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from TorahWeb <torahweb@torahweb.org> hide details Jul 23 (1 day ago) to weeklydt@torahweb2.org date Jul 23, 2008 10:44 PM subject Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger - Tevilas Keilim and the Sanctity of the Jewish Family

Rabbi Yaakov Neuburger

Tevilas Keilim and the Sanctity of the Jewish Family

It is in the discussion of organizing and managing the spoils of the successful military campaign against Midyan that the Torah reveals to us the rules of purging dishware and cookware and the obligation to bring them all to tevilah in a mikva. Whereas purging is a technical chapter in the laws of kashrus making sure that we avoid eating from the absorption of non-kosher foods, tevilas keilim is a different matter altogether. Tevilas keilim is according to most rishonim an independent Biblical mitzvah, and this is the first time it was being taught to us.

Whether first taught after this battle or first recorded, there must be some message in our studying the mitzvah of tevilas keilim in response to the battle with Midyan rather than in the common presentation of a directive to Moshe to teach as other halachot appear, with notable but rare exception.

To be sure the war against Midyan was unusual. We are certainly familiar with battles that have been waged in our defense, such as against Amalek and against the armies of Sichon. We also understand that we are commanded to battle in order to establish the Land of Israel as our home. Yet the battle of Midyan was neither to remove a present threat nor to ready land for our families. It is presented as revenge for the diabolical strategies of Bilam that were exercised by Midyanites. (Bamidbar 2:18, Rashi)

True their battle against us brought us to one of the lowest points of the midbar narrative. Women were sent into our ranks and first encouraged familial infidelity which in turn led to serving peor, a service which defiles human conduct and religious service as well. This ultimately led to the public repudiation of no one less than Moshe Rabeinu and all he stood for by one of the tribal leaders. Additionally, the encounter introduced the coupling of infidelity with idolatry, a theme that Yirmiyahy Hanovi would often revisit in warning us of the impending destruction of the first Beis Hamikdash.

Remarkably, Moshe is told that the battle against Midyan is to be waged neither because of the idolatry nor because of any loss of life nor because of the rebellion that it brought about, rather because they sought to undermine our familial relationships (Bamidbar, ibid). Bilam is recorded to have advised Midyan that our G-d hates decadence and introducing it to our people was Midyan's surest manner of affecting a military like victory.

For our people, going to war for a cause is probably the strongest statement that could be made in advocating its centrality to our thinking. Thus this war indicates that our existence is dependant on a healthy family structure. That infidelity and idolatry are so closely associated further emphasizes that when integrity and loyalty are trampled we remain without anchor or purpose. The converse that truthfulness and faithfulness are necessary for the successful transmissions of our legacy as individuals and as a people is boldly stated by our battle against Midyan.

Clearly to remind ourselves of the importance and preciousness of the family and its attendant relationships and attitudes through the study of a onetime battle will have little impact. After all, creating the warmth and the vibrancy of a successful home and family requires unflagging patience, sincere respect and an ongoing commitment to cheerfulness (Rambam, Isha 1:19). It demands the utmost respect for home making and home makers, unquestionably challenging in a two income family climate.

Perhaps setting the mitzvah of tevilas keilim into the context of the bold statement of the Midyan battle underscores the mitzvah as an enduring reminder of what we fought for so long ago. Thus we announce the uniqueness and sanctity of the Jewish family whenever introducing any table and cooking utensils of non-Jewish origin into homes (Talmud Yerushalmi, Avoda Zara 5:15). Hopefully this will instruct us to be ever mindful of the efforts required to make a home the haven that it must be for growth in faith and character, and accord absolute respect for all those efforts and their dedicated providers.

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from Rabbi Aryeh Striks <striks@vths.org> hide details 5:50 pm (5 hours ago) reply-to striks@vths.org to internetparshasheet@gmail.com date Jul 24, 2008 5:50 PM subject Mussar HaTorah - Parashas Matos

Mussar HaTorah Torah insights into human nature from the weekly parasha. **Based on the talks of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l** (Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim - RSA) and dedicated in his memory. This week's Mussar HaTorah - a weekly parasha newsletter - can be downloaded at this link: [Mussar HaTorah Parashas Matos 5768](#) "And Moshe sent them ... and Pinchas..." (Bamidbar 31:6) Moshe sent Pinchas to lead the army of B'nei Yisrael against the nation of Midyan, to exact Hashem's revenge for their causing the Jews to sin at Ba'al Pe'or. The Midrash Rabbah (Bamidbar 22:4) points out that even though Hashem commanded Moshe to attack Midyan, Moshe sent others in his stead. This, explains the Midrash, was because Moshe had lived in Midyan and it would have been inappropriate for him to hurt those who had previously helped him. The Midrash's parable: Do not throw stones into a well from which you have drunk. The commentary Mahrzu (ibid.) compares this incident to the plague of blood, where Moshe did not hit the water himself because it had saved him as a baby when his mother put him afloat in the Nile River. It is certainly an insight that we must have appreciation for people - and even inanimate objects - that help us unintentionally or even against their will. The Nile River did not intend or want Moshe to survive. So too, the general Midyanite population did not aim to help Moshe; they merely allowed him to live in Midyan. This is also similar to the parable of the well, as the water does not offer itself to one who is thirsty, but rather is passively drawn up to the person who drinks. Nevertheless, Hashem expected Moshe (and expects us) to show appreciation for an involuntary kindness, too. Upon further study, Moshe's gratitude to Midyan would still seem unfounded. Forty years had elapsed since Moshe lived in Midyan. Within the last few months, the elders of Midyan, together with Moav, arranged to have Bilaam curse B'nei Yisrael. The Midyanite princess Kozbi publicly sinned with Zimri. It was Midyan's advice enabled the daughters of Moav to entrap B'nei Yisrael in the grave sins of immorality and idolatry, causing a plague that killed 24,000 Jews. Every Jew lost was a student of Moshe Rabeinu, beloved to him like his own child. In fact, had Pinchas

not have taken action, the entire Jewish nation would have been destroyed because of Midyan's deceit. Would any of us think that gratitude would be appropriate to such wicked enemies? Wouldn't these recent actions of horrible evil erase any fleck of good they might have unintentionally done 40 years earlier? Hakaras haTov – gratitude – is not a matter of points on a scorecard. It is not a rewards or mileage program with conditions and expiration dates. Our obligation to appreciate a benefit received from others is an absolute requirement that never gets cancelled out by subsequent misdeeds or the passage of time. The Navi Yirmiyahu (2:2) says that Hashem remembers our "kindness" in following Him into the desert as a young nation leaving Egypt. The Ohr HaChaim (Vayikra 26:45) explains that this applies to benefit the final generation before the redemption. Despite our many sins throughout the Exile and the thousands of years that have elapsed, this one chesed is still appreciated by Hashem. May we emulate our Creator and always be grateful for every kindness, intentional or not, and despite any negative actions done to us by those same benefactors. This will guarantee a life of happiness and never-ending appreciation for the many blessings we constantly receive.

Mussar HaTorah Torah Insights into Human Nature – Dedicated in memory of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l Based on the talks of Rabbi A. Henach Leibowitz zt"l, Rosh HaYeshiva of Yeshivas Chofetz Chaim – RSA © 2008 by Rabbi Aryeh Striks & Rabbi Shimon Zehnwirth. For more information call (818) 505-7999 or e-mail mht@vth.org

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genesis@torah.org to ravfrand@torah.org date Jul 24, 2008
Rabbi Frand on Parshas Mattos

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A Stinging Demotion

"They killed the kings of Midian along with their slain ones: Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; and Bilaam the son of Beor they slew with the sword." (31:8)

In the Torah's narrative of Klal Yisrael's defeat of the Midianite armies, we read a name with which we are vaguely familiar: Zur.

Zur's first appearance in the Torah was at the end of Parshas Chukas, as the father of Kozbi, the woman with whom Zimri sinned publicly.

Midrash Tanchuma tells us that Zur was the greatest of the five Midianite kings, but he was demoted and appears third in the Torah's listing of the Midianite kings because he readily sent his daughter to commit a vile, immoral act in public.

We have to wonder when we read such a midrash: does Zur really care? Does it bother him in the least if the Torah lists the Midianite kings and places him third instead of first?

A similar question strikes us when we read a midrash in Parshas Chayei Sarah . In one of the pesukim describing Avraham's purchase of Me'aras HaMachpelah, Ephron's name is written without a vav. The midrash tells us that Ephron lost the vav because of his shady handling of the sale of Me'aras HaMachpelah.

Again we have to wonder: does Ephron care? When we read the parashah, it is quite apparent that Ephron is a particularly greedy person, who was far more concerned about the amount of money he could derive from Avraham Avinu than with the number of letters he merits in the Torah.

The truth is that these questions stem from a false perception that we all possess to some extent.

As long as we are here in olam hazeh, the physical world seems so real to us and Olam Haba (the World to Come) seems so far off that we consider the physical world a reality and the spiritual world somewhat fantastic.

In the physical world, one can blatantly ignore or shrug off even the greatest of insults. In Olam Haba, however, all the false illusions of "the Real World" are exposed. Every single person, even a person who had no spiritual values in this world, suddenly realizes that spirituality is all that matters. The Torah, the source of all spirituality, is the only entity that the souls in Heaven bother contemplating.

As long as they were here on earth, Zur and Ephron would have snickered if we would have told them that they were being punished by being mentioned disparagingly in the Torah.

As they look down now — or up, as the case may be — from their rightful spot in the next world, Zur and Ephron suffer extreme anguish because of their stinging demotion.

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from Yeshivat Har Etzion <office@etzion.org.il> to yhe-sichot@etzion.org.il
date Jul 24, 2008 10:29 AM subject SICHOT68 -42: Parashat Matot
PARASHAT MATOT
GUEST SICHA BY **RAV MOSHEH LICHTENSTEIN**
Yirmiyahu and Moshe – Two Models of Prophecy
Translated by David Strauss

This week's haftara (Yirmiyahu 1) opens the series of haftarot that are read during the Three Weeks, known as telata de-pur'anuta - "the three haftarot of catastrophe." This haftara serves also, according to the Sefardi rite, as the haftara for Parashat Shemot. There it serves the purpose of comparison and contrast between the selection of Moshe and the consecration of Yirmiyahu. Here, too, we shall examine this angle.

When we compare the two consecration stories, we see that Moshe strongly opposes the appointment forced upon him, whereas Yirmiyahu does not oppose it, but merely asks for support and strengthening. His argument that he is young and lacks maturity is a pertinent argument, and from the moment that he is promised God's support and assistance, he calms down and accepts the mission without further discussion. Moshe, on the other hand, does not put forward any relevant arguments based on his inappropriateness for the job.[1] All that he presents are general arguments that could have been put forward by anybody upon whom such a mission would have been cast. The argument, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Shemot 3:11), testifies to Moshe's humility, but it does not constitute an explanation why he in particular is unsuited for the role. And this is certainly true about the question, "Behold, when I come to the children of Israel, and shall say to them, The G-d of your fathers has sent me to you; and they shall say to me, What is His name? what shall I say to them?" (ibid. v. 13). We are not dealing here with a flaw in Moshe's personality or abilities, but rather with a lack of desire on his part to accept the mission. Unlike Yirmiyahu, who accepts the supportive words of G-d and abandons his arguments, Moshe is not set at ease even after he is promised by God, "Certainly, I will be with you" (ibid. v. 12), and he continues to argue with God.

PROPHET OF REDEMPTION AND PROPHET OF DESTRUCTION

The conclusion that emerges from all this is that Yirmiyahu is not afraid to accept upon himself his prophetic mission and that he merely voices a pertinent comment regarding his inappropriateness for the job; therefore God's promise to help him suffices. Moshe, on the other hand, does whatever he can do not to accept the mission and he only goes to Egypt after a long argument during the course of which G-d becomes angry with him. Were we to ask ourselves, from whom would we expect greater opposition - from Moshe, the prophet of redemption, or from Yirmiyahu, the prophet of destruction - we would say just the opposite. Moshe is sent to the people with the festive tidings of their redemption and the end of their servitude, whereas Yirmiyahu comes with harsh prophecies of rebuke and destruction. It is certainly far more pleasant to prophesy about the evil that will befall Pharaoh and Egypt, than to make similar prophecies about Israel.

While it is true that Moshe will also be sent as a prophet to Pharaoh who will refuse to heed his message and that the confrontation with Pharaoh will be unpleasant, Moshe's primary mission was still to Israel and it differs in its essentials from that of Yirmiyahu. And, indeed, even retrospectively, we see that Yirmiyahu suffered more than Moshe. He lived in harsh and constant tension with the members of his generation, he was persecuted by his neighbors and acquaintances, and he was cast

into a pit. Moshe, despite his disappointment with the people and the tensions that accompanied the relationship between them throughout their joint years in the wilderness, was very far from the situations that characterized Yirmiyahu. Why, then, did Moshe oppose his prophetic mission so much more strongly than did Yirmiyahu?

LEADER OR MOUTHPIECE

In order to answer this question, we must examine the nature of the missions assigned to each of them. We find in Scripture various models of prophecy, and these account for the difference between Moshe and Yirmiyahu. One model of prophecy is the prophet sent to lead the people and serve them as a guide. Fundamentally, we are dealing with human leadership. The prophet is chosen because of his unique spiritual-prophetic powers and because of his spiritual greatness, but he leads the people according to his own judgment, while exploiting his capability of communicating with G-d and in light of his spiritual perspective. In other words, we are dealing with a "prophet-leader," that is to say, a leader who is also a prophet. Of course, the tensions and doubts that accompany any leader who is forced to make difficult decisions and outline policy in complicated situations, are also the lot of the leader who is a prophet, for the prophet leads his people as a human being.

In contrast, there is another type of prophet, who does not approach the people with the spiritual powers that had developed within him to the point that he achieved prophecy, but rather he simply serves as a convenient mouthpiece for G-d to pass His word on to the people. The prophet is a human loudspeaker that G-d uses to pass on messages relating to the needs of the people. If a prophet of independent stature is available, he will be chosen to bring the word of G-d to the people, but if no such possibility presents itself, it is not impossible that a person who does not meet the ordinary criteria for prophecy will be chosen, because the circumstances dictate transmission of the message.

It is precisely on this point that there is a significant difference between Moshe and Yirmiyahu. Moshe was appointed as a prophet sent to lead the people. G-d revealed Himself to Moshe through prophecy, and chose him because of his spiritual qualifications, but the office was one of political leadership. For reasons that we can not go into here, Moshe was afraid and tried to refuse, but it is important to emphasize that it was the position of prophet-leader that he tried to refuse. Yirmiyahu, on the other hand, was not appointed to serve as leader, but rather he was meant to serve as God's mouthpiece, and therefore he does not refuse, but rather he accepts God's support and agrees to prophesy.

YOUNG AND CONSECRATED

This point expresses itself in various ways. First of all, it is expressed in Yirmiyahu's selection despite his young age. If the prophet is God's mouthpiece, there is no reason not to choose a young man, for he prophesies not on the basis of his spiritual accomplishments, but because he serves as a conduit for passing on messages. Needless to say, had Yirmiyahu been chosen to serve as a leader like Moshe, it would have been inconceivable to send him as a young man, with no experience or standing, despite his consecration. It was only because the job description was that of a prophet who is not a leader that it was possible to appoint such a young man.

Second, Yirmiyahu's consecration is formulated in terms of bodily sanctity; this is connected to the fact that he serves as God's instrument. This is similar to the sanctity of a priest, who is a "vessel of the sanctuary" and he serves G-d with his body. In this context, let us cite the words of Radak:

"I have sanctified you" – in the sense of sanctity. "And I have known you" – in the sense of greatness. According to the first explanation, one might ask: Surely all the prophets and righteous people, and similarly the wicked people, G-d knew and recognized them before they were formed. This teaches that [Yirmiyahu's] father and mother were careful regarding sanctity and purity during the pregnancy so that the prophet should be consecrated.

And the great Sage, Rabbi Moshe bar Maimon wrote that this applies to every prophet – he requires natural preparation from the time of his formation that he be prepared for prophecy with training. According to him, one can ask: Why was this not stated to any other prophet, but [only] to Yirmiyahu? We can say that because God, may He be blessed, knew that Yirmiyahu would refuse God's mission, He told him that He had been prepared for prophecy from the womb, in order to strengthen his heart to follow God's mission. Should you ask: Surely Moshe Rabbenu also refused God's mission, but He did not tell him these things? [The answer is that] He gave him a great sign to strengthen his heart, namely, the sign of the burning bush and the other signs that He gave him to perform before Pharaoh.

According to the Radak's first explanation, when G-d says, "Before you came out of the womb I sanctified you," we are dealing with the concept of sanctity, in its plain sense, whereas the Rambam understood this as preparation for prophetic capability. According to both explanations, the Radak is bothered by the fact that this was not stated with respect to other prophets. According to the Radak's first explanation, only Yirmiyahu was sanctified with bodily sanctity from the womb, this owing to his parents' conduct during the period of pregnancy (apparently, following

the precedent of Shimshon). It seems that the emphasis on the prophet's bodily sanctity stems from the fact that he serves as God's mouthpiece. Since Yirmiyahu does this from an early age, his sanctity is from the womb. A prophet-leader, on the other hand, leads on the basis of the human greatness within him, and therefore his definition is different.

A comment is also in order regarding the Radak's second answer (based on the Rambam's understanding). He assumes that the matter of sanctity was not unique to Yirmiyahu, but it was told to him in order to strengthen him since he did not want to prophesy. A question, therefore, arises regarding Moshe, for he too refused to prophesy, but he did not receive this kind of strengthening. The Radak answers that Moshe received other types of strengthening, for "He gave him a great sign to strengthen his heart, namely, the sign of the burning bush and the other signs that He gave him to perform before Pharaoh."

This answer fits in very well with what we have said. Yirmiyahu who was a prophet-mouthpiece was strengthened with respect to his sanctity, whereas Moshe, who hesitated to accept the office of prophet-leader, was given tools that would strengthen his political skills, this being preferable for his needs.

PROPHET TO THE NATIONS

Third, the expression, "I have ordained you a prophet to the nations" (v. 5) seems to be connected to this distinction as well. The expression is difficult, for Yirmiyahu's primary mission was not to the nations, but to Israel. The commentators offered various explanations to resolve this difficulty. However we explain these words, whether directed at Israel as a nation, or to all the nations including Israel, it is only in the framework of prophet as God's mouthpiece that Yirmiyahu could have been assigned the mission of turning to the nation and prophesying about it. Even if the reference is to Israel, the prophecy follows from the fact that they are a nation about which the prophet can prophesy, and this he does by delivering the word of G-d from the outside. Were he a prophet-leader leading the people, using the expression "prophet for the nations" when he guides and leads the people of Israel would be off the mark, for he would be leading them as part of them. A prophet-leader cannot look upon the nation of Israel from a prophetic perspective outside of them.

HAND AND MOUTH

In light of this, we can well understand the end of the dialogue: "Then the Lord put out His hand, and touched my mouth. And the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put My words in your mouth" (v. 9). Defining the consecration as placing the word of G-d in his mouth follows the definition of the prophet as a mouthpiece. This is also the reason that He touches his mouth, in contrast to Moshe who receives signs in his hand and in his staff. The objective of the signs for Moshe is not the strengthening of his prophetic powers, but rather his leadership, and the symbols for that are not the mouth, but rather the staff and the hands which represent practical and political activity.

GOD'S MOUTHPIECE – A PRIVATE PERSON

In conclusion, it should be noted that in the continuation of the book, there is a sharp tension between Yirmiyahu the person who experiences the destruction and Israel's suffering, on the one hand, and the prophet of destruction who foretells the catastrophe that will befall them. Frequently, the book describes points of friction and near crises regarding this duality. This does not stand in contradiction to our claim that Yirmiyahu is God's mouthpiece, but rather it strengthens it. In the end, Yirmiyahu is also a private individual with personal experiences, but the duality and the tension stem from the fact that in his other half he is God's mouthpiece. Owing to the sharp differences of perspective between the human being and the divine mouthpiece, the sharp tension is created. Were he a prophet-leader, he would be able to faithfully represent the human angle even before G-d and mitigate the tension between his prophetic role and his personal identity. But since Yirmiyahu's prophetic role is merely to express the Divine perspective, the tension is exceedingly severe.

THE ORDER OF THE PROPHECIES AND THEIR MEANING

Let us now briefly deal with another point, namely, the reciprocal relationship between the various parts of the haftara. It is easy to see that the haftara is composed of four prophecies:

- 1) the prophecy of consecration;
- 2) the prophecy concerning the rod of the almond tree;
- 3) the prophecy concerning the boiling pot;
- 4) the prophecy concerning Israel's going after G-d in the wilderness.

The prophecy of consecration is not a prophecy that was related to Israel, but only to Yirmiyahu, and it deals with the nature of his prophecy. The second prophecy, regarding the rod of the almond tree, also deals with the nature of his prophecy (as "a prophecy about prophecy") and with Yirmiyahu's prophetic skills ("You have seen well" [v. 13]). It is not meant to serve as Yirmiyahu's inaugural words to the people, but as sort of a "prophetic exercise" between him and God. In light of this, we must examine the third prophecy concerning the boiling pot, and this in light of two considerations.

First, unlike the prophecy of consolation at the end of the haftara, when Yirmiyahu is told, "Go and cry in the ears of Jerusalem" (2:2), here it does not say that Yirmiyahu must go out and speak to the people. It should be emphasized that in many places in the book, the prophet is told to go to the people and prophesy to them, and thus this is not an expression unique to this prophecy of consolation. We see then that the prophecy of "Go out and cry in the ears of Jerusalem" was told to the people, whereas the prophecy of the boiling pot was not conveyed to the people, but rather it was a private message directed at Yirmiyahu alone. This fits in well with the words, "And the word of the Lord came to me a second time" (v. 13), which emphasizes the connection between the prophecy of the rod of the almond tree and the prophecy of the boiling pot, for the word "second" creates a relationship between the two prophecies.

What is the meaning of the boiling pot to Yirmiyahu as a private individual, rather than as a prophecy to the people? It seems that the prophecy comes to warn Yirmiyahu that his primary mission will be to serve as prophet of doom. He must know and prepare himself for the fact that he will spend most of his time dealing with ruin and destruction. His visions will be visions of boiling anger ("boiling pot") and his predictions will be about foreign kings coming to destroy Jerusalem. Before he sets out on his mission, he is forewarned by G-d and prepared for what the future will bring him.

OPENING WITH CONSOLATION

If this is true, it leads us to another important conclusion, namely, that the first prophecy that Yirmiyahu delivers to the people is the prophecy of "I remember in your favor, the devotion of your youth, etc." (2:2-3). Chazal[2] indeed note that this is the beginning of Yirmiyahu's prophecy:

"Go out and cry in the ears of Jerusalem" – this is the beginning of the book. And why is it written here? Because there is no order in the Torah.[3]

This notion has great importance because, according to this, Yirmiyahu's first words to the people are not rebuke and warning of destruction, but consolation. In order that he should be able to reproach them with harsh words and decree destruction and exile, he must first present a prophecy that embraces long-term optimism - surely the "devotion of youth" under discussion took place hundreds of years earlier, but it is still valid. He must also open his prophetic career by showing the people God's compassion for and connection to them. Otherwise, the rebuke would bring the people to despair and to the feeling that G-d wishes their destruction. Only in the wake of such an opening can the prophet come with words of rebuke. In next week's haftara, Yirmiyahu will rebuke Israel for straying from God. It is therefore of exceeding importance that this week he opens with Israel's youthful devotion and bridal love.

[1] The argument of "heaviness of mouth" and "heaviness of tongue" appear only at the end of the story of the burning bush, after he exhausts all his other arguments.

[2] Mekhilta on the Song of the Sea, on the verse, "The enemy said, I will pursue, I will overtake" (Shemot 15:9).

[3] In light of our explanation, there is no need to invoke the idea that there is no order in the organization of the biblical books, for we can say that the previous prophecies are not the beginning of the book for the people.

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KOL TORAH A Student Publication of the Torah Academy of Bergen County
Parshat Nasso 4 Sivan 5768 June 7, 2008 Vol.17 No.37

Why Do We Still Mourn the Death of Yoshiyahu? - Part 1 of 2 by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Introduction Every year on Tishah BeAv (until the arrival of Mashiach), a Kinah written by Rav Elazar HaKalir is recited mourning the tragic death of Yoshiyahu in battle at Megiddo. By reciting this Kinah, we honor Yirmiyahu's establishment of the practice of mourning Yoshiyahu's death for all generations (see Divrei HaYamim 2:35:25 with the commentary of Da'at Mikra). In this essay, we will seek to explain why the death of Yoshiyahu was so traumatic, to the extent that it still haunts us until this very day and is deemed worthy of inclusion in the Tishah BeAv liturgy along with the mourning of other major disasters, such as the Churban Beit HaMikdash

and the Crusades. I would like to acknowledge the influence of Rav Yoel Bin Nun and Rav Hayyim Angel on this presentation, though I accept responsibility for any error. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the contributions of my TABC Talmidim, to whom I presented this Shiur in 5767 in our study of Sefer Divrei HaYamim during our Thursday evening voluntary Mishmar. I would also note the contributions of the many members of Congregation Rinat Yisrael who attended a Shiur I delivered on this topic on Shabbat Mevorchim Chodesh Menachem Av 5767.

Background – The Prophecy Concerning Yoshiyahu Before we explore the life of Yoshiyahu, we should note some important pieces of information that help place this great man into his proper historical context. Yoshiyahu stands out as one whose actions were foretold approximately three hundred years before his birth. In Sefer Melachim (1:13:1-2), we read of anonymous prophet (whom Chazal, Sanhedrin 89b, identify as Iddo) who visits the wicked Yaravam ben Nevat, who had built illegitimate altars in Beit El and Dan for his Northern Kingdom of Israel. The Navi informs the wicked king that a descendant of King David, named Yoshiyahu, will one day be born and will kill many priests who served on the illicit altars. It is quite rare for an event to be foretold so far in advance - it is almost without parallel in Tanach. No other king's actions and name are so specifically given so far in advance, which testifies to the greatness of Yoshiyahu. Interestingly, though, Yoshiyahu seems to have been entirely unaware of this prophecy (see Melachim 2:23:17). This expresses the dictum of Chazal, "Everything is foretold, yet the freedom of choice is given" (Avot 3:19), a theme that pervades Yoshiyahu's life.

Background – Yoshiyahu's Predecessors and Successors Another vital piece of information is Yoshiyahu's predecessors and successors. Yoshiyahu is seventeenth in the line of descendants of King David who ruled Judea (leaving out Atalyah). Sefer Melachim rates the spiritual performance of each of the kings using David HaMelech as a benchmark. Only Asa (5), Chizkiyahu (14) and Yoshiyahu (17) were as good as David, and Asa is assessed less positively in Divrei HaYamim than he is in Sefer Melachim. Of all the other kings, Shlomo (2), Yehoshafat (6) and Yotam (12) were good, though they did not measure up to David; Yeho'ash (9), Amatzyah (10) and Uzziyahu (11) started their reign as good kings but took a turn for the worse (as stated in Divrei HaYamim); and Rechavam (3), Aviyam (4), Yehoram (7), Achazyahu (8), Achaz (13), Menashe (15), and Amon (16) were bad kings. The rulers of the Northern Kingdom are regarded by Sefer Melachim as having ranged from bad to worse. Thus, Yoshiyahu's predecessors had an uneven record, and Am Yisrael did not enjoy the benefit of a stable succession of kings who were dedicated to honoring the Torah in a manner comparable to David HaMelech. This highlights the greatness of those kings who chose to lead our nation in accordance with Torah ideals. We should also note that Yoshiyahu's four successors are all evaluated by Sefer Melachim as spiritual (as well as political) failures. Thus, of the last seven rulers of Judea, only Yoshiyahu was a Tzaddik, which stresses the outstanding nature of this great man.

Menashe – Yoshiyahu's Grandfather We must make special note of Yoshiyahu's grandfather, Menashe. Despite being the son of the righteous Chizkiyahu, Menashe engaged in wickedness in the extreme. This evil king is regarded as the worst of the monarchs described in Sefer Melachim. No other king, even among the evil Northern rulers (such as Basha), is described in such negative terms. He is described (Melachim 2:21:2-11) as having done evil in the eyes of Hashem, having imitated the evil practices of the Nochrims, having exceeded the evil of the Emori, and having sinned with the brazen intention of angering Hashem (LeHachis). The Navi presents a stunning list of idolatrous practices in which he engaged: Molech, Ov, Yidoni, Baal, Asheirah, Onin, and Nichush. He even placed an idol in the Beit HaMikdash. It seems as if Menashe looked in the Chumash for any and every form of Avodah Zarah and then engaged in that practice. To top it off, Menashe is described as having murdered so many innocent people that he filled the streets of Yerushalayim with blood from "mouth to mouth." It is reasonable to assume that he killed these people because they resisted his plans to make Judea awash with idolatry. To make matters worse, Menashe ruled for fifty five years, the longest of any monarch in Sefer Melachim, allowing his lust for idolatry to seep into the hearts and minds of Am Yisrael. Shockingly, nothing bad happens to this unrepentant sinner (at least as recorded in Sefer Melachim).

Yoshiyahu – The Early Years When Menashe finally died, he was succeeded by his son Amon, who continued his father's evil practices but ruled for only two years before being assassinated. Sefer Melachim describes how Yoshiyahu succeeded his father at the tender age of eight. He was installed as the king, even though he obviously was unfit to rule at that age, because he was next in the Davidic line. The people of Judea, despite their spiritual shortcomings, zealously honored the Davidic line even after they assassinated a disliked king. Yoshiyahu is described in Sefer Melachim as beginning to take interest in repairing the Beit HaMikdash already at age twenty six. In Sefer Divrei HaYamim chapter thirty four, he is described as having begun to take an interest in the proper Torah way at age sixteen, and he began the process of purifying the Beit HaMikdash at age twenty. Incidentally, this shows

that the teen years are a time that is ripe for youngsters to return to their Jewish roots.

Interestingly, Rav Elazar HaKalir's Kinah for Yoshiyahu states that at age eight he sought Hashem on his own. In total, the Jewish people had experienced seventy five years - fifty five of Menashe, two of Amon, and eighteen more until Yoshiyahu matured and was fully committed to Hashem - of rule under monarchs that were, at the very least, not dedicated to Torah law. Despite this handicap, Yoshiyahu embarked on his program of national reformation (Teshuvah). The challenge of trying to affect such a sea change amongst Am Yisrael was enormous. Imagine if the United States had been under communist rule from 1900 until 1975, and in 1975 a president sought to restore democracy. Imagine further that America had not enjoyed a stable succession of leaders even before 1900 that were dedicated to the ideals of democracy. The challenge of affecting such change would require a Herculean effort, and it probably would need two or three generations for the American people to internalize the need to return to the roots upon which the country was founded. Yoshiyahu faced similar formidable odds in his attempt to restore the ideals of David HaMelech's rule. Undaunted by the enormity of the challenge, Yoshiyahu set out on his path to national Teshuvah. He encountered, however, a major setback at the early stages of his campaign. He discovered, in his efforts to purify the Beit HaMikdash, a Sefer Torah that was opened to the Tochachah (reprimand) of Sefer Devarim. As explained by the Midrash HaGadol (Devarim 27) and the Radak (Melachim 2:22:11), Yoshiyahu correctly saw this as a bad omen and sought the interpretation of a Navi. Chuldah the prophetess presented a crushing message. Her prophecy was that as a result of Am Yisrael's intense sinning, Hashem had resolved to destroy the Beit HaMikdash. She noted, however, that since Yoshiyahu had expressed remorse for the evil committed by his predecessors and his people, he would be spared from experiencing this awful event in his lifetime and that he would die a peaceful death.

Reaction to Chuldah's Prophecy Sefer Melachim (2:23:1-24 records that Yoshiyahu did not accept this prophecy with equanimity. Instead, he reacted by embarking on a massive campaign of national spiritual renaissance. He gathered all of Am Yisrael and its leaders and demanded that the nation make a solemn commitment (Brit) to dedicate itself wholeheartedly to the service of Hashem. He committed himself to eliminating Avodah Zarah completely from Eretz Yisrael. The Navi records that he eliminated the Avodah Zarah of his grandfather Menashe as well as the misdirected places of worship (Bamot) of Yaravam and Shlomo HaMelech that had stood for hundreds of years that not even Yoshiyahu's righteous predecessors (other than Chizkiyahu) dared to disturb. It is important to contrast Yoshiyahu's reaction with that of his great grandfather, Chizkiyahu. Although Chizkiyahu was a righteous king of first rank, when he was told by Yesheyahu that eventually the Beit HaMikdash would be destroyed by the Babylonians, he responded, "Well, at least there will be peace in my day" (Melachim 2:20:19). Yoshiyahu's contrastingly selfless reaction again marks him as an unparalleled Tzaddik among the descendants of David HaMelech. Indeed, Rav Hayyim Angel notes that Yoshiyahu is the only individual in Tanach who is described (Melachim 2:23:25) as having fulfilled the Torah's mandate to worship Hashem "with all of your heart, soul and resources" (Devarim 6:5), which also serves to emphasize the greatness of this amazing king. Indeed, Rav Elazar HaKalir even goes as far to compare Yoshiyahu's righteousness to that of Moshe Rabbeinu! Next week, we shall conclude our discussion and explain why the death of Yoshiyahu is a cause for mourning even today.

Why Do We Still Mourn the Death of Yoshiyahu - Part 2 of 2 by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Introduction Last week, we began to discuss why we still mourn the death of Yoshiyahu in our Tishah BeAv Kinot. This week, we shall conclude our explanation of why his devastating death has traumatized the collective Jewish psyche. Last week, we noted that Yoshiyahu's was one of the few shining examples of a Judean king who achieved spiritual excellence comparable to that of his ancestor, David HaMelech. We noted that this was all the more remarkable considering that his grandfather, Menasheh, was the worst of all the kings in Sefer Melachim and that Yoshiyahu began his program of national Teshuvah after seventy five years of rule by kings who either promoted or tolerated idolatry.

Was Teshuvah Possible after Chuldah's Prophecy? We concluded our discussion last week with Yoshiyahu's reaction to Chuldah's devastating prophecy that the Beit HaMikdash would be destroyed. Yoshiyahu made a colossal effort to thoroughly remove all traces of Avodah Zarah from Eretz Yisrael in an attempt to reverse the terrible decree. We must ask, however, why Yoshiyahu even bothered to attempt to undo the decree. After all, the word of the prophetess represented God's immutable will. How could this possibly change? The answer appears to be (following the approach advocated by the Abarbanel) that an evil decree that can be reversed with Teshuvah. We see that after the Cheit HaEigel, Moshe Rabbeinu, through Teshuvah and Tefillah (as we discuss in an essay that appears at www.koltorah.org), was able to reverse the decree to destroy Am Yisrael. We see

this in regard to the Cheit HaMerglim as well. Ashkenazic Jews express this idea on Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur by stating, "Teshuvah, Tefillah, and Tzedakah can remove the evil of the decree." Indeed, on Yom Kippur we read (in Sefer Yonah) about how the Teshuvah of the people of Nineveh brought about the repeal of the decree that the city be destroyed. Yoshiyahu follows in Moshe Rabbeinu's footsteps in trying to rid Bnei Yisrael of idolatry and lead them back to a path of retaining Hashem's intense presence in their midst. Am Yisrael at the time of Chuldah's prophecy can be compared to a football team that is, for example, ten points behind with five minutes left in the game and is standing at its own eighteen yard-line. Defeat still can be averted, but it will take a titanic effort in order to prevail.

Yoshiyahu's Achievements – Korban Pesach, Justice, and Expanded Borders For a period of thirteen years, Yoshiyahu enjoyed great success as a ruler. He organized the most widespread observance of the Korban Pesach since the days of the Shoftim (Melachim 2:23:22). Yirmiyahu (22:15) describes Yoshiyahu's reign as a time when justice prevailed in Eretz Yisrael. Rav Yoel Bin Nun notes that an archaeological discovery seems to corroborate Yirmiyahu's evaluation. A shard of pottery ACLdated to Yoshiyahu's time describes a soldier who called to the attention of the authorities what he deemed unfair treatment (the destruction of his clothes) by his commanding officer. Only in a society where justice prevails would a soldier even dare to lodge such a complaint. In an unjust society, a soldier would not dare complain against a commanding officer, for he certainly would be punished for his complaint. Sefer Divrei HaYamim (2:34:6-7 and 21) describes Yoshiyahu as impacting all of Eretz Yisrael, not merely Judea. This appears astonishing in light of the fact that Yoshiyahu was a Judean king – what was he doing in the North? The answer lies in the historical events of the time of Yoshiyahu's reign (see Daat Mikra Divrei HaYamim p. 933). During that time, the Assyrian Empire that had controlled the Northern portion of Eretz Yisrael since the reign of Chizkiyahu was collapsing. Yoshiyahu appears to have seized the opportunity to expand the borders of his kingdom to include the former Northern kingdom. Sefer Melachim (2:23:24), however, indicates the limitations of Yoshiyahu's Teshuvah campaign. It states that Yoshiyahu succeeded in eliminating the idolatry that "appeared" in Judea. This clearly implies that the Avodah Zarah that was not in plain view remained. Two Pesukim later, we are told that there was never a king who so sincerely returned to Hashem either before or after Yoshiyahu. This also seems to imply that only Yoshiyahu had returned but that the people had not wholeheartedly join him in his efforts. Indeed, Chazal (Ta'anit 22b; see Rav Elazar HaKalir's Kinah mourning Yoshiyahu) explain that during Yoshiyahu's time, many Jews covertly worshipped Avodah Zarah. They describe how people hid Avodah Zarah behind their doors in order to escape its detection by soldiers enforcing Yoshiyahu's rule. It seems that the soldiers were not particularly thorough in their searches, as they seemed to carry out royal decrees perfunctorily and without much enthusiasm. This also explains how Bnei Yisrael deserved the Churban not so long after Yoshiyahu's death. Yoshiyahu's reformation seems to have made little impact on people's hearts. They merely cooperated in the removal of public idolatry. Finally, this also explains why Yirmiyahu was castigating Am Yisrael even during Yoshiyahu's reformation (see Yirmiyahu 3:6-10 and 25:3). We should note that Rav Yehudah Amital and other religious opponents of expanding religious legislation in Israel cite the failure of Yoshiyahu's government to affect any meaningful change on the part of much of Am Yisrael in its commitment to Hashem and His Torah as precedent for their position.

The Traumatic Death of Yoshiyahu Thirteen years after he began his reformation in earnest, Yoshiyahu was killed, at the age of thirty nine, by Paroh Necho's Egyptian army. This episode was so traumatic that Sefer Melachim (2:23:29) describes this tragedy in one cryptic Pasuk. It is almost as if the Navi does not want to record this event and therefore presents the story in the shortest and most obscure manner possible. The Pasuk informs us that when Paroh Necho of Egypt went to the Assyrian king on the Euphrates River, Yoshiyahu went towards Paroh Necho, whereupon Paroh Necho killed him. The Pasuk does not explain why Paroh Necho was traveling to the Assyrian King, why Yoshiyahu went towards Paroh Necho, or why Paroh Necho killed Yoshiyahu. Divrei HaYamim (2:35:20-23) provides us with a few more details but is also sparing in its presentation of this tragedy. It informs us that Paroh went to join the King of Assyria at Karkemish on the Euphrates. This is a well-known battle that we know from non-Jewish sources occurred in 609 B.C.E (see also Yirmiyahu chapter forty-six). The battle pitted the crumbling Assyrian Empire against the emerging Babylonian Empire. It seems that Paroh Necho joined the Assyrian forces in an attempt to prevent the Babylonian takeover of the region and to further Egyptian interests to expand their empire into the areas lost by the Assyrians. Divrei HaYamim records that Paroh Necho sent Yoshiyahu a message not to confront him, as he did not intend to engage Yoshiyahu in battle. He sought merely to travel through Eretz Yisrael along the international trade route that cuts through the Jezreel Valley, the location of Megiddo. Yoshiyahu ignored the warnings, Divrei HaYamim tells us, and confronted Paroh Necho. Yoshiyahu disguised himself in battle but nevertheless fell to arrows shot by the Egyptian forces. It is of note that an arch-villain of Sefer Melachim, Achav, died

under eerily similar circumstances (see Melachim 1:22:30-34 and Midrash VaYikra Rabbah 20:1).

Assessing the Extent of the Tragedy Yoshiyahu's death was a multidimensional tragedy. It seems that he was motivated to wage war to prevent Paroh Necho extending his sphere of influence in the Middle East and thereby impinging on the former's control of the northern portion of Eretz Yisrael. Unfortunately, Sefer Melachim records that after the death of Yoshiyahu, the Egyptians seized control of Eretz Yisrael, and the subsequent Judean "kings" were merely vassal kings controlled by Egypt. The Babylonians then overtook the Egyptians (Melachim 2:24:7) and grabbed control over Eretz Yisrael. Thus, the death of Yoshiyahu effectively marked the end of Jewish sovereign control of Eretz Yisrael, which was not regained until centuries later in the days of the Chashmonaim. Accordingly, Yoshiyahu's death essentially is the beginning of the Churban. In fact, Rav Yoel Bin Nun suggests that Yirmiyahu's prophecy of seventy years of exile (Yirmiyahu 25:11) refers in part to the seventy years from Yoshiyahu's death until Koresh's proclamation permitting us to return to Yerushalayim to rebuild the Beit HaMikdash, which according to non-Jewish sources occurred in 539 B.C.E (exactly 70 years after the battle of Karkemish). For further discussion of the fulfillment of the seventy years, see Daat Mikra to Divrei HaYamim 2:36:21 note 56. A second dimension of the tragedy of Yoshiyahu's death is the fact that it contradicted the prophecy of Chuldah (mentioned last week) that Yoshiyahu would die in peace. The failure of this prophecy to materialize was certainly traumatic. We can explain this failure based on the teaching of Chazal (see Berachot 4a) that even positive prophecies can be reversed if we sin and do not continue to merit the promise. As we cited last week, "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given" (Avot 3:19). Chazal (Taanit 22b) explain that Yoshiyahu's sin was his failure to consult with Yirmiyahu before heading to battle. However, the most profound aspect of this tragedy is the fact that such an incredibly righteous king could die in battle. To make matters worse, he died in the very same manner as did Achav! In fact, Rav Yoel argues that it is for this reason that Am Yisrael ignored the impassioned pleas of Yirmiyahu and Yechezkeil to repent before the Churban. People most likely felt that serving Hashem did not pay. While Menashe served every sort of Avodah Zarah and reigned peacefully for fifty five years, Yoshiyahu, who destroyed the Avodah Zarah, was killed prematurely in battle at age thirty nine. Therefore, pleas for Teshuvah fell on deaf ears. Furthermore, had Yoshiyahu not died and had lived until the age of sixty seven (as did his Menashe), his Teshuvah movement potentially could have remained in effect for another twenty eight years, totaling forty one years. In that amount of time, a new generation that did not know Menashe could have emerged and possibly been much more committed to Torah life than their parents' generation. Such a Teshuvah movement likely could have averted the Churban. Alas, this was not to be (see Rav Yosef Dov Soloveitchik's Reflections on the Tishah BeAv Kinot pp. 285-286 for a similar approach).

Why Didn't Yoshiyahu Consult Yirmiyahu? I would suggest that Yoshiyahu did not consult with Yirmiyahu (in addition to the consideration mentioned in Taanit 22b) because he would have received an answer that he did not want to hear. Yirmiyahu (see Yirmiyahu 2:18) followed in the footsteps of Yeshayahu (30:1-5) in maintaining consistently that Am Yisrael should stay out of any involvement with the superpowers. Rather, these two prophets felt, Am Yisrael should remain neutral and should be satisfied, as Yishayahu expresses it metaphorically, with "the waters of the Shiloach (a stream outside of Yerushalayim) that moves along slowly" (Yishayahu 8:6). Despite his mistake, Chazal (Taanit ad. loc.) tell us that Yoshiyahu repented and that his dying words were, "Hashem is righteous, as I have rebelled against His word" (Eichah 1:18).

Conclusion The death of Yoshiyahu was an event of enormous disappointment for the spiritual and political aspirations of our people, and it merits our attention even today. We must also note, though, that we owe a great debt of gratitude to Yoshiyahu. Had he not done Teshuvah, Bnei Yisrael would have had to endure living for more than a century under the rule of eight consecutive evil kings. Had that happened, our fate might have been the oblivion that befell the ten Northern tribes who were ruled by evil kings for very long periods of time. Therefore, we must pay our respects to and acknowledge Yoshiyahu. Avi Levinson adds that the righteous Jewish leaders in exile, such as Yechezkeil and Daniel, likely were impacted positively by Yoshiyahu's Teshuvah movement. Without the thirteen years of Teshuvah, such great spiritual leaders would have been unlikely to emerge. Yoshiyahu must retain a significant place in the collective Jewish psyche since it was he who preserved the legacy of David HaMelech. Our spiritual survival, in the main, can be attributed to him (for further explanation for the mourning of Yoshiyahu on Tishah BeAv, see Rav Soloveitchik aforementioned work pp. 275-286).

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Prologue: The impending battle against Midyan was destined to be Moshe's final battle. In preparing for it, Moshe sent 12,000 troops together with Pinchas (31:6). The Meforshim all question why it was Pinchas and not Elazar who led the troops to battle?

Rashi explains that Hashem said that he who initiated the mitzvah, who originated the vengeance against this abominable nation, should complete the task. Pinchas, who slew Kosbi, should finish the job.

What is the reason that "he who begins the mitzvah" is told to complete it?

Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, comments that there is no comparison between an endeavor which is executed piecemeal and one which is performed in one complete unit. A number of people participating in a mitzvah - one after another - demonstrates the beauty of teamwork. Such a cooperative effort, however, is still not to be compared to the quality manifest when one performs the entire mitzvah by himself. A mitzvah performed in sections, one that is carried out in components, does not have sheleimus, completeness/ perfection. Sheleimus can be achieved only if a mitzvah is carried out by one person in one motion.

When Rabbi Akiva returned after twelve years of study with an entourage of twelve thousand students, crowds gathered to see the great Torah scholar. His wife, who had encouraged his decision to leave home to study Torah, was also waiting. As Rabbi Akiva came close, one of the women questioned his wife about how she had permitted him to stay away for so many years. Rabbi Akiva's wife responded emphatically, "I would be happy to let him return for another twelve years!" Rabbi Akiva heard this and immediately turned around to return to the yeshiva to study. He returned twelve years later with twenty four thousand students. The question which begs elucidation is apparent: Why did Rabbi Akiva not stop for even a moment to greet his wife, from whom he had been separated for twelve years? Would it have been such a terrible thing to do? The response which is echoed by the various baalei mussar, teachers of ethical behavior, is that two times twelve is not nearly the same as one continual period of twenty-four uninterrupted years. What Rabbi Akiva achieved in Torah study, his brilliant erudition, his vast group of students, was due to the fact that he had studied continually for twenty-four years. He did not pause; he did not take a break; he would not even say hello to his wife after twelve years! He did not weaken his momentum. A brief interlude quells one's enthusiasm, diminishing the end result. One who begins a mitzvah should complete his action to achieve greater success.

This week's Chaburah examines the benefit of completion as well. It is entitled:

***** Tevilas Keilim: Is it worth the wait??? *****

The Talmud (Avoda Zara 75b) notes that all the metal Keilim that were captured in the battle with Midyan need Tevila based on the Possuk of Ta'aviru BaEish V'Taher." This idea is based upon the fact that the Torah adds the word "V'Taher" which, Chazal tell us means that one is supposed to add an additional Tahara to the Kashering process. The Rishonim differ as to whether the Tevila concept is Deoraisa or D'Rabbonon. Rashi clearly holds that the issue is one of Deoraisa as do Tosafos (A.Z. 75b), the Smak (99) and the Rashba (Toras HaBayis, Bayis 4, Shaar 4). On the other hand, the Kol Bo (86) argues that Tevilas Keilim is a Mitzva D'Rabbonon and the

Possuk is only an asmachta B'Alma. Tosafos Rid and many other Rishonim concur (See Yeshuos Yaakov, Y.D. 120:2-4) who notes that this is the opinion of Rov Rishonim.

Truthfully though, one must question as to whether this Tevila is a Mitzva on its one or merely a Matir, a means of allowing one to utilize new dishes? The Rambam doesn't count Tevila Keilim as a Mitzva in his numbering of the 613 and the Ramban doesn't challenge the omission. Though, the Smak seems to count Tevilas Keilim as a mitzvah. It would seem that the Rambam and Ramban count Tevilas Keilim as a Matir while the Smak counts it as a Mitzva, one of the 613.

The problem with such an interpretation is that when it comes to Shechita (Mitzva Aseh 146), the Rambam DOES include Shechita as a Mitzva even though it is merely a Matir for meat to be consumed (as it removes the prohibition of Ever min HaChai). The Raavad even challenges the Rambam's decision to count Shechita as a Mitzva even though it is merely a Matir. How then do we reconcile the Rambam's decision to ignore the Mitzva of Tevilas Keilim while counting that of Shechita?

Rav Asher Weiss Shlita (Minchas Asher, Matos, 68) suggests that it is more likely that the Rambam holds that Tevilas Keilim is a Mitzvah D'Rabbonon. Hence, we can recite a blessing over it (like a mitzvah) but not have it included in the listing of 613. In fact, Rav Asher notes that the Rambam never notes a Beracha for Tevilas Keilim (see the Ritva, A.Z. 75b) implying that perhaps he didn't recite one, consistent with his opinion about the recitation of Berachos on Mitzvos D'Rabbonon.

One particular Halachic difference that results from this question is whether one may leave Keilim in his home untoveled or whether s/he should strive to get them to the Mikva IMMEDIATELY. If Tevilas Keilim is a mitzvah, then one must strive to get the new Keilim to the Mikva right away. But truthfully, the only one who discusses the matter is the Maharshal (Beitzah II:19) and his primary concern was that he was worried lest one forget to toevel the Keilim – not because of the mitzvah. This raises the question as to why one does not have to take keilim to the Mikva right away. After all, if it is a mitzvah, why do we not say Mitzva HaBaah L'Yadecha Al Tachmitzeina?

Rav Asher shlita suggests that the reason is based on the fact that the obligation to take one's keilim to the Mikva only begins when one wants to use the Keilim. The mitzvah becomes a Mitzva Kiyumis similar to the rules of a Matir.

Bottom line, when purchasing new Keilim it is ideal to take them to the Mikva as soon as one can, but only so that one not forget and ruin the Mitzva of Tevilas Keilim.

Shabbat Shalom

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PARSHAS MATTOS If a man takes a vow to Hashem... whatever comes from his mouth shall he do. (30:3) The Talmud Kesubos 62b relates a fascinating story. The great Tanna Rabbi Akiva was a shepherd for Kalba Savua, one of the richest Jews at the time. Kalba Savua's daughter noted the modesty and refined character manifest by R' Akiva, who, at the time, was no more than an ignorant shepherd. She approached him, asking, "If I become betrothed to you, will you go to the yeshiva to study Torah?" He replied in the affirmative. He betrothed her in secret, and she sent him away to the yeshiva to study Torah. When her father heard what she had done, he cut her off financially. Suddenly, Kalba Savua's daughter was transformed from an enormously wealthy young lady to someone facing abject poverty.

Kalba Savua made a vow prohibiting his daughter from benefitting from his possessions. A vow of this kind is binding and can be annulled only by a

sage or a panel of three competent laymen who form a bais din, court of law. Twelve years went by, and Rabbi Akiva returned as one of Klal Yisrael's preeminent teachers. Accompanied by twelve thousand students, he entered the city. As he approached his home, he overheard a certain old man asking Rabbi Akiva's wife, "How long will you wait for him? You are leading a life of living widowhood." Her response has become a classic, "If he would listen to me, he would sit in the yeshiva for another twelve years!" Upon hearing this, R' Akiva turned around and returned to the yeshiva for another twelve years.

Upon his second return, he was accompanied by twenty-four thousand students. His wife went out to greet him. When she reached him, she fell on her face and began to kiss his foot. When one of R' Akiva's attendants was about to push her away, the sage commented, "Leave her alone. The Torah that is mine and the Torah that is yours belong to her."

So ends the saga of the great Rabbi Akiva, relating how he became the great Torah leader. It was all because his future wife saw the enormous potential that was just begging to be released from within him. The story, however, continues. When Kalba Savua heard that a great sage was coming to town, he decided to meet with him, so that he might obtain an annulment of his vow. According to halachah, the sage or the bais din must find a pesach, an opening, a circumstance, which if it had been fully considered by the vower, would have prevented him from declaring the vow in the first place. It can then be annulled. Perhaps, R' Akiva could discover such a circumstance, because Kalba Savua was getting older and he no longer wanted to see his daughter languishing in poverty.

Kalba Savua approached R' Akiva, totally unaware that, in fact, he was his son-in-law, to ask him to annul his vow. R' Akiva asked, "Did you make the vow even if your son-in-law would eventually become a great Torah scholar?" He replied, "Rebbe, even if he were to become proficient in just one chapter of Mishnah, or even just one halachah, I would not have made the vow." R' Akiva looked at him and said, "Ani hu, I am he." Kalba Savua's reaction was one of intense joy, as he bequeathed half of his possessions to his son-in-law.

This ends our story and brings me to a comment made by Tosfos, which is the real purpose of my relating the story. There is a halachic principle that a sage may not annul a vow on the basis of a circumstance that was non-existent at the time of the vow. This is referred to as a pesach b'taus. If so, how could R' Akiva have annulled the vow based upon a circumstance that had as yet not materialized, since he was certainly not yet a sage when the vow had been made? If R' Akiva had been a scholar and Kalba Savua unaware of this circumstance, then there would have been grounds for declaring this vow null and void. R' Akiva, however, was not yet much of anything. He was a refined, humble man who exemplified incredible character, but he was not yet a scholar.

Tosfos comments: "Although he was not a sage when the vow was made, the fact that he had entered a yeshiva to study Torah and had begun to immerse himself in the Torah was sufficient that it could be expected that he would become a great sage." The potential was present, and the wellsprings of Torah were being tapped. What more did he require?

Tosfos is teaching us a powerful lesson, one that I feel every parent and certainly every teacher should review - constantly. Once one enters a yeshiva to study Torah - once one begins studying Torah, the potential within him is aroused and he becomes a potential sage. The rebbe that walks into his class to deliver a Torah lesson should view his students as potential gedolei hador, Torah leaders! He should teach with that attitude, because that is what they are. Once a Jewish child begins studying Torah, there is no limit, no boundary, to what he can achieve. If, however, the rebbe does not realize this and adjust his attitude to this fact, he may stunt the child's ability to achieve distinction and maximize his own potential.

I believe that this is what Tosfos is conveying to us. The potential is there. It is like a faucet waiting to be opened. His entrance into the yeshiva for the purpose of limud haTorah opens that faucet and stimulates the flow - one that continues to run throughout his life.

Whatever comes from his mouth shall he do. (30:3)

Much has been written concerning the effect of man's tongue. Hashem imbued us with the power of speech for a lofty purpose. While speech is the manner in which human beings communicate, we rarely take into consideration that we use the same medium through which we communicate with people, to communicate with Hashem. Yes, we talk to G-d with the same mouth that we talk to people. While everybody is aware of this, we rarely give it much thought. The following inspirational story should give us something to consider.

The kitchen workers in the Yeshivah of Ponevez, complained to the venerable Rosh Yeshivah, Horav Elazar M. Shach, zl, about a group of bachurim, students, who, after studying until the wee hours of the morning on Shabbos night, decided to "break into" the kitchen and help themselves to some of the cholent that had been prepared to be served Shabbos morning. Rav Shach was shocked to hear this, and immediately declared that those bachurim who had perpetrated the disgraceful act were disqualified from rendering testimony before a bais din, judicial court, on the grounds that they were thieves. Taking property from the yeshivah without permission is an act of theft. "If they are hungry," he said, "they can come to my house and I will give them food. They do not have to concern themselves with waking me. I am up at those hours!"

When the Rosh Yeshivah gave his weekly shmues, ethical discourse, to the yeshivah, he devoted a portion of it to the cholent fiasco. He explained that when Bisyah, the daughter of Pharaoh, brought the infant Moshe to the palace, she attempted to have him nursed by one of the maidservants, to no avail. Moshe refused to nurse, until a Hebrew nursemaid, who was actually his mother, Yocheved, was summoned. Why did Moshe reject the other nursemaids? Chazal explain that he thought, "Shall the mouth that is destined to speak with the Shechinah drink milk from women who themselves eat unkosher food?" Based upon the Talmud's statement, the Rashba issues a halachic ruling, which is adopted by the Rema in Shulchan Aruch Yoreh Deah 81:7, "A Jewish child should not be given to a non-Jewish nursemaid."

Rav Shach wondered how the Rashba could draw a general conclusion applicable to all Jews from the specific case of Moshe. The Talmud is clear in its reasoning: Moshe Rabbeinu's mouth had to remain pure because it was destined to speak with the Shechinah. Clearly, this reasoning does not apply to the average Jewish child! The Rosh Yeshivah declared that, indeed, it does apply to each and every Jewish child, because every child recites brachos daily. When we say, Baruch atah Hashem, "Blessed are You, Hashem," we are addressing G-d directly, in second person! "So," concluded Rav Shach, with a rhetorical question, "a mouth that has taken into itself stolen food - how can it dare speak to the Shechinah in prayer and in the recitation of blessings?"

Perhaps this story might serve as "food" for thought. Certainly, it should give us something to "talk" about.

Moshe sent them - a thousand from each tribe for the legion - them and Pinchas ben Elazar the Kohen. (31:6)

Actually, it was Moshe Rabbeinu whom Hashem had instructed to lead the legion that would take revenge against the Midyanim. Why did he send Pinchas? Chazal explain that while Moshe had no problem leading the assault against Midyan, he felt that it was not right for him to go, since Midyan was the country in which he was protected from Pharaoh. How could he lead the army against his benefactors? The Talmud concludes with an analogy: "The well from which you drink water, do not throw stones into it."

We find a similar reaction when Moshe was instructed to raise up his staff and strike the Nile River, which would turn to blood. He felt that since the water protected him as a newborn, it would be an act of ingratitude to strike it.

Concerning the next two plagues, frogs and lice, Hashem commanded Aharon HaKohen to strike the ground. After all, the ground hid the Egyptian that Moshe had killed. He should not be the one to strike it. It was not as if

the water or the earth would arise and "complain": "How could you, Moshe, after all we did for you." Nonetheless, it would have an effect on Moshe's subconscious. He was ungrateful.

Hakoras hatov, recognizing the source of one's benefit, and showing appreciation to one's benefactor, regardless if it is a human or an inanimate object, and certainly to Hashem, the Source of all good, is more than an obligation. It defines one's humanness. One who is not makir tov is simply not a mentch. He is not a refined member of the specie of creation referred to as a human. His actions bespeak the antithesis of how a human being should act.

Yosef HaTzaddik was thrust into a dungeon because of false allegations which Potifar's wife made against him. She substantiated her spurious claim by presenting his garment, which he left in her possession when she made advances towards him. Why did he simply not overpower her? Certainly, he had the ability to do so. It was because of this that he was sent to the dungeon, only to be released some time later as a result of the dreams of the chamberlain and baker. Otherwise, he might have languished in prison indefinitely, all because he refused to respond aggressively to Potifar's wife. Why was he so non-combative?

The Ramban explains that when Yosef was sold to the Egyptians, he was raised in Potifar's home. It was Potifar's wife who instructed him in the management of the house. Indeed, she played a critical role in his guidance - even if it might have been for personal gratification. Thus, Yosef was not prepared to fight with the woman who had helped him in his new home.

Horav Yisrael Abuchatzera, zl, the "Baba Sali," was a holy and pure, saintly individual who left an indelible mark on thousands of followers. When he emigrated to Eretz Yisrael in 1951, he settled in the small Negev town of Netivot. There he became a beacon of light and inspiration to thousands of people from all segments of the Jewish spectrum. When the Baba Sali came to Eretz Yisrael he was hosted by Reb Chazan Dehahn, a pious activist who had arrived two years earlier. The Baba Sali spent several weeks in the Dehahn home before relocating to his first home in Yerushalayim.

The Dehahns were not the only people who had vied for the sage's presence in their home. In fact, countless adherents competed for this singular honor. Nonetheless, the sense of appreciation manifested by the Baba Sali towards Reb Chazan Dehahn was incredible. Indeed, it showed that to him hakoras hatov was an obsession. After all, how can one forget the kindness shown to him by another fellow?

The Baba Sali's custom was to serve elaborate meals to those who came to him for advice or blessing. This custom was sharply curtailed during the Three Weeks from Tammuz 17 through Tisha B'Av, because of the spirit of mourning that prevailed in the home. He would receive visitors on a limited basis, but would not serve them a meal. With the commencement of the Nine Days, an atmosphere of sorrow seemed to engulf the household, since now they were sharing in the exile of the Shechinah.

Once, during the Nine Days, a visitor who was distantly related to the Abuchatzera family arrived at the Dehahn home with a request to see the Baba Sali, who at the time was living in Yavneh. He was dissuaded, because the sage's practice was not to greet visitors during this period. Nonetheless, the individual insisted on going, explaining that he was on a tight schedule and had to return immediately after Tisha B'Av.

The man would not accept no for an answer. He had to see the Baba Sali. Reb Chazan relented and they went to the home of the sage, where they were warmly greeted by the Rebbetzin. The sage was not happy about their arrival, because of his inability to serve an elaborate meal to such distinguished guests. It simply did not coincide with the atmosphere of mourning. It was the Rebbetzin who solved the quandary. Reminding her husband that it was the yahrtzeit-- annual anniversary-- of the passing of the Ari HaKadosh, he could commemorate the auspicious day with a seudah, meal, in honor of the yahrtzeit and invite his distinguished guests to join him.

While the Baba Sali was basically pleased with the suggestion, he still felt that a quickly-prepared dairy meal was an unsatisfactory substitute for the type of meat dinner he would normally have served these guests. He felt that he was indebted to Reb Chazan. Thus, following the meal, he asked his guests to return for the Shabbos meal and also for the meal following the fast of Tisha B'Av. The guest, citing his tight schedule, demurred, but Reb Chazan agreed to attend. During the meal, Reb Chazan noted that the sage was unusually sad. He conjectured that this was due to the fact that Shabbos was actually Tisha B'Av and, thus, the sage was beside himself in sorrow. After a brief inquiry, he discovered that even when Tisha B'Av coincided with Shabbos, the Baba Sali would never alter his joyful demeanor. Shabbos was Shabbos! Not to allow an opportunity to learn something important to be wasted, Reb Chazan asked the sage why he was so perturbed. The Baba Sali replied that he had a dream that night that was a portent of tragedy, which he refused to divulge, because he did not want to disturb the joy of Shabbos.

That night, following Kinos, the Baba Sali and his entire family gathered in his private study and listened to the sage relate the sorrowful events of his dream. He revealed that he had seen a fire burning, and that this fire represented the passing of his daughter-in-law in France. Several hours later, the tragedy was confirmed by normal channels of communication.

Following the fast on Sunday evening, crowds of sympathizers lined up to offer their condolences to the grief-stricken family. Each of these individuals received the Baba Sali's personal attention and appreciative response. As soon as Reb Chazan entered the room, the Baba Sali arose quickly and asked him to join him in the kitchen.

"You are surely hungry and thirsty following such a long fast. The family members are presently engaged in their bereavement. May I have the privilege of serving you?" asked the Baba Sali.

"Chas v'shalom, Heaven forbid," was Reb Chazan's immediate reply. "The Rav should be my waiter? Baruch Hashem, I can take care of myself. I will see to some. Let the Rav go back into the room with the other mourners."

"It is nothing to talk about," said the Baba Sali. "I will not allow the mitzvah of hachnosas orchim, welcoming visitors, to slip by, especially to the man who welcomed me so graciously when I first came to Eretz Yisrael. I will never forget your kindness and warmth when I had nothing - no resources, no home."

What a powerful lesson in hakoras hatov. Perhaps we should all ask ourselves how many people who were involved, in one way or another, in our personal development have we forgotten or ignored, some on purpose, others simply through thoughtlessness? The Baba Sali did not forget - even at a time when it would have been certainly understood that his mind was on his personal loss. No. That is not hakoras hatov. How far are we from such a level of spiritual integrity?

Behold! They (the Midyanite women) caused Bnei Yisrael, by the word of Bilaam, to commit a betrayal against Hashem regarding the matter of Peor. (31:16)

It is regrettable that there are still apologetic Jews who feel that they have to find some way to qualify the fact that we are the am ha'nivchar, chosen people. This is after we have endured centuries of persecution, pain and misery. Even after the Holocaust, there are still those who lack the moral character to hold up their heads with pride and declare; "Yes, I am a Jew, and I am proud of it!"

If we peruse the parsha, we note the incredible divide that exists between Klal Yisrael and the gentile nations. Chazal teach us that after the Flood, the nations of the world decided to restrict themselves in the area of arayos, immorality and forbidden relationships. They understood that in order for members of society to exist as human beings, they must act as humans - not as animals. The perverse lifestyle, the accepted decadence that had prevailed prior to the Flood, was no longer acceptable. Tznius, moral purity, and chastity were to be the only ways in which the new world could continue to exist.

This was supposed to be the new standard of living. Hashem provided the gentile nations with "spiritual" leadership. After all, they would need guidance. Bilaam was gifted, talented and supposedly very spiritual. He was a prophet who had achieved an extremely high level of prophecy. He would mentor the nations and guide them on the proper path. Is it then not shocking that this paragon of "spirituality" advised his people to engage in moral filth, to break down the boundaries of morality, to destroy the accepted laws of chastity, so that by prostituting themselves they would be able to cause the Jews to sin? This is the navi umos ha'olam, prophet of the gentile nations, who was there to ensure their spiritual ascendancy.

In contrast, our leadership exemplified tznius at its zenith. Shaul Hamelech was known for his modesty. His daughter, Michal, who became David Hamelech's wife, personified what she had observed at home. Yes, there is a stark contrast between them and us, yet we still have those among us who find it difficult to accept that we are a "kingdom of Priests and a holy nation."

When the sons of Yaakov Avinu heard of their sister Dinah's violation by Shechem, the Torah writes: "They were extremely angry because he had committed a disgraceful act against Yisrael" (Bereishis 34:7). Horav Eliyahu Munk, zl, notes that this is the first place in the Torah that the descendants of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov are referred to by the name Yisrael. This is a name that signifies our mission in this world, "to struggle for G-d." The name Yisrael is first used in the defense of moral purity. This is our sacred ideal. It is one we must safeguard and hold sacrosanct. Indeed, it defines our very Jewishness and bespeaks our uniqueness in the world. Without it - we are like everybody else.

B'chol yom avorchecha va'hallelah Shimcha l'olam va'ed. Every day I will bless You, and I will praise Your Name forever and ever.

David Hamelech emphasizes the significance of blessing Hashem every day, regardless of what challenges that day may bring. We all know that there are good days and seemingly "bad" days. We are not to respond positively to Hashem only on those days which we feel are "good"... We bless Hashem kol yom, every day.

The Psalmist uses two words avorchecha, I will bless You; and ahallelah Shimcha, I will Praise Your Name. Is there a difference between blessing and praise? Furthermore, why is blessing equated with "every day," while praise is something that goes on forever and ever? Horav Chaim Kanievsky, Shlita, explains that we are not permitted to add any blessings of our own to the ones that Chazal have composed. Therefore, when one is about to "bless" Hashem using the blessings formulated by Chazal, he is limited to those blessings that are designated for specific days and periods. In contrast, when one "praises" Hashem, there are no time or quantity limitations. Praise is always forever and ever.

I'zechar nishmas R' Yissachar Dov ben HaRav Yisrael a"h Hertzberg niftar 7 Av 5745 t.n.tz.v.h.

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Covenant & Conversation
Thoughts on the Weekly Parsha from
Sir Jonathan Sacks

Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth

[From 3 years ago - 5765]

<http://www.chiefrabbi.org/tt-index.html>

Mattot

The Israelites are almost within sight of the promised land. They have waged a victorious campaign against the Midianites. We feel the tempo quicken. No longer are the Israelites in the desert. They are moving inexorably toward the Jordan, to the west of which lies their destination: the land 'flowing with milk and honey'.

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they are travelling is ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would like to stay there, to the east of the Jordan. Moses is angry at the suggestion:

Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, "Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them? The tribes meet his objection with a compromise formula:

Then they came up to him and said, "We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we are ready to arm ourselves and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan." We are willing, they tell Moses, to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead. Indeed we are willing to go on ahead, to be the advance guard, to be in the forefront of the battle. It is not that we are afraid of battle. Nor are we trying to evade our responsibilities toward our people as a whole. It is simply that we wish to raise cattle, and this land to the east of the Jordan is ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agrees. If they keep their word, they may settle east of the Jordan.

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said:

Then they came up to him and said, "We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children." Moses replies:

"Build cities for your children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised." The ordering of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they speak of their flocks first, their women and children second. Moses reverses the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes:

They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: 'Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks.' The midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 22: 9) makes the same point through a dazzling interpretation of the line in Ecclesiastes:

The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. (Ecclesiastes 10:2) The midrash identifies 'right' with Torah and life: "He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand (Deut. 33:2). 'Left' refers to worldly goods:

Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. (Proverbs 3: 16) The men of Reuben and Gad put 'riches and honour' before faith and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong. The midrash continues:

The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: "Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it." One of the most consistent patterns of Jewish history is the way communities through the ages put children and their education first. Already in the first century Josephus was able to write: "The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls." In twelfth century France a Christian scholar noted: "A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of G-d's law - and not only his sons but his daughters too."

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organise the educational system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small

townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family:

The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys' school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son. The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her sons schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew - for her the two are synonymous. In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshivah heads and Hassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilization that is as child-centred as Judaism, nor any that has predicated its very existence on putting their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues - Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor detail but a fundamental statement about Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary.

Civilizations that value the young, stay young. Those that invest in the future, have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our belief and way of life into the next generation.

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Parshas Matos 5768

I Give My Word

A person's word should be that person's bond. In Jewish law, oral agreements when properly witnessed are as binding as any written contract. The Torah teaches us that "everything that comes forth from one's mouth requires that person's fulfillment of his declaration." Commitments, such as vows, are viewed very seriously in Jewish law and the penalties associated with breaking one's commitment and/or vow are quite severe.

Because of this, King Solomon in Kohelet stated that "it is better not to vow at all than to vow and fulfill that vow." Due to the seriousness of vows, it has become customary in Jewish life for one to qualify any commitment that one may make, no matter how sincere and noble that commitment may be, with the Hebrew words bli neder - this is not to be construed as a vow.

In order to extricate people from vows already made, the halacha has provided a legal mechanism that can retroactively annul vows. This mechanism is founded on the principle that the vow was made in error, under an erroneous assumption that circumstances would allow the vow to be fulfilled. However, now, when it is apparent that because of changing or unforeseen circumstances, the person is unable to execute his vow, then the vow may be annulled retroactively. This is in reality the basis for the famous and moving Kol Nidrei prayer that ushers in the holy day of Yom Kippur.

We cannot ask for Divine forgiveness if we are yet burdened with unfulfilled commitments and pledges. However, there are limitations on the power of the Jewish court to annul vows and commitments. A vow or pledge made publicly is not capable of being annulled in most instances. There are other exceptions to the possibility of annulment of vows retroactively. An entire tractate of the Talmud, Nedarim, is devoted to the

complexity of this subject. It is one of the “regular” tractates that form the basic Talmud curriculum in the yeshivot of the world.

The name of this week’s parsha is Matot – the tribes. Moshe speaks to the heads of the tribes of Israel and instructs them regarding the laws of vows and oral commitments. Why is this the only place in the Torah that these laws are given specifically to the heads of the tribes? Perhaps it is a lesson that leaders have to be doubly careful in their words of promises and commitments. We are well aware that in the election campaigns that are currently mounted in the Western democratic world and here in Israel as well, the words of the candidates must be greatly discounted.

People run on a certain platform of expressed views and commitments and when elected often completely disregard their publicly stated pledges and policies. If any private individual is held to one’s word by the Torah, then how much more should public officials and elected leaders be held to their statements, which after all, forms the basis for their election victory. Therefore, Moshe first instructs the heads of the tribes, the leaders of Israel, regarding these laws of the Torah. Only by fulfilling one’s words can trust and confidence be achieved between the public and its leaders.

Shabat shalom.
Rabbi Berel Wein

from Ohr Somayach <ohr@ohr.edu to weekly@ohr.edu date Jul 24,
2008 5:33 PM subject Torah Weekly - Parshat Matot
Self-Made Man

“A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe...” (31:4)

‘People don’t know what it is to work these days. When I was a kid I used to get up every morning at 4:30 AM, rain or shine. I’m a self-made man alright.’

More elusive than the Loch Ness Monster or the Yeti is a species called the Self-Made Man.

Reports of his existence are very frequent, but to date he has never been positively identified. All the thousands of reported sightings have turned out to be mistaken wishful thinking.

Let’s take a look at a typical reported sighting:

Morris is one of the biggest corporate stock whizzes on Wall Street. He is the president of Huge and Wealthy International Inc., one of the top Fortune 500 companies. But did Fortune really give him his success? Or did it come from elsewhere?

Morris gets up every morning at 4:30 AM and works almost without a break till late every night. But does Morris give himself this strength, this drive, or does it come from somewhere else?

Morris is successful, but the bankruptcy courts are littered with financial whizzes who had no way of knowing that the bottom would drop out of their market, despite all the genius of their planning. And even those who make it to the top, like Morris, can, in a few seconds, succumb to a heart attack, and the president of Huge and Wealthy International Inc. can suddenly become a statistic in a study on heart disease.

When we’re successful, it’s all too easy to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves on how clever we were. In order to keep a true perspective as to where our success really comes from we need constant reminders.

In this week’s parsha, the Torah tells us that for every thousand soldiers that went out to fight for the Jewish People, another thousand stayed in Eretz Yisrael and prayed for them. In other words, for each soldier at the front, there was another ‘soldier’ responsible to pray for his counterpart.

You might think that this was to give those at the front added protection. The main reason, however, was that those who were fighting shouldn’t be under any illusion as to where their success was coming from. It was not by the strength and the might of their own hand that they were victorious in battle, rather their success — like all success — comes from G-d, the maker of the ‘Self-Made’ Man.

- Sources: Based on Rabbi Chatzkel Levenstein, heard from Rabbi Yehoshua Bertram

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Another Hundred Dollar Bill

“If a man takes a vow to G-d...” (30:3)

A tramp standing by the side of the road. A big Rolls-Royce pulls up right next to him. One of the tinted windows in the back rolls down with a soft electronic purr, coming to rest at the end of its travel with a reassuring clunk. A hand in a white cotton glove emerges from the car holding a crisp new \$100 bill. A voice emanates from the car. “It’s for you,” says the voice. The tramp gazes at the gloved hand in disbelief. “What?” The tramp looks around to make sure no one is standing behind him. “Are you speaking to me?” says the tramp. “Here, take the money!” Gingerly, he approaches the car, half-expecting that this is some kind of practical joke, and the money and the car will vanish in a second. He extends his hand and ever so slowly grasps the note. As soon as his fingers clutch the bill securely, the hand retracts into the car. The window rises with a soft purr and the Rolls-Royce speeds into the distance. The tramp stands transfixed to the spot, beaming from ear to ear with equal amounts of incredulity and joy.

The next day the tramp is standing in the same spot. The same Rolls-Royce draws up next to him. Again, one of the tinted windows in the back rolls down with a soft electronic purr. The same white-gloved hand emerges from the car holding another crisp \$100 bill. The tramp cannot believe his luck. Again he extends his hand and slowly grasps the note. And as soon as his fingers clutch the bill the hand retracts into the car and the Rolls-Royce speeds into the distance. Again the tramp is overjoyed. But maybe not quite as overjoyed as the previous day.

The next day the same thing happens, and the next and the next and the next...

This goes on for about a month. One day, the Rolls-Royce draws up at the lights. This time, however, nothing happens. After a few seconds the tramp knocks on the glass, but it stays firmly closed. So he knocks harder and then starts to shout, “Where’s my hundred dollars?”

The Midrash quotes the line from our parsha “If a man takes a vow to G-d...” and comments that a man doesn’t know the length of his allotted time in this world. What is the connection between “If a man takes a vow to G-d...” and knowing how long we have to live?

The Talmud (Nedarim 10) says that when a person makes a vow to bring an offering to G-d, he shouldn’t say “To G-d, an offering.” Rather, he should say “An offering to G-d.” The reason is that maybe he will utter G-d’s ineffable name “To G-d,” and not complete the sentence by saying “an offering”. It will thus transpire that he uttered G-d’s name in vain. The commentators explain that the Talmud is referring here to a situation where the person might die before he is able to complete the sentence. This is the meaning of the Midrash. A person does not know when his time is up, so he should be careful how he phrases a vow.

At first sight one might think that the Talmud is preoccupied with an extremely remote case. I mean, how many people drop dead in mid-sentence just when they happen to be in the middle of making a vow?

Most of us look at our lives as though we deserve to live. We may not say it, but we feel that way. That’s why we complain against G-d when people die ‘prematurely.’ If we looked at every moment we breathe on this world as yet another hundred-dollar bill, maybe we wouldn’t be so quick to complain when G-d takes back something that was a free handout in the first place. When we see every second as a separate and new gift we do not assume that necessarily we will be given the gift to complete even the sentence that we have started to speak.

- Sources: Nachal Kedumim and Kedushas Levi in Mayana shel Torah
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