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**The Lower East Side**  
**Parshat HaShavua sheet**

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from around the Internet*

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Parshiot Matot-Maasei

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**COLLATERAL DAMAGE**  
*By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

“War,” said General Sherman, “is not the glory that boys make of it.” He termed it even worse; the antithesis of Heaven. The ramifications of conflict transcend the battlefield, often impacting the lives of civilians and neutral parties in ways that are both unpredictable and terminal.

In this week’s portion, Moshe is commanded to wage war against Midian, the nation whose daughters seduced the Israelites into a quagmire of sin and Divine retribution. If Hashem asks His nation to war, victory should be assured, yet this war would have devastating ramifications that would not occur through failure on the battlefield, but rather with the success of victory. Hashem speaks: “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people” (Numbers 31:2).

The term “gathered unto your people,” does not refer to a victory parade where people gather to pay homage to a victorious conqueror. Rather it means the same thing as it meant when the Torah tells us about many of our forebears. “And he gathered unto his people and he died.” Yes, Moshe was told to fight a battle for the sake of Israel’s honor and then he would die. This battle was to be his last. With mission in life accomplished, and the shell of his holy body would be interred while his soul would join his Heavenly father in Heaven.

Though success on the battlefield would be his death knell, Moshe did not tarry. Immediately, in the verse after the critical directive, “Moses spoke to the people, saying, ‘Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem’s vengeance against Midian.’” (Ibid v. 3) Moshe did not tarry nor did he bide his time with strategic planning. He prepared his nation in prompt fashion for what would be his final battle. What is interesting to note, however, is that despite the fact that Moshe’s command was immediate and succinct it differed slightly from the original directive that Hashem issued.

Hashem said, “Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites.” Moshe said, “to inflict Hashem’s vengeance against Midian.” Why did Moshe change the directive?

*A certain Rabbi, who was constantly tormented by the prime minister of a despot nation. “All right, Rabbi,” he taunted, “you seem to have the answer to everything. Since you are so smart,” he smirked, “tell me, dear Rabbi, when will you die?” The Rabbi knew he was in a bind. If he were to identify a date in the distant future, the king could immediately prove him wrong with a call to the executioner. Of course, if he predicted an imminent demise, the angry king would surely fulfill it. The Rabbi, thought for a few moments and then, with a vision of clairvoyance, he smiled. “I do not know the exact date your honor, but I can assure you one thing: I will die one day before you.” Needless to say, the Prime Minister, made every effort to keep the good Rabbi alive for a very long time.*

When Moshe was told about the directive to wage war, he moved with gusto. He gathered the troops, appointed Pinchas as a general, and motivated his army for the war that would precede his own demise. But to the people who knew of G-d’s directive in its entirety it seemed almost like a death sentence. Why should they fight, knowing that as soon as they avenged their honor and accomplished the mission, the missive of Hashem will be fulfilled and Moshe would die?

Therefore, explains the Malbim, Moshe told the nation, “We are not doing this for your honor.” He knew that if it was for the Jews’ honor they would have tarried in their mission while knowing the deadly toll their success would have on their beloved leader. And so “Moshe spoke to the people, saying, ‘Arm men from among yourselves for the legion that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem’s vengeance against Midian’” (Numbers 31:3).

Perhaps for human honor, Moshe could have stayed his demise. The people would have even laid down their arms and not fought, despite the humiliation they received through Midian. However, when the honor of Hashem is at stake, then no mortal impediment, not even the passing of the world’s greatest leader, can stand in the way.

## **Peace by Choice**

*By Rabbi Lazer Gurkow*

Disaster is the parent of opportunity. When the normal and routine are shattered, when calm and confidence are shaken, the patterns of life are altered and new opportunities are born.

It remains to us to convert these opportunities into reality. It remains to us to grasp that, if we permit it, even dark clouds can bear a sliver lining.

In May of 1967 the worldwide Jewish community joined in unprecedented unity to face the grave danger that threatened the land of Israel. Long-standing fissures that had splintered our community were, for the moment, dismissed. The enemy did not discriminate; he threatened us all, and this brought us together.

Personal animosities and parochial differences were set aside. Jews who had never visited Israel traveled en masse to volunteer their help. Jews secure in distant countries contributed their life savings in defense of the land. At that moment, our unity was complete.

The impending crisis brought to the surface a devotion we never knew we possessed. An otherwise fragmented people was forced by a common enemy to find a common ground. The threat of incredible disaster gave rise to an incredible opportunity for unity and love.

As our ancestors approached the Promised Land, two tribes—Reuben and Gad—requested permission to settle in the fertile, but foreign, lands outside of Israel. Rather than encourage them to join their brethren in the Holy Land, Moses acquiesced with only one stipulation. He asked that they fight alongside their people in times of war (Numbers 32).

Moses' response is perplexing. Were these tribes an integral part of the nation only in war, but not in peace? Were these tribes dispensable to the nation as long as its military strength was not affected?

I would like to offer a different perspective. Moses sought to divine the mindset of those who were prepared to separate from their brethren in pursuit of material gain. Did they view themselves as members of the Jewish nation, or did the promise of bounty on the Jordan's east bank cause them to sever their ties with the Jewish nation?

The only litmus test that could prove their loyalty was their behavior in time of war. With their families safely ensconced in distant lands, would they identify with their people? Would they risk life and limb to come to the aid of their nation? Drafting an army to fight alongside their brethren would prove their Jewish identity.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad viewed themselves as a part of the Jewish people, but their commonality did not emerge until it was threatened by war. In times of peace they were content to pursue their own dreams far from the rest of their people. This is why, our sages maintain, these tribes were the first Jews to be exiled from their land.

This is, unfortunately, the other side of the coin. It is true that disasters parent opportunities for unity and hope, but it is frustrating that it takes a disaster to bring us together. Why can't we appreciate each other in peace as we do in war? Why can't we stand together at all times? Why must we wait for a crisis to show our common identity?

Indeed, there will come a time when the astounding unity currently reserved for times of danger will become the norm. The prophet Isaiah promised that in the messianic age, animals of prey will set their aggression aside. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard lie down with the goat; the calf, the cub and the ox will be together, and a child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze together . . . the lion and the cattle will both eat straw."

This particular miracle already occurred once before in history. In Noah's ark, during the deluge, the animals tamed their aggression and lived together. The lion did not prey on the sheep and the tiger did not stalk the lamb.

The former Chief Rabbi of Israel, Rabbi Yisrael Meyer Lau, posed the following question. If this miracle did not herald the messianic age when it occurred the first time, why was Isaiah convinced that it would herald the messianic age the next time it occurred? In response, Rabbi Lau suggested that a distinction can be drawn between that which occurred in Noah's ark and the miracles of the messianic age.

In Noah's ark the animals banded together against a common enemy, the flood. They needed each other; they would survive together or not at all. They were in the ark on Noah's sufferance, and he would not have hesitated to eject them if they had quarreled. Their goodwill was intended to serve their own needs, not those of their prey.

In the messianic age there will not be a common enemy. There will be no precipitating reason for the docile nature of aggressive animals. Peace and security will arise not of necessity, but of choice. Not out of tragedy, but out of goodwill. The animals will choose to become peaceful.

This is a phenomenon not extant today. As Isaiah correctly prophesied, when we witness this astounding miracle, we will know with certainty that the messianic age has arrived.

If we emulate this way of life today, we will hasten the arrival of the messianic age.

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## **Priorities and Price Tags**

*By Rabbi Yossy Goldman*

Is it the money or the man, the cash or the kids? Of course, no one would ever admit to putting money ahead of their children; but is it not an all too common phenomenon? Aren't most parents, even good parents, guilty of making that mistake now and then?

In this week's Parshah the Jewish People are preparing for the conquest of Canaan and the allotment of the Promised Land amongst the twelve tribes of Israel, when the tribes of Reuben and Gad make a special request of Moses.

They had abundant herds of livestock and the land east of the Jordan River was especially suitable for grazing. They asked Moses if they could receive this land rather than land west of the Jordan. In making this request they expressed themselves thus: "Pens for the flock we shall build here for our livestock, and cities for our small children."

Immediately, Moses chastises them and corrects their mistake. "Build for yourselves cities for your small children and pens for your flock." Moses turns around their sequence, putting the children ahead of the animals.

Rashi observes that these tribes were more concerned about their money, i.e. livestock, than they were about their sons and daughters. Moses needed to give them a lesson in values and priorities. Put family first. Possessions come later.

The veteran American spiritual leader, Rabbi David Hollander, once told me the story of a fellow who somehow managed to get himself locked in inside a big department store after they closed up for the day. To compound the problem, it was over a holiday weekend. When all his attempts to get out proved futile, he decided to give vent to his frustrations by taking revenge on the store management. He spent the time of his incarceration swapping price tags on the merchandise. The result? A mink coat was now priced at \$29.99, a necktie at \$999.00. Furniture was going for the price of peanuts, the latest hi-fi for a song, and a set of underwear was absolutely unaffordable! Imagine the chaos when the store reopened.

The question is, are our own price tags correctly marked? Do we value the things in our own lives correctly? Are our priorities in order? Or do we too put the cattle and the sheep — the car and the office — ahead of our children?

How many workaholic husbands have told their wives, "Honey, I'm doing it all for you and the kids." But the businesses we are busy building for them actually take us away from them in the most important and formative years of their lives. Rightly has it been said, "the best thing you can spend on your kids is not money but time."

I've seen many people become "successes" over the years. They achieve professional success, career success, business success, growing their fame and fortunes. Too many in the process have become family failures. At the end of the day, our deepest satisfaction in life comes not from our professional achievements but from our family — the growth, stability and togetherness that we have nurtured over the years — what our Jewish parents and grandparents simply called *nachas*.

To paraphrase the sixth Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneersohn, "Jewish wealth is not measured in property portfolios or stocks and bonds; true Jewish wealth is being blessed with children who walk in the ways of G-d." For that, we need to be there for them and with them.

A congregant of mine once walked up to me and proclaimed, "Rabbi, I am a millionaire!" I knew the man to be of modest financial means but he immediately explained, "I'm a millionaire in *nachas*!"

Amen. I wish it upon all of us.

**“If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do” (30:3)**

The parsha begins with a discussion of the laws regarding vows. The Torah attaches a great significance to the words that a person speaks. Even something completely permissible can become prohibited to a person if he merely declares that he wishes it to be so. This teaches us the power of speech. Today, many people are very free with their speech and they do not realize its importance. Talking should not just be done for the sake of talking because it causes us to forget how special and powerful our speech is. We can also use this power of speech to do many good things. A person should never feel that his prayers are worthless because the speech of every person has the potential to do great things. We can also compliment people and praise them. The Rambam writes that when one praises his friend, he fulfills the mitzva of Ve'ahavta Lerei'acha Kamocha, to love his fellow as himself. Cheering up a depressed person is also a form of the mitzva of tzedaka. It is important to recognize the importance of speech and remember to be careful about the way in which we express ourselves. There is an entire tractate of Gemara that deals with the laws of vows because the laws change depending on the language a person uses when making a vow. It is important to think about what we say and make sure that we are saying it in a proper manner.

**“Elazar the Kohen said to the men of the legion who came to the battle: This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded Moshe” (31:21)**

Why was it Elazar, and not Moshe, who instructed the soldiers regarding the laws of purifying utensils? Rashi writes that Moshe forgot to instruct the soldiers about these laws because of his anger. Chazal explain that when a person becomes angry he becomes a different person. This causes him to become forgetful and illogical. This is not just a reaction, it is a natural extension of anger. This is what caused Moshe to fail to remember the Torah that he had learned. Anger is really only good if the person shows it on the outside but does not feel it on the inside. This is very important for parents and teachers. If one feels the anger, it can cause a person to lose control and act irrationally. Merely showing anger without feeling it can also accomplish the same results.

**“They journeyed from Refidim and encamped in the Wilderness of Sinai” (33:15)**

When listing the places where the Jews camped in the wilderness, the Torah pauses to mention significant events that occurred along the way. Why doesn't the posuk mention that the Torah was given in Midbar Sinai? R' Moshe Feinstein answers that the Torah has to be new in our eyes every day. The Torah is not a historical event that happened once and is now in the past. It is by no means an "old testament." Rather, it continues to renew itself every day. Similarly, the Torah never mentions the date of the giving of the Torah. Shavuos, the holiday of the giving of the Torah, does not have a set date. A person should view the Torah as if it has been given anew every single day and treat it in the same way that one treats a gift that a person has just received. This is the attitude one should take in his Torah learning and in his performance of mitzvos. As Chazal tell us, "Every day, they should be like new in your eyes."

**“For he must dwell in his city of refuge until the death of the high priest, and after the death of the high priest the murderer shall return to the land of his possession” (35:28)**

Why does the murderer stay in the city of refuge until the death of the Kohen Gadol? The Abarbanel explains that when the Kohen Gadol dies, the relative of the victim sees that death comes to everyone, from the highest people to the lowest. He realizes that the victim would have died anyway and will be calmed down. Only then can the murderer leave the city without being concerned for the vengeance of the victim's relative as he will finally be at peace with what happened. his safety.

*By Rabbi Meir Friedman*

## A Critical Look at Our Past

By Rabbi Wein

It is the nature of human beings to look on the past with nostalgia. Often, we do so in a very selective manner, remembering the good and pleasant, and conveniently forgetting or ignoring the sad and unpleasant experiences. This is especially true in our time, when sections of the Jewish world, especially within the society of Orthodox Jews who descended from Eastern European ancestors, paint the narrative of life in Eastern Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries as rosy and, in the main, fanciful.

It attributes all of the current divisions and conflicts; the appalling decline in the population of Jews in the Diaspora due to intermarriage and assimilation and the continued strength of liberal secularism throughout the Jewish world, to forces over which we had no control and which pushed much of the Jewish world to stray from the proper path of traditional Jewish life and values.

This narrative essentially holds traditional orthodoxy blameless for what occurred in the Jewish world over the past three centuries. It glosses over the failings of Eastern European Jewish society, its poverty and terrible living conditions and the viciously disruptive disputes, both ideological and personal that wracked the world of Eastern European Jewry. By so doing, it allows many of those failings and unnecessary disputes to continue to linger even in our current society and in a world far removed from the conditions of Eastern European Jewry three centuries ago.

The Torah presents for us in this week's reading an accurate recall of the places and events that were part of the story of the Jewish people during their 40-year sojourn in the desert of Sinai. As Rashi points out, it is illustrative of a father reviewing a past trip with his child. He points out that here you had a headache, here we encountered unexpected difficulties, here we had a life-changing experience and here is where our extended trip ended. The detailed description, the listing of all the different places in the desert, many of which are still not completely known to us and identifiable, is meant to sharpen our memory as to what exactly happened to our ancestors when they left Egypt and set out on their historic journey to enter the land of Israel.

The Torah is aware of the dangers of nostalgia and of the distorted picture of events that it can and usually does present of past events and personages. This week's reading is a wake-up call to the generation of the desert of Sinai and to all later generations of the Jewish people as to the dangers of ignoring reality and taking comfort in false narratives of past events.

Eastern European Jewish society had greatness within it and for 800 years was the wellspring of Ashkenazic Jewish scholarship, society and culture. All of this is to be remembered and treasured. But the picture is never always one-sided, and memory and recognition of what went wrong is also in order and necessary.

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*"If you do not drive out the land's inhabitants before you, those who remain shall be barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides, causing you troubles in the land that you settle" (33:55).*

Rashi explains that those nations will be like "pins which prick out your eyes," forcing Israel to hide behind [Security] fences such that no one can leave or enter, and our enemies will torment us.

What is the idea behind metaphors in which the eyes are threatened? It is known that the eyes symbolize wisdom and understanding. Therefore, the leaders and wise men of the people are called "the eyes of the people" (15:24). From here we learn that if we leave a foreign people in our land, our leaders' eyes will be "pricked out," i.e., they will lose their wisdom and understanding...

The Ohr HaChaim adds, "Not only will your enemies take hold of part of the Land, but even in the part that you have settled, 'your enemies will cause you trouble,' saying, 'Get up and leave the Land!'"

The crystal clear words of our holy Torah and the unequivocal explanations of Rashi and Ohr HaChaim regarding the harsh results of a foreign people ruling over even a part of our land require us to wake up and to open the eyes of our leaders and of the Jewish masses. We must rise as one man with one heart against the counsel of our enemies who wish to banish us from our land, and from Jerusalem the nation's heart. Then we will be living fulfillment of Numbers 34:2: "This land shall fall to you as your inheritance, the Land of Canaan to its borders."

By Rabbi Dov Begon

## THE LAND IS OUR DESTINY

by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

The reading of *Parashas Masei* always coincides with the season that marks Jewish suffering and sorrow: the anniversary of the destruction of our Holy Temples. But our Torah never speaks of sorrow without imparting hope and consolation. So it is that this *parashah* imbues us with strength and faith, and the very fact that these tragedies occurred in the Jewish month of *Menachem Av*, which, literally translated, means "a comforting father," speaks volumes.

The *parashah* teaches us that we were launched upon life's journeys "*al pi Hashem* - at the bidding of God," and that knowledge, in and of itself, is the greatest source of comfort. We are fortified in the realization that our journeys are not just random happenings. There is a God above us Who directs it all, Who oversees our going forth and our coming in. Nothing, but nothing, escapes Him. He hears our cries, He sees our tears, and He never forsakes us. Yes, there *is* a purpose to our wandering, even though we may not understand it. We are strengthened in the knowledge that there is an ultimate destination to which God leads us.

To reinforce this teaching, the Torah reader chants this *parashah* to a special tune so that we may be ever mindful that we are not alone. Even as our forefather's journeys through the Wilderness were hazardous, but they arrived safely to their destination, Eretz Yisrael, just the same, so too shall we arrive in the Promised Land, no matter how difficult our journey may be. God is leading us.

The Torah speaks of 42 encampments along life's journey. Forty-two is a mystical number, comprising the letters in God's ineffable Name. There is a kabbalistic teaching that as a result of our sins, those letters in God's holy Name have become blemished, and so we embark upon our journeys to gather those holy sparks and return them to wholeness, to God's holy Name, which we have blemished through our sins. When our journeys become difficult, when they test our mettle and we wonder how we can possibly go on, let us remember that there is a purpose to our journeys. We need only stay the Torah course and God will guide us to our ultimate destination.

*Moshe Rabbeinu* apportions the land among the tribes in accordance to a *goral* (drawing of lots). The word *goral*, however, has a double meaning. It not only means "lot," but also "destiny." The land is our destiny for all eternity. Thus, the Torah teaches us that the Jewish people, Hashem, Torah, and the Land of Israel are forever intertwined.

No matter what the political situation may be, no matter what the nations of the world or world leaders may scheme, that land is our Divine destiny, and no human being and no nation can ever negate that. Our history is testimony to that eternal truth. Indeed, there is no nation on Planet Earth that has been separated from its land for almost 2,000 years and yet remained loyal to that land. And moreover, there is no country on earth that, throughout the long centuries, rejected all its occupiers, all its conquerors, to await her children's homecoming. Over 3,000 years ago, our Torah proclaimed that Eretz Yisrael is our *goral*, the *destiny of the Jewish people*, and today, history testifies to it.