

TorahFax: Mattos-Massei

Rabbi Zalmen Marazov

Tuesday, Tammuz 22, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 11, 2023

Shabbat we will read in the Torah the final two portions (Parshiot) of the Book of Bamidbar (Numbers) – Matot & Masei. At this point, we in the Diaspora and in Israel, have the exact same Torah readings.

During the summer months we also recite a chapter of Pirkei Avot (Chapters of Our Fathers) each Shabbat. This Shabbat we start again with the first chapter.

One of the many beautiful and practical lessons in this chapter is: "Antignos of Socho would say, 'Be not like servants who serve the master for the sake of receiving a reward. But be like servants who serve the master without the expectation of receiving a reward; and let the fear of heaven be upon you.'"

Q. Reward is mentioned in the Torah. G-d promised many times in the Torah that He will reward us for the observance of Torah and Mitzvot. Why shouldn't a person serve G-d for the sake of reward?

A. The Chafetz Chaim gives the following parable to explain this. A poor man was walking in the street. He was thinking to himself how he could earn some money to feed his family, as he had nothing in his home. He needed the basics of food and clothing. He was walking with a bitter heart, his head bowed down... when he noticed a shiny object on the ground.

He decided to examine it. He picked it up and saw it was a small piece of glass. He was about to throw it away, but something struck him that this glass is different than ordinary glass, as it sparkled with different colors. He decided to take it and bring it to someone to check it out.

He brought it to a jeweler, who after giving one look at it exclaimed, "You have a brilliant diamond here. It's not for the ordinary person. A diamond like this is befitting for the king. The word got out and the king called for the poor man to show him the stone. After examining the diamond, the king said to the man, "This is an extraordinary diamond. How much do you want for it?"

The poor man was at a loss. He had no idea of its value. He said to the king, "I have no idea how much it is worth. I'm only a poor person and wasn't even sure if it had any value when I picked it up... You, my dear king, you know its value. Give me what YOU think it's worth!"

The same is with our performance of mitzvot. We have no idea of their true value. If we were to expect reward it would be according to our values, which we have no idea what they are. We are like the poor man who would have given the stone away for a few pennies.

Thus, our sages teach us that we should perform G-d's mitzvot and study G-d's Torah not for the sake of reward as our understanding of their value is very limited. Only G-d knows the true value of each mitzvah. We should leave it up to Him to decide the reward which He will give us for performing them. His reward will surely be much greater and more meaningful than any reward we can think of.

Thursday, Tammuz 24, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 13, 2023

This Shabbat we read the two final portions of the book of Numbers (Bamidbar), Matot and Masei.

Parshat Matot begins with the laws of vows (Nedarim); "And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel, saying, 'This is what G-d commanded; When a man makes a vow to the L-rd or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bind, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all which came out of his mouth.'" The general law of vows also applies to women.

"He shall not break his word; he shall do according to all which came out of his mouth." However, when one vowed to transgress a commandment of the Torah, he or she are prohibited to fulfill the vow. A personal vow cannot override G-d's commandment, which we have already vowed much earlier, at Mount Sinai to keep and observe.

This Parsha also teaches us the significance and implications of the words we speak. Indeed, the third commandment of the Ten Commandments is, "Do not utter the name of G-d in vain." This is a prohibition which is associated totally to what we say.

Words and speech are very powerful tools. In fact, the creation of the universe, as told in the beginning of the Torah, came about through G-d's words!

G-d's sayings are not the same as our form of speech. Yet, the fact that the Torah relates that the world was created by G-d's sayings, tells us how important words are. They have great power.

This is why we use the term "Bli Neder"; which means "without a vow" when making a commitment. For, even with the best intentions, one never knows if they will be able to honor their commitment. Thus, when making a pledge or commitment whether in business or otherwise, it is always best to say "Bli Neder" - i.e., without a vow. We must especially be very careful to avoid using the expression, "I swear."

Swearing, even when one is 100% sure about the accuracy of the subject, is not proper. How much more so when some use the expression without thinking whether what they're swearing to, is true.

The Midrash relates the following: "King Yannai ruled over two thousand cities. Yet, they were all destroyed because they were accustomed to swearing -- even in truth!"

"How so? A person would say to his friend, 'I swear that I will go and eat this and this in such a place; I swear that I will drink this and this in that place.' Then they performed exactly as they swore. They were still punished although they didn't swear falsely."

The Midrash concludes: If for those who swore the truth, the punishment was so severe; how much more so does one have to be careful not to swear falsely.

Friday, Tammuz 25, 5783 (Hakhel Year) July 14, 2023

This Shabbat, with the reading of Parshat Matot & Masei, we conclude the fourth book of the Torah – the book of Numbers (Bamidbar). We also bless the new month, Menachem Av. Rosh Chodesh is Tuesday night and Wednesday.

In Parshat Matot the Torah relates that the tribes of Reuben and Gad had a great multitude of cattle. They came to Moshe and requested to inherit land on the eastern side of the Jordan River, rather than settling on the other side together with the rest of the people of Israel.

Moshe rebukes them; "Shall your brethren go to war and you will sit here? You will turn away the hearts of the Children of Israel from going into the land which G-d has given them."

Moshe reminds them what happened when the ten spies came back and convinced the people not to go to the Promised Land. This resulted in their staying in the desert forty years.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad replied that they will go and fight together with their brothers. "We will build fences to secure our cattle and cities for our little ones. We ourselves will be ready and go armed before the Children of Israel... we will not return to our houses until the Children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance."

Moshe was satisfied. He said to them, "If you will do this thing and go to war... until the land will be conquered... then this land shall be to you for a possession before G-d."

Then Moshe instructs them, "Build cities for your little ones and fences for your sheep and do that which has proceeded out of your mouth (i.e. keep your promise)."

Q. The tribes of Reuben and Gad told Moshe, "We will build fences to secure our cattle and cities for our little ones." First mentioning securing their cattle and then their children. Yet, Moshe instructed them, "Build cities for your little ones and fences for your sheep." Why did he reverse the order?

A. Our sages tell us that Moshe rebuked the two tribes for speaking of the safety of their cattle before their children. Thus, he instructed them to go about this in the proper order; "First build cities for your little ones and only after you shall build stables for your cattle."

As with every part of the Torah, there is an important lesson here. Especially in our time when so much emphasis is placed on material success, at times, unfortunately, even at the expense of our children.

The lesson from this story in the Torah is that we must place much greater priority and emphasis on protecting our children. Monetary and social success is important, but it should only be secondary to the spiritual, moral and emotional wellbeing of our children. May G-d bless us all with much Nachas.