

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

In Bamidbar 31:2, God commands Moses to: "Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites." This harks back to Chapter 23 when the King of Moav reached out to Midian for assistance against the Israelites. Together they tried to induce the prophet Balaam to curse the Israelites, and when that failed, their women tried to seduce the Israelites (Moav in 25:1 and Midian in 25:6) and get them to worship their god. But why is only Midian condemned and not Moav? Rashi explains that the King of Moav was reasonably afraid of the Israelites camped on his border, but Midian got involved "over a quarrel which was not their own." In fact, Midian had every reason to be pro-Israel; after fleeing Egypt, Moses lived in Midian and married Tziporah, daughter of the Midianite priest, Yitro! In essence, the Israelites could let Moav's behavior slide because it was "just business," but when Midian "made it personal" only an act of vengeance, a settling of the score, could make them "clear before the Lord."

We see this idea again Chapter 35 in the discussion of the Cities of Refuge. There is nothing more unsettling than the killing of one human being by another. The Torah tells us that: "blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of him who shed it." (35:33) Thus a "manslayer" must be executed by the "blood avenger" - the kin of the victim. With this death warrant hanging over their head, the manslayer is only safe inside a City of Refuge. There a trial determines whether the "manslayer" acted with intent or malice. If so, the "blood avenger" settles the score. But if not, the manslayer continues their unsettled existence, residing in the City of Refuge for the rest of their lives, or until the death of the High Priest.

But why does the High Priest's death serve as expiation for the killing? The Talmud Bavli Tractate Makkot 11a suggests two possibilities. The first is that the High Priest, who on Yom Kippur secures expiation for all of Israel's sins, here serves as a kind of sacrifice, his death a stand-in for the death of the manslayer. The other possibility is that the High Priest is co-responsible for the accidental killing: he must not have prayed properly or sufficiently for such calamities not to occur. But in either case, the scales are balanced.

All of these stories remind us that truly being settled - FEELING settled - requires more than land and material security. It requires keeping our word and fulfilling our obligations to kin, to community, and to justice. Only then can we be "clear before the LORD and before Israel."



# TORAH SPARKS

## Parashat Matot-Masei

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Annual | Numbers 30:2 - 36:13 (Etz Hayim p. 941-967; Hertz p. 702-724)  
 Triennial | Numbers 32:1-33:49 (Etz Hayim p. 949-957; Hertz p. 707-710, 714-716)  
 Haftarah | Jeremiah 2:4-28, 3:4 (Etz Hayim p. 972-977; Hertz p. 725-729)

## D'var Torah: Unsettled

*Rabbi Andy Shapiro Katz, Director of NA Engagement, Conservative Yeshiva*

As they are poised to enter the Land, two tribes ask permission to settle instead on an expanse of recently conquered pasture land. Shocking! During the Exodus and all the subsequent wanderings, had the goal not been to dwell in the Land of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov as a 'nation of priests and a holy people?!" As it turns out, no. The tribes of Reuven and Gad, and probably the rest of the Israelites as well, were just seeking what most humans do - food, drink, shelter, and security - the lowest two levels on Maslow's hierarchy of needs. But as Maslow taught, we also need love/belonging and esteem - positive regard from self and others. Moshe plays on this, telling the two tribes that only if they join the others in the conquering of the Land will they be "clear before the LORD and before Israel; and this land shall be your holding under the LORD." To be *settled*, they need no *unsettling* debts, obligations, or conflicts hanging over their heads.

With this in mind, we can make connections with other stories in Matot-Masei. The double parasha opens in Chapter 30 with instructions concerning vows: "If a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips." Unsettling debts and obligations are not just things imposed on us from the outside; they can be created with the words we say. And with an unfulfilled vow, we cannot be "clear before the Lord and before Israel." If one didn't really mean it, a *beit din* - representative of both God and Israel - can annul it. But if the vow was sincere, it hangs over one's head in perpetuity.

# D'var Haftarah: The Possibility of Return

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In this week's haftarah, the second of the 3 special haftarot which precede Tisha b'Av, Jeremiah expresses God's bitterness over the nation's religious disloyalty. God had redeemed them and settled them in their land. The people, in return, both betrayed Him and, even worse, ignored Him by turning to the false gods of their neighbors. Jeremiah cites this as the reason for their eventual downfall as a nation. Out of this bitterness was born an incredibly haunting, even horrifying statement in God's name: "Though you wash with *natron* (soap) and use much lye (exceedingly harsh detergent), your guilt is ingrained before Me (God), declares the Lord God" (2:22) The Targum Yonatan, the Jewish Aramaic translation of the Prophets, translates the verse this way: "like a permanent stain that will not come clean, so, too, your sins are great before Me (God)" But was this statement really intended to imply that the sins of the nation were indelible and that there was no room for making amends?

The Talmud relates a story about a famous sage and heretic, Elisha ben Abuya, who struggled over this very question: "Our Rabbis taught: Once Aher (Elisha ben Abuya) was riding on a horse on the Sabbath (a Shabbat violation) with Rabbi Meir (his longtime student) walking behind him in order to learn Torah from him. [Aher] said to him: Meir, return, for I have already measured by the paces of my horse that you have reached as far as is allowed on Shabbat. Rabbi Meir replied: You, too, should 'return' [implying that Aher should repent]! [Aher] answered: Have I not told you that I have already heard from behind the Veil (a heavenly voice): 'Return you backsliding children' (Jeremiah 3:22) — except Aher. [R. Meir] prevailed upon him and took him to a schoolhouse. [Aher] said to a child: Recite for me thy verse! [The child] answered: 'There is no peace, saith the Lord, unto the wicked. (Isaiah 48:22) He then took him to another schoolhouse. [Aher] said to a child: Recite for me thy verse! He answered: **'Though you wash with natron and use much lye, your guilt is ingrained before Me (God), declares the Lord God'**" (adapted from Hagigah 15a)

From his experiences, Elisha ben Abuyah concluded that his situation was hopeless — that all of the doors to repentance and reconciliation with God were closed. When the child repeated the verse from our haftarah, it simply reinforced his assertion. He felt religiously and psychologically boxed in and acted accordingly, much to the chagrin of his student, Rabbi Meir.

But despite Elisha ben Abuyah's impression, a later verse makes clear that 2:22 was just hyperbole, to jar people into an awareness of the repercussions of their actions. In 4:1-2. Jeremiah says "If you return, O Israel, declares the Lord, if you return to Me... in sincerity, justice and righteousness, nations shall bless themselves by you and praise themselves by you." (4:1-2) Or, put succinctly, never say to yourself, never — the doors of repentance are always open.

# Parashat Matot-Masei Self-Study

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This double Parasha that ends the book of Bamidbar contains some topics that form a closure to events that started in earlier Parashot, and others that are looking forward to the entry into the Land of Israel, just across the Jordan River.

1) The Parasha opens with the laws regarding oaths. Unlike the standard 'and the LORD spoke to Moshe, saying...' here (30:2) we are told that Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes and delivers the laws regarding oaths (and prohibition to break them.) What might be the reason for this unusual form? (For those who want a challenge: This question is keeping the commentators busy. Take a look.)

2) God instructs Moshe (31:1-6) to take revenge for the Children of Israel against the Midianites. (What did the Midianites do? See 22:4-7, 25:6-18.) But when forwarding the instructions, he tells the people 'you should take revenge for God against the Midianites.' How would you explain this discrepancy?

3) When the warriors return with captives, including women, from the war against Midian, the leaders get upset. They tell the people: 'the women were the ones who went to the Children of Israel according to Balaam's plan.' (31:13-20). What new light does this comment shed on the story of Baal Peor (chapter 25)?

4) Two tribes, Reuben and Gad, request to stay in the lands conquered in trans-Jordan (chapter 32). Moshe is furious at the request for 2 reasons: It is unfair that the rest will do battle in the land and these tribes will sit back and relax, and they are behaving like the spies, rejecting the land of Israel. What does Moshe fear might happen to all the people because of these 2 tribes? (Think about the story of the spies, 14:28-33, and its consequences.)

5) After giving a description of the borders of the land of Israel (west of the Jordan River), Moshe appoints Joshua and Elazar the Kohen Gadol to be in charge of distributing the land. He adds a representative for each tribe (34:16-29). Why? Why do you think that Joshua does not represent his tribe (Ephraim)?

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