

מַטוֹת

Parashat Matot opens with the laws of *Nedarim* / vows. R' Zeidel Epstein z"l (1908-2007; *Mashgiach Ruchani* of Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yaakov Yosef (RJJ) and Yeshiva Torah Ore) writes: From the laws of *Nedarim* we learn that man's words can work wonders. When a person makes a *Neder*, he transforms an object or activity that was permitted to him into something that is prohibited to him by Torah law. Likewise, through his words, a person can consecrate his ordinary farm animal as something holy, thereby prohibiting any person from having benefit from it. It is not for nothing that our Sages refer to man as a "speaker." Indeed, *Onkelos* translates the phrase (*Bereishit* 2:7), "Man became a living being," as "Man became a speaking spirit."

R' Epstein continues: Just as man can change an animal's essence through his speech, so he can change his own nature. This is why our Sages emphasized the importance of enunciating the words of Torah that one studies, not just scanning the words with one's eyes. The same is true when one prays. *Hashem* can see what is in man's heart; nevertheless, one is supposed to enunciate the words when he prays. When one repents, as well, *Vidui Peh* / confession with one's mouth is an essential part of *Teshuvah*.

By the same token, R' Epstein notes, one can do immeasurable damage through his speech, as we read in *Mishlei* (18:21), "Death and life are in the hand of the tongue." But if one so chooses, we read in *Tehilim* (34:13), guarding one's tongue can lengthen his days. (*He'arot*)

Shabbat

"Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying, 'Take vengeance for *Bnei Yisrael* against the Midianites . . . ' Moshe spoke to the people, saying, 'Arm men from among yourselves for the army, and they will be against Midian to inflict *Hashem's* vengeance on Midian'." (31:1-3)

If *Hashem* commanded Moshe Rabbeinu to take vengeance against Midian, why did Moshe not lead the army himself? *Midrash Tanchuma* explains: Do not throw a stone into a well from which you drank. Since Moshe took refuge in Midian when Pharaoh tried to kill him, and he found his wife there, Moshe owed Midian a debt of gratitude and he did not personally make war with them. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

R' Aryeh Finkel z"l (1931-2016; *Rosh Yeshiva* of the Mir Yeshiva in Modi'in Illit, Israel) asks: *Hashem* told Moshe expressly that he should take vengeance against Midian! How, then, could Moshe rationalize that it would not be moral for him to do so personally?

R' Finkel answers: The first of the *Aseret Ha'dibrot* / Ten Commandments is (*Shmot* 20:2), "I am *Hashem*, your *Elokim*, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt from the house of slavery." Why is the commandment to believe in *Hashem* backed-up by the fact that He took us out of Egypt? The Torah is teaching, writes R' Finkel, that it is not sufficient to believe that *Hashem* created and runs the world; the *Mitzvah* of *Emunah* / faith also requires one to believe that *Hashem* wants to do good for him, and that everything He does is in one's own best interests. In short, not only must we believe in Him, we must feel *Hakarat Ha'tov* toward him / acknowledge His goodness. Indeed, say our Sages, without *Hakarat Ha'tov* toward whomever does good for us, serving *Hashem* is impossible, for first one will deny his friend's kindness, and then he will deny *Hashem's* kindness.

As such, R' Finkel explains, Moshe was not rationalizing. Rather, given the critical role of *Hakarat Ha'tov*, Moshe understood that *Hashem's* commandment could not have meant that Moshe should personally wage war against Midian.

R' Finkel concludes: *Shabbat* is the day when we express our *Emunah* that *Hashem* created the world and sustains all of His creations. It is the day when we can sense His kindness to us and that everything, large or small, comes from Him. As such, *Shabbat* is a day devoted to *Hakarat Ha'tov*, as a result of which *Hashem* can bless us further. (*Yavo Shiloh* p.544)

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“These are *Masei* / the journeys of *Bnei Yisrael*, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon... *Va'yisu* / They journeyed...” (33:1, 3)

R' Avi Ezri Zelig Margalios z"l (rabbinical judge and *Darshan* / preacher in several European cities; died 1715 in *Eretz Yisrael*) asks: Do we not already know that *Bnei Yisrael* were led by Moshe and Aharon? Also, why does they Torah use the word “*Va'yisu*” instead of saying that *Bnei Yisrael* “walked” or “went”?

R' Margalios answers: The words “*Masei*” and “*Va'yisu*” come from the root that means “to carry.” The verse is teaching that *Bnei Yisrael* did not walk; they were carried by the Clouds of Glory. In whose merit were they surrounded by those clouds? Our Sages teach that they existed in Aharon's merit, and after he died, in Moshe's merit. (*Kessef Nivchar*)

“And *Mitzrayim* / Egypt was burying those whom *Hashem* had struck, every firstborn...” (33:4)

R' Ze'ev Wolf z"l (*Chassidic Rebbe* in of Zhytomyr, Ukraine; died 1798) writes: Understanding people, whose hearts trust in *Hashem* and whose faith is fixed in their hearts, recognize that everything that happens is the result of *Hashem's Hashgachah Peratit* / Divine providence. They know that *Hashem* runs the world down to the smallest detail. When He does good for them, they praise Him for His overflowing kindness. When bad happens, they know that that, too, is from *Hashem*, in order to repair something in their lives, though only *Hashem* may know exactly what.

R' Ze'ev Wolf continues: The word “*Mitzrayim*” (מצרים) can be broken into two words: “*Meitzaryam*” (מצר-ים), meaning: “Narrow place in the sea.” When the “sea of understanding” is “narrowed” for a person, and he cannot process the foregoing lesson, then all he can do is “bury his dead.” He cannot be elevated by what he perceives as a negative experience. (*Ohr Ha'meir*)

“You shall designate cities for yourselves, cities of refuge they shall be for you, and a murderer shall flee there--one who takes a life unintentionally.” (35:11)

“For he must dwell in his *Ir Miklat* / city of refuge until the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, and after the death of the *Kohen Gadol* the murderer shall return to the land of his possession.” (35:28)

R' Moshe ben Maimon z"l (*Rambam*; 1135-1204; Spain and Egypt) explains: The unintentional murderer must flee to an *Ir Miklat* so that the relatives who are entitled to avenge the murder will not see him, and their passions will not be aroused against him. The unintentional murderer may return home when the *Kohen Gadol* dies because it is human nature, *Rambam* writes, that the death of a distinguished and beloved public figure such as the *Kohen Gadol* will overpower and supplant a personal feeling of loss that the murder victim's family feels at their relative's death; therefore, the unintentional murderer will henceforth be safe. (*Moreh Nevachim* III ch.40)

“Moshe was angry with the commanders of the army...” (31:14)

“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 were the laws of immersing vessels acquired from gentiles taught by Elazar and not by Moshe Rabbeinu? *Midrash Sifrei* answers: Since Moshe came into the category of anger, he came into the concept of mistake, and the *Halachah* was hidden from him. [Until here from the *Midrash*]

Why does the *Midrash* use the awkward expression, “Moshe came into the category of anger,” instead of saying simply, “Moshe became angry?”

R' Yechiel Yaakov Weinberg z"l (1884-1966; rabbi of Pilvishki, Lithuania, then *Rosh Yeshiva* in Berlin, Germany and later Montreux, Switzerland) explains: The word choice in the *Midrash* is meant to teach us that when the Torah says, “Moshe was angry,” it does not mean that he became visibly angry as ordinary people become angry. Rather, Moshe's “anger” was a subtle change of temperament perceptible only to the One Who knows all secrets--it was in “the category of anger.” The lesson for us, in any event, is that one who loses his temper makes mistakes.

There is a deeper lesson, as well, R' Weinberg continues: Do not think that improving one's *Middot* / character traits is merely a tool for achieving greater spiritual perfection. No! Having proper *Middot* is a prerequisite for thinking logically and rationally. One who looks through a lens clouded with personal biases and other bad *Middot* can never perceive the truth. (*L'frakim* p.78)

“Everything that comes into the fire, you shall pass through the fire, but it must be purified with the water of sprinkling; and everything that would not come in the fire, you shall pass through the water.” (31:23)

Commentaries ask: Why was the *Mitzvah* of *Tevilat Keilim* / immersing vessels acquired from a non-Jew in a *Mikvah* taught now, after *Bnei Yisrael* defeated Midian, and not earlier, after *Bnei Yisrael* defeated Sichon and Og?

R' Moshe Sofer z"l (1762-1839; rabbi and *Rosh Yeshiva* in Pressburg, Hungary; the “*Chatam Sofer*”) answers: The *Talmud Yerushalmi* teaches that *Tevilat Keilim* is done to remove from the vessel the impurity of its previous non-Jewish owner and to place upon it the *Kedushah* / holiness of the Jewish People. The source of the prior impurity is the item's connection to the *Sar* / guardian angel of the nation to which the previous owner belonged. However, we read about the Seven Canaanite Nations, of which Sichon and Og were part, (*Bemidbar* 14:9), “Their protection has departed from them.” Therefore, vessels belonging to Sichon and Og and their people did not need to be immersed.

The *Chatam Sofer* adds: This answers another question, as well. We read in our *Parashah* (31:49), “They said to Moshe, “Your servants took a census of the men of war under our command, and not a man of us is missing’.” The leaders of *Bnei Yisrael* seemed surprised that not a single Jewish soldier had died in the campaign against Midian. Why? Because unlike the Canaanites, the Midianites were still protected by their guardian angel. (*Torat Moshe*)