues of perjury, vows and oaths.

“In Judaism, the word is the mark of one’s identity as a human being, in contradistinction to a beast or brute. In medieval Hebrew, the name for man is medabber, the ‘speaker,’ Judaism believes in the potency of the word. It is not just a sound, it is not just phonetics - it has a mystical quality to it. Hence man’s awareness of G-d must be objectified in the word. ‘And they all open their mouth in holiness and purity, in song and hymn, and bless, praise, glorify, revere, sanctify and declare the kingship of G-d’” (Abraham’s Journey, p.28-29).

The Sages teach (Pirkei Avos 2:1): הַסֵּתֶפֶל בְּשִׁלְשָׁה דְבָרִים: וְאִי אֲתָהּ בָּא לִיְדֵי עֲבָרָה, דַּע מֵה לְמַעַלָּה מִמֶּךָ, עֵין רוֹאָה וְאָזְנוֹ שׁוֹמְעָה, וְכָל מַעֲשֵׂיךָ בְּסֵפֶר נִכְתָּבִין - pay attention to three things and you will not come to sin: know what is above you: an Eye that sees, an Ear that hears, and all your deeds are Written in a book. In the Eternal World, before the Heavenly Court, we will have to give an accounting of all of our actions, including all the words that we uttered in this world. If we were but able to keep this teaching in mind at all times (or even most of the time!), how much more careful we would all be before speaking.

As we are charged with being a holy nation, kedoshim ti’hi’yu, part of being holy is defined by counting both the quality and quantity of our words; see the Ramban:

וגם ישמור פיו ולשונו מהתגאל ברבוי האכילה הגסה ומן הדבור הנמאס כענין שהזכיר הכתוב (ישעיהו ט טז) וכל פה דובר נבלה ויקדש עצמו בזה עד שיגיע לפרישות כמה שאמרו על רבי חייא שלא שח שיחה בטלה מימיו. (רמב"ן ויקרא יט:ב)

As Parshas Pinchas is (almost) always the first sidra read in the Three Weeks, this follows that Matos will always be read Shabbos Mevorchim Chodesh Av. As we begin the Nine Days, we are reminded about the power of our words. What is the connection between Matos, the importance of vows and words, and Churban BHM”K (destruction of the Temples)?

Chazal (Yoma 9b) teach us that the first BHM”K was destroyed (in 586 BCE by the Babylonians) because of the three cardinal sins prevalent during that time: idolatry, immortality and bloodshed. As for the second Temple (destroyed in 70 CE by the Romans), the Sages (ibid) teach that it was destroyed because of baseless hatred amongst the nation. And then, the Gemara questions: ובמקדש ראשון לא הוה ביה שנאת חנם - and in the time of the First Temple, was there no baseless hatred? Answers the Gemara: אלו בני אדם שאוכלין ושותין זה עם זה ודוקרין זה את זה: בחרבות שבלשונום - yes, there was; for these were people who would eat and drink with one another, and then spear one another with the swords of their tongues.

Hence, the sin of poisonous words and hatred amongst the people contributed to the downfall of both Batei Mikdash, and our long and bitter exile, R”L.

About his father, Rabbi Ronnie Greenwald z”l, his son Rabbi Zecharya Greenwald relates the following vignette: “My late father, R’ Ronnie Greenwald ztz”l was davening mincha one Shabbos without his hat. A fellow who had recently joined the community whispered in his ear, ‘You know, you should be wearing a hat.’ My father responded, ‘I am not so religious.’ The man apologized and stepped away. Two minutes later, my father approached him and asked, ‘Are you religious?’ ‘Yes, yes,’ the man responded vigorously. ‘Then why are you embarrassing me?’ my father asked” (Mishpacha, Issue 968, 7.5.23, p.43).

As we prepare to usher in the month of Av, the most mournful time on the Jewish calendar year, let us recall the sins that destroyed our Temple, our Land, and exiled us from our Home. Let us recall that words can build or destroy, and perhaps if we are cognizant of how, what and when we speak, we will have the merit to be the generation that turns galus into geula.

Opening the Pipelines of Blessing

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Parshas Matos tells about the war which Benei Yisrael waged against the nation of Midyan. Moshe instructed the people to mobilize an army consisting of one thousand men from each tribe: *אלף למטה, אלף למטה, לכל מטות ישראל תשלחו לצבא – “One thousand per tribe; one thousand per tribe; for all the tribes of Israel shall you send to the army”* (31:4).

The Midrash Tanchuma (3) and Midrash Rabba (22:2) explain this repetitious pasuk to mean that three thousand men were recruited from each tribe: one thousand to fight the war, one thousand to stand guard, and one thousand to daven for the campaign’s success.

The Otzar Pela’os Ha’Torah notes the significance of the fact that tefilos were necessary despite the fact that Hashem specifically commanded Benei Yisrael to wage this battle. In truth, whenever Benei Yisrael went out to war in ancient times, this was done with Hashem’s authorization – after consulting with the urim ve’tumim, the part of the kohen gadol’s garments which would prophetically respond to questions posed to it. We might have assumed that once Benei Yisrael received Hashem’s clear authorization to fight, victory was guaranteed. After all, if He told them to go to war, then He would certainly assure their success. And yet, nevertheless, tefilos were still necessary. No matter how confident we are of success, the Otzar Pela’os Ha’Torah explains, we still need to pour

our hearts before God in prayer and beg for His assistance, because tefila is an indispensable prerequisite for beracha.

We might draw an analogy to a person with a winning lottery ticket. As long as the ticket remains in his pocket, not a penny of the millions of dollars that he won will go into his bank account. He is no better off after the winning number was announced than he was previously, if he doesn’t bother to go to the lottery office and show his ticket.

The same is true of tefila. We all have the winning ticket. Hashem has an abundance of blessing with which to shower each and every one of us. But we need to cash it in, and this is done through sincere, heartfelt prayer. We cannot access the beracha without davening for it. The blessings are there, but our tefilos create the pipelines through which they can descend from the heavens into our lives.

During one of Israel’s recent military campaigns, Rav Simcha Kook zt”l of Rehovot arranged a program whereby people signed up to receive the name of an Israeli soldier for whom they would daven. There is no excuse for those who are not participating in Israel’s struggles against its enemies to not at least daven on behalf of those who are. Tefila is the pipeline that brings our nation success, protection and prosperity, and we must all take part in the effort to build this pipeline.

Israel Is Not a Start-up Nation

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

What happens when grand visions meet harsh realities? For hundreds of years, the land of Israel was a shimmering dream buoying the spirits of an enslaved nation. Once that dream became a reality, however, everything seemed to go sideways. The scandal of the meraglim wrecked our first opportunity to achieve this dream, and we were condemned to an agonizing forty-year desert odyssey. Having recovered from that disaster, we now stood at the doorstep of history, ready to convert those grand dreams into reality. Unfortunately, reality leaves a lot to the imagination, and dreams, when they finally arrive, lose much of their luster.

Just prior to our entry into Israel, two shevatim

petitioned Moshe asking to remain in the eastern bank of the Jordan river, rather than entering Israel proper. Shocked by their request, Moshe recalls the trauma of spy-gate, thirty-eight years earlier. Evidently, this nightmare is happening again. Additionally, Moshe can’t justify the moral calculus through which most of the nation battles for Israel, while two tribes sit on the sidelines, watching idly.

After failing to dissuade these tribes, Moshe offers a compromise solution. He, effectively, contracts them to battle alongside the rest of the population. Once they uphold their end of the bargain they can return to their homesteads in the lush green pastures of the East bank.

Given everything that has transpired, Moshe is,

understandably, skeptical about the intentions of these mercenaries. Fearing their betrayal, he painstakingly stipulates the conditions of this arrangement, repeating the terms of the agreement and crafting a tightly-wound verbal contract. Fascinatingly, Moshe's stipulations serve as the template for any conditions in halachik legal sales and transactions. As the Talmud repeatedly remarks "any tenai or condition which isn't crafted in the same fashion as these original stipulations aren't legally binding". Moshe's bargaining with these two shevatim becomes the model for all future transactions.

How tragic! A land of faith and vision has now become a clause in a legal contract. A land of history and heritage has become an addendum to a legal transaction.

Instead of being bound to Israel through common destiny, these tribes are now obligated by a diplomatic treaty. This transactional relationship cannot last long.

Soon after we settled the land of Israel, suspicions surfaced about the loyalties of this satellite population. Through last minute statesmanship a civil war was narrowly averted, but distrust lingered. Unfortunately, these tribes were first to be exiled and to be amputated from Jewish history in the mainland. Ironically, by forging a purely transactional relationship these tribes severed themselves from our common narrative and launched their own mental gallus. To them, Israel was nothing more than a transaction.

A Transactional Culture

Our own society is quickly morphing into a transactional culture. The shift is largely due to the disproportionate influence of Capitalism. Free market economics have altered our world, empowering each individual with economic rights and unlimited potential. Fortunately, Capitalism has dramatically improved our standard of living and has all but eliminated hunger and poverty as a source of death. We so deeply revere it that we seldom question its impact upon other facets of the human imagination.

Capitalism is pivoted upon financial transactions between two individuals, each seeking maximal value for minimal expenditure. Each individual party to a transaction, acts purely out of personal interest and not altruistically. The "other" party in a transaction possesses no inherent value, but is merely a "trade partner" helping to maximize my own profit. Transactions are faceless and the market, by definition, exhibits no moral values,

no altruism and certainly no respect for human dignity. Transactionalism may work well in the isolated world of free markets but are corrosive to other areas of human identity.

Transactional Politics

Regrettably, modern democracies are becoming transactional. Citizens of modern democracies view themselves as clients, paying taxes to receive government services. As in any transaction, a client seeks to pay as little as possible and receive as much as possible. Likewise, governments view themselves as service providers, receiving votes in exchange for the benefits they deliver. As transactions are always short-term interactions, transactional politics encourage short-term policy making rather than long-term programming. Additionally, transactions occur between individuals, not between communities. Transactional politics casts each citizen as an individual customer rather than a member of a larger unified group. Transactional politics fosters individualism rather than collectivism and common experience. Over time, transactional democracies will wither, and we are witnessing the first warning signs of this deterioration.

Transactional Relationships

Our relationships have also become transactional. We ask ourselves how a relationship or affiliation benefits us and how much it will cost. Transactional relationships focus on what we get and not on what we give. Genuine relationships are centered around generosity, compassion and selflessness not taking benefit. As Rabbi Sacks wrote "In a contract, two or more people come together, each pursuing their self-interest, to make a mutually advantageous exchange. In a covenant, two or more people, each respecting the dignity and integrity of the other, come together in a bond of loyalty and trust to do together what neither can achieve alone. It isn't an exchange; it's a moral commitment ... Contracts are about interests; covenants are about identity. Contracts benefit; covenants transform. Contracts are about Me and You; covenants are about Us."

Transactional Religion

Transactionalism has even wormed its way into religious consciousness. Of course, Jewish belief acknowledges reward and punishment, both in this world and well as in olam habah. Yet, the Torah never explicitly mentions the afterlife, precisely to avoid casting religion as transactional. We don't adhere to Hashem's will merely to receive reward or to avoid punishment. Religious experience is

self-sufficient, and we should, as the Rambam claimed, “do what is right because it is right” without need of any external incentivization. By muting any overt mention of *olam habah*, the Torah presents religious life as the highest and most noble lifestyle, even if there weren’t any reward and punishment. Religious duties are not divine

transactions, but acts of devotion and piety to Hashem who loves us and chose us for lives of commandment, commitment and covenant.

A Start-up Nation

Similar to other democracies, Israeli politics have become transactional. Additionally, during the past 20 years, Israel’s emergence as a technological superpower has shifted our cultural narrative. A well-known book entitled “Start-up Nation” captured the spirit of our age and the dizzying pace of Israeli innovation, scientific discovery and technological progress.

However, this story about “Start-Up” entrepreneurial Israel is replacing our original story about historical Israel.

The Mitzvah of Living in the Land of Israel

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In parashat Masei, the second of this week’s double parashiot, G-d speaks to Moses, Numbers 33:50-52, in the Plains of Moab and tells him to tell the Children of Israel that when they pass over the Jordan river and enter the land of Canaan, they are to drive out all the inhabitants of the lands and destroy their idols and their places of worship.

In the next verse, Numbers 33:53, the people of Israel are, once again, instructed to rid the land of the indigenous inhabitants. והורשטם את הארץ וישבתם בה, כי לכם נתתי את הארץ לרשת אתה, “*You shall drive out the inhabitants of the land and dwell therein, for unto you have I given the land to possess it.*”

There is an ancient tradition that the Torah contains תרי”ג —“Taryag,”—613 mitzvot/commandments. What these 613 mitzvot are, however, is subject to dispute. One of the major disputes concerning the 613 mitzvot, is whether there is an explicit Torah mitzvah for every Jew to settle and live in the land of Israel.

Based on these verses in parashat Masei, Numbers 33:52-53, Nachmanides counts the mitzvah of settling in the land of Israel as number four on his list of mitzvot. Hence it is known as the “Fourth Mitzvah.” This mitzvah incorporates the command to accept G-d’s offer of the

We didn’t come to Israel to invent technology, or to receive lavish financial buyouts, as beneficial as these may be.

We gathered from across the globe, fleeing persecution and antisemitism hoping to construct a common Jewish homeland. History is our narrative not entrepreneurialism. Entrepreneurial connection is transactional and fades once the costs outweigh the benefits. Historical connection to our homeland is endures and outlasts hardships and adversity.

Watching Israelis abandon our country when the political winds shift is deeply troubling. In a transactional society these decisions make sense: if a political policy is bad for profit, or personally inconvenient the overall transaction of living in Israel isn’t worth it. However, we are not here for profit, we are here for history. We are not a Start Up nation, but a Renaissance nation. Commitment to live in this country must transcend cost-benefit analysis. Not everything in life is a transaction. Israel certainly isn’t. It is our heritage.

land and to live in it. In his commentary, Nachmanides proclaims this doctrine forcefully:

In my opinion, this constitutes a positive command of the Torah, wherein He [G-d] commanded them [the People of Israel] to settle in the land and inherit it; for He gave it to them; and they should not reject the heritage of the L-rd! Should it enter their mind, for instance, to go and conquer the land of Shinar [Babylon] or Assyria or another country and settle therein, they would have transgressed the commandment of the L-rd...

The great biblical commentator, Rashi maintains that the phrase (Numbers 33:52-53), והורשטם—“*V’ho’rahsh’tem,*” means that the people of Israel must drive out (from the root of the Hebrew word “to conquer”) the indigenous inhabitants. Nachmanides, however, interprets “*V’ho’rahsh’tem,*” to mean that one must “inherit” the land as patrimony. Nachmanides emphasizes that the people must take this Divinely granted heritage, and not be further concerned, for G-d will provide for the security of the land.

In his comments on the Sefer ha’Mitzvot (Book of Divine Precepts) authored by Maimonides Nachmanides outlines, at great length, where and how he differs with Maimonides in his method of reckoning the 613 mitzvot.

Nachmanides takes Maimonides to task for not counting the duty to settle in the land of Israel as a separate mitzvah. Even though Maimonides, in many of his writings, often underscores the indispensable importance of the land of Israel, he never explicitly spells out the mitzvah of settling in the land of Israel as one of the 613 mitzvot.

Rabbinic and Talmudic tradition place great emphasis on living in Israel. The midrashic commentary on the Torah known as Sifre (Deuteronomy 12:29), tells of four rabbis who journeyed from Israel to the Diaspora. When they reached Palatium, a location outside of Israel, they remembered the land of Israel and their eyes welled up with tears. They proceeded to rent their clothes, while recalling the verse, Numbers 33:53: “And thou shall drive out the inhabitants of the land and dwell therein.” At that point, retracing their steps, they returned to Israel, and declared forcefully that living in Israel is equal to all the other mitzvot in the Torah.

The Talmud in Ketubot, 110b, underscores the centrality of the Land of Israel by reminding all Jews that it is preferable for a Jew to dwell in a city in Eretz Yisrael where the majority of the residents are idolaters, rather than live outside of Israel, even in a city mostly inhabited by Jews. The rabbis declare that those who reside in the land of Israel are like people who have a G-d, while those who reside outside of Israel are like those who have no G-d and serve idols.

Whereas all the other nations merely inhabit and reside in their respective homelands, the Jews have a particular obligation to observe an ethical and religious way of life in the land of Israel. That is why, according to Nachmanides, the Jews are specifically commanded to take possession of the land of Israel and to live there in order to fulfill this

central religious mission.

Many argue that, in fact, Maimonides also maintained that Jews are duty bound to live in Israel, even though he did not list it among the “Taryag,” the 613. According to these commentators, Maimonides considered himself a sinner for not living in the Holy Land. Furthermore, it is an undisputed halachic ruling, (Ketubot 110b), that either a husband or wife may insist that their spouse make aliyah (move to Israel), and if the spouse refuses, he/she is penalized.

There are those who argue further that Maimonides actually sees the mitzvah of living in the land of Israel as so fundamental, that he did not deem it necessary for the mitzvah to be listed and counted.

So where does that leave us? Jews who live in galut, the Diaspora, often proffer a host of legitimate and not so legitimate excuses for not living in Israel. Be that as it may, there really are no valid excuses for not visiting Israel regularly or supporting Israel economically, and especially educating and encouraging our children about the centrality of Israel. Diaspora Jews who purchase second homes, should purchase those homes in the land of Israel. If they wish to invest in additional businesses, the land of Israel should be a primary investment consideration.

To paraphrase Nachmanides, we, the Jews of the Diaspora, should not look to conquer the alien lands of “Shinar” or “Asyria” or any other country to settle therein. The Diaspora should not be allowed to become the long-term alternative to the land of Israel. To the contrary, the land of Israel must always be seen as the Jew’s primary residence, and the Diaspora as a waystation, not a destination. Israel is our land to conquer and to possess. And, if we really wish to “possess” it, we can do so only by first “conquering” our own reluctance and reticence.

Why Do Chazal Support Intermarriage?

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

The end of Parshat Masei describes a plan for the division of Eretz Yisrael among the tribes. The heads of the families of the tribe of Menasheh approach Moshe with a challenge. They point out an apparent contradiction between G-d’s command to distribute portions of land to particular tribes and His earlier instruction allowing the daughters of Tzelofchad to inherit. If these daughters marry men from other tribes, the land will pass permanently to their husbands’

tribes. Moshe consults with G-d, who acknowledges the validity of the concern. G-d instructs that the daughters of Tzelofchad should marry within their own tribe. The same is true for any woman who inherits land. This way, land will remain with its original inheriting tribe.

The straightforward understanding of this passage suggests that these laws are applicable indefinitely (see Ibn Ezra, Bamidbar 35:8). However, the Sages restrict its application to very limited cases. They do so in a

remarkable manner.

A mishnah (Taanit 4:8) states that Yom Kippur and the 15th day of Av are exceptional holidays for the Jewish people. The mishnah describes how unmarried women would meet potential husbands on these days. The mishnah compares the joy of the 15th day of Av to the joy of Shlomo HaMelech when he built the Temple.

The Talmud (Taanit 30b) raises the question of why the 15th day of Av is significant. It offers various explanations, and the first suggestion is that this was the day when intermarriage between tribes was permitted again. Rashi (ad loc.) explains that only in the first generation did the Jews follow the straightforward interpretation of the passage from our parshah. Girls who inherited land were not allowed to intermarry with other tribes. But after that generation, on the 15th day of Av, the Sages declared that this passage should not apply going forward; there would be no problem with future intermarriage between tribes.

The Talmud (ibid.) links this ruling with a nuance in the Torah's text itself. But the logic behind ending tribal segregation is difficult; our parshah states explicitly that G-d approved of the claim of the heads of Menasheh! Perhaps the Sages understood the following: There is justification for the claim about transferring between tribes. But implementing the regulations described in the Torah would lead to a division between the tribes, preventing any woman who stands to inherit land from marrying out of the tribe. Effectively, this would result in each tribe marrying internally. The result would be a

fragmented Jewish people, where each tribe would exist in isolation from the others. Halachah recognized a greater value that superseded this reality: the unity of the Jewish people.

Our mishnah's comparison of the joy of the 15th day of Av to the joy of building the Temple may allude to this. Rabbi

Chaim Cohen (Hakitzu V'ranenu, page 300) explains that the Temple can only arise from a sense of unity among the Jewish people. A disparate group of individuals do not build a home together. Only a family seeks a home. So too, the Temple, as our national home to meet with G-d, can only be constructed by a unified Jewish family. Once intermarriage was allowed and the division between tribes dissolved, we could live as one large family capable of building the Temple. This is the essence of the joy that permeates the 15th day of Av.

There is a lesson here for us. The Jewish people are inherently tribal, with different groups following diverse perspectives and ways of life. It is appropriate and justified for these groups to be accommodated. However, when we excessively focus on tribal existence, the cost is a loss of overall unity and a diminished sense of being one larger family. The Sages teach us that the ability to come together as one family is the overriding value. We must strive to respect each other's tribal identities. But at the same time we must stay focused on the ultimate goal. If we desire to witness the rebuilding of the Temple and experience the joy it brings, we must become one unified family.

The War with Midian – Why Now?

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

Toward the beginning of Parshas Pinchas (Bamidbar 25:16-18), Hashem commands Moshe to wage war against Midian in order to avenge the Midianites ensnaring B'nei Yisroel at Ba'ar Pe'or into severe public transgressions, which led to the deaths of 24,000 Jews – an incredibly painful and tragic episode that had just occurred. However, Hashem did not command that the battle with Midian actually occur until later, as presented in Parshas Matos (ibid. 31:1-54).

The Chizkuni explains that although the actionable command to wage Milchemes Midian, the war with Midian, was not given to Moshe until Parshas Matos, Hashem initially charged Moshe and B'nei Yisroel to wage Milchemes Midian in Parshas Pinchas in order to

assuage the bereaved and shaken nation (with the apparent message that Midian would be defeated and B'nei Yisroel would move on and upward toward a better future).

The Chizkuni's remarks prompt a question in the reverse: Why did Milchemes Midian not occur at that juncture, directly after the calamitous incidents at Ba'al Pe'or? Why was Milchemes Midian postponed, as it were, until Parshas Matos?

Milchemes Midian immediately precedes the account of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven requesting settlement in Ever Ha-Yarden, the East Bank of the Jordan River. It seems that the juxtaposition of these two events – Milchemes Midian and settlement in Ever Ha-Yarden – bears a deep underlying message.

In fact, the Torah's language in these two narratives is striking. In Milchemes Midian, we read: "And Moshe told the nation: 'Arm (*Heichaltzu*) men from among you...'" (ibid. 31:3), and in the account of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven do we read, "We will rapidly arm (*nachalotz*) ourselves" (ibid. 32:17). The shoresh/Hebrew root word "*chalatz*" that is found in both texts rarely appears in the Torah and indicates a connection between these two events. (In fact, this same rare shoresh appears seven times in the story of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven; e.g., "We will pass armed (*chalutzim*) before Hashem to the Land of Canaan..." (ibid. 32:32), and it appears twice in the story of Milchemes Midian).

It is also noteworthy that the Torah elaborates extensively regarding the details of the booty captured by B'nei Yisroel in Milchemes Midian – something that we do not find concerning the possessions gained from the Egyptians at Yetzi'as Mitzrayim (the Exodus from Egypt) or at K'rias Yam Suf (the Splitting of the Sea). Similarly does the Torah elaborate extensively regarding the specific cities and tracts of land received and settled by B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven (and half of Shevet Menashe) in Ever Ha-Yarden – something that we do not find in the Torah as pertains to any other Jewish settlement.

The direct adjacency of Milchemes Midian and the story of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven, and their resemblances, tell us that we need to peer deeper and derive important lessons.

Despite the similarities and juxtaposition of these two events, there is also stark contrast. Chazal indicate that B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven placed an emphasis on material possessions; the fact that these shevatim approached Moshe and began to enumerate the names of the lush pasture lands in Ever Ha-Yarden before even presenting to him their proposal to remain in Ever Ha-Yarden might further hint at this. However, even though Milchemes Midian involved a massive amount of material possessions, we read that a significant portion of these possessions were donated for holy purposes; we read as well how the Jewish warriors in Milchemes Midian were instructed to kasher and sanctify the metal vessels of booty which they brought back from the battle, and they needed to purify themselves and their clothing upon return from the battle. Pinchas the Kohen was sent to the battlefield as well, with the Aron Ha-Kodesh (Holy Ark), the Urim V'Tumim and the Tzitz - the sacred headband of the Kohen Gadol. (Rashi on ibid. 31:6, from Medrash)

Milchemes Midian was a holy war in every sense of the word. (Chazal even elaborate about the punctilious mitzvah observance on the part of the Jewish soldiers who participated in Milchemes Midian.)

In contrast, B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven were involved in a solely materialistic venture. These two shevatim viewed it as a practical necessity – they were not base, selfish people – yet a palpable aura of kedushah was not present in this endeavor. In fact, Chazal were critical of B'nei Reuven and B'nei Gad for their emphasis on material possessions, which caused these shevatim to settle outside of Eretz Yisroel, away from the rest of B'nei Yisroel, and which resulted in B'nei Reuven and B'nei Gad to be exiled first. (Bamidbar Rabba 22:7; Rashi from Tanchuma on Bamidbar 32:16)

By connecting the narrative of Milchemes Midian to the story of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven, the Torah is telling us that what might appear to be quite similar pursuits can be vastly different and almost polar opposites, all depending upon our motivations and values. The Torah presents what are essentially two tales of mass conquest back-to-back, in which material assets played a major role. We are bidden to consider the contrast in priorities in these events and to realize which approach is correct and reflects the highest ideals of the Torah. This is why the episode of Milchemes Midian and the story of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven are together, and why Milchemes Midian was delayed until this point. Furthermore, it is quite likely that Milchemes Midian was mandated to occur when it did, immediately before B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven approached Moshe, so that these two shevatim would observe and derive from Milchemes Midian the proper perspective regarding the role of *gashmiyus*, material possessions.

It is fascinating that even though it was not initially requested by them, Moshe allotted a large portion of land (the territories of Sichon and Og) in Ever Ha-Yarden to half of Shevet Menashe as well. Why is this? Although it is true that Menashe was a massive tribe that needed a lot of land, why was Menashe so readily accorded territories in Ever Ha-Yarden, whereas Reuven and Gad had to debate Moshe and be subjected to rebuke before being accorded land there?

The decision to assign land in Ever Ha-Yarden to half of Shevet Menashe is discussed by some of the Meforshim (Commentators – v. Ramban and Chizkuni on ibid. 32:31), but perhaps a new interpretation can be suggested:

We read in Parshas Pinchas (Bamidbar 27:6-11) how

B'nos (the daughters of) Tzelofchod sought to inherit the land in Eretz Yisroel that their deceased father would have received. Chazal laud B'nos Tzelofchod for their love of Eretz Yisroel (*Chibas Ha-Aretz*) and relate that these women derived this trait from their ancestor, Yosef, who likewise displayed a great love for Eretz Yisroel, as exhibited by his strong desire to be returned there for burial. (V. Rashi on *ibid.* 27:1.) Chazal connect B'nos Tzelofchod with Yosef through their lineage, for B'nos Tzelofchod were part of Shevet Menashe, who came from Yosef.

This story does not end here, for we read at the very end of Sefer Bamidbar (36:1-12) how Tzelofchod's brethren, who were the heads of the family units of the house of Machir, son of Menashe, approached Moshe Rabbeinu to request that the land to be inherited by their nieces, B'nos Tzelofchod, remain in Shevet Menashe and not transfer to another shevet, should B'nos Tzelofchod marry into other shevatim, whereupon the inheritance of their land upon their passing would normally be subject to transfer to heirs who were members of the shevatim of their husbands.

Tzelofchod's brethren who approached Moshe with this concern, similar to their nieces, were not interested in

this land for its real estate value; rather, they too exhibited a profound *Chibas Ha-Aretz*, as direct progeny of Yosef, and sought for Shevet Menashe's ancestral land in Eretz Yisroel to remain with their own shevet. *Chibas Ha-Aretz* was a strong family value, and it was robust and particularly conspicuous in Shevet Menashe.

This explains why Moshe assigned land in Ever Ha-Yarden to half of Shevet Menashe - for Moshe wanted the neighbors and co-settlers of B'nei Gad and B'nei Reuven to be people who were teaming with *Chibas Ha-Aretz*, in order to try to infuse that entire Jewish territorial settlement with a greater sense of *ruchniyus* (spirituality) and connection with the Holy Land.

The message for us is that we must always seek spiritual elevation and use every opportunity in life to serve Hashem and find kedushah (holiness). We can approach our choice of home/real estate from a business perspective, or we can choose our place of residence based on spiritual considerations. This same calculus applies to every facet of our lives.

Let us commit to cling to Hashem and His Torah as the animating factors in all that we do, and emulate the holy examples of Yosef and his progeny.

