

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

JULY 22, 2017

This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moises Ben Shabtai.
"May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

VOLUME 7, ISSUE 38

28 TAMMUZ

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS MATTOS-MASEI

Only as Good as His Word

And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Jewish people saying; "this is what HaShem has commanded. If a man vows a vow to Hashem, or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond; he shall not break his word, he shall do according to whatever comes out of his mouth" (30:2-3).



Maimonides, in the introduction to his commentary on Mishna, ponders why Rabbi Yehuda Hanassi, compiler of the Mishna, chose to place the tractate of *Nedarim* (vows) in the section of *Nashim* (the laws related to women). He answers that the placement is appropriate as *Nedarim* deals with vows made by a woman that can be annulled either by her father or her husband. However, the laws of a father or husband annulling vows doesn't appear until the tenth chapter of *Nedarim*; clearly this isn't a focus of the tractate.

Perhaps an alternative answer to Maimonides' question can be suggested. The vast majority of tractate *Nedarim* is concerned with the language of

articulation of a vow – which words and/or statements bind a person to a commitment and which do not. The tractate also focuses on which words properly communicate one's intent, and which phrases do not. This means that to bind oneself to a commitment requires the correct words, the proper intent, and the listener's understanding.

As *Nedarim* is essentially about articulating intent and how communications are understood, it is incredibly relevant to the section of *Nashim*. Interaction with wives (and mothers and daughters of course) are all about understanding communication. Men have to understand that conversation isn't just about saying what's

on their mind. They have to begin by considering how their words will be interpreted and understood (or not) and then choose their words carefully. Even then men often fail, (as we are often reminded). It must be understood that, through speech (which is a reflection of our soul and a God given ability through His breath), one has the power to convey thoughts and create obligations by articulating commitments.

Perhaps this is why the only transaction that requires actual speech is that of the marriage ceremony. The message being delivered is that marriage can only begin with a man articulating his intent through his words – and in a manner which his bride finds acceptable.

Did You Know...

In this week's *parsha*, Hashem instructs Bnei Yisrael to fight a war against Midian, and take revenge for the damage they caused; namely the death of 176,000 Jews. 13,000 Jewish soldiers (1,000 from each tribe) mounted an attack, led by Pinchas, and killed all the men of Midian including the five kings and Bilaam who, unfortunately for him, happened to be in Midian collecting his fee for his role in the deaths of Bnei Yisroel. It is interesting to note that there are quite a few *halachos* that we learn from this whole episode. Here are just a few:

1. When a Jew comes in contact with a dead body, he must purify himself on the third and seventh days.
2. Even though goyim don't become *tamei* from a corpse, captives from war acquire the status of slaves, and have a similar status to a Jew (and are therefore also *tamei*).
3. Any metal utensil acquired from a goy must be *toveiled* before they can be used.
4. We learn the laws of *kashering* utensils from this story.
5. If someone starts a *mitzvah*, he should follow through until it's finished (as we see with Pinchas, since he started the battle against them, he went to finish it).
6. The spoils taken from war should be divided equally between those who fought in the battle and those who remained behind to stand guard (1 Shmuel 30:24).
7. For wars of revenge, part of the spoils are set aside for Hashem (*Sefer Hamitzvos, Shoresh 3, 39a*); although it's definitely not required for ordinary wars (*Menachos 77b*).

Don't Focus on Yourself – Be Happy

And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Avenge the people of Israel from the Midianites; afterwards you shall be gathered to your people. And Moshe spoke to the people saying, "Arm some of yourselves for the war, and let them go against the Midianites, and do the Lord's vengeance in Midian. From every tribe a thousand...twelve thousand armed for war" (31:1-5).

This week's *parsha* relates Moshe's final responsibility as leader of the Jewish people; to exact vengeance from the Midianites who had caused devastating human losses to the Jewish people. HaShem informed Moshe that after completing this final mission Moshe would die. Rashi (ad loc) quotes the Midrash Tanchuma: "Even though Moshe knew that at the end of this final task he would die, he did it with joy and didn't delay." How do Chazal know that he did it with joy if it doesn't appear anywhere in the *pesukim*?

Rashi (verse 4) explains that the words "from every tribe" include even the tribe of Levi. In other words, every tribe sent one thousand armed soldiers for war against the Midianites. The commentators (Mizrachi and others ad loc) ask a very difficult question on Rashi: If Moshe indeed sent one thousand from every tribe including the tribe of Levi, that would equal 13,000 armed soldiers, so why does verse 5 say that only 12,000 were given over to war?

Rashi (verse 5) explains that the 12,000 armed men had to "be given over" to duty because they had heard that after this final mission Moshe would die. The men were very reluctant to go and had to be coerced. So even though Moshe had gone about his final task with joy, the Jewish people were very sad. Why this dichotomy?

As the baby boomer generation ages, the burden of their care falls on a large

portion of our population; their children. Why is it that some of these children view caring for their aging parents as their greatest privilege, and are thrilled to be able to do this for their parents, while other children see it as an overwhelming burden? This isn't limited to caring for others; often two people in the same predicament (e.g. a serious health issue) have polar opposite attitudes to life and living. Why? What is the root cause of this difference?

The answer is focus. A person who is constantly, and solely, focused on what he can do for others is always happy as his main currency of life is defined with what he can do for others. Conversely, a person who is focused solely on himself is devastated when anything about him is diminished. Therefore, an outwardly focused individual looks at caring for a parent as a tremendous opportunity; not only to do a great kindness, but also to repay a debt of gratitude. While an inwardly focused person only sees how his life is "diminished" by this added responsibility.

This, of course, is a cause for sadness. The inwardly focused individual doesn't feel a deep sense of gratitude because, after all, everything is coming to him. This sense of entitlement (i.e. I am owed everything I receive because **everything** is about me) causes these individuals to lead a frustrating and unhappy life because they are always waiting on the largesse of others. On the other hand, the person with the healthy giving attitude is always

happy because he is in control of his own destiny; he isn't frustrated by waiting for others to give him what he "deserves."

Moshe was an outwardly focused individual. Even though HaShem told him that he would die after this final mission, he was happy because his sole focus was what he can do for others. Anytime he had something to accomplish he did it with joy. We see this clearly in the *pesukim*: HaShem tells Moshe to take revenge for the Jewish people; yet when he tells the Jewish people he changes the purpose of the war to be revenge for HaShem. He is telling the Jewish people that this isn't about us, this is about HaShem. Someone attacked Hashem's children (the Jewish people), that is an attack on HaShem and we have to avenge Hashem's honor.

The problem with the perspective of the Jewish people was that they were focused on their loss (i.e. Moshe dying after this final mission) and had to be "given over" because they didn't want to lose Moshe. Only the tribe of Levi, Moshe's tribe and the one tribe that was historically outwardly focused on what HaShem wanted (e.g. they never participated in the golden calf; they were the only tribe to keep the *mitzvah* of circumcision in the desert; etc.), wasn't reluctant to go to war. It is for that reason that only 12,000 men had to be given over to the war. Only the other tribes were reluctant, the tribe of Levi was already ready to go on this final mission.

This week's *parsha* also discusses the request of Gad and Reuven to occupy land on the east side of the Jordan. It seems that although the original request to live in the land outside Eretz Yisrael came from Gad and Reuven, they did not have a big enough population to occupy the land, so they invited half of Manasseh to join them (Ramban; Abarbanel). This does not necessarily mean that Gad and Reuven were small tribes, it very likely might just show how large the land was that was requested by Reuven and Gad.



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