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פרשת מטות-מסעי תשפ"ו

POWER OF SPEECH

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the B'nei Yisroel, saying: This is the thing which Hashem has commanded (30:2).

Only in this section dealing with *nedarim* and in the one dealing with *shechutei chutz* (*korbanos* slaughtered outside the confines of the *Beis Hamikdash*) does it say "This is the thing". Generally speaking, Moshe *Rabbeinu* was taught the Torah by Hashem briefly, but he conveyed it to the heads of the tribes in a much more detailed fashion. Only in these two sections did Moshe convey what he had been taught by Hashem to the heads of the tribes in exactly the same concise manner in which he had heard it, and it was only the heads of tribes who explained the *halachos* on these two sections to the rest of the nation more elaborately.

Nedarim teach us about the immense power of speech. Through them a person can prohibit certain actions on himself, giving them a force equivalent to an absolute Torah prohibition, which in certain circumstances he cannot retract. Similarly, by sanctifying an animal with his mouth he becomes liable to *kares* if he proceeds to profane his statement by slaughtering the animal outside the *Beis Hamikdash*. In everyday life too, life and death are in the power of the tongue.

By adding not even one word in his speech to the heads of the tribes on these *halachos* pertaining to speech Moshe *Rabbeinu* was emphasizing how careful we have to be not to speak more than necessary, and to use our ability to speak, which is the most important attribute that distinguishes us from the animals, wisely and with circumspection.

PRAY BEFORE TRAVELLING

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the B'nei Yisroel, saying: This is the thing which Hashem has commanded ... If a man makes a vow to Hashem (30:2-3).

Parashas Matos, which deals with vows, comes before *Parashas Massei*, which deals with the journeys of the Jews. This serves as a reminder before travelling out of town to make spiritual resolutions so as not to stumble during the journey. Only once one has undertaken to abide by "the utterances of his mouth" should he proceed to *Massei*, to his journeys.

When Rav Sternbuch was young, people would say, "He who is a complete person at home is only a half a person when travelling". This is because of the spiritual dangers on the road. As *Gedolei Torah* have noted, sometimes even one departure from the *Stender* of Torah and *halacha* is enough to make a person lose out on an entire *zman*. If that was the case in previous generations, what can one say about our generation, where the street is full of forbidden sights and various spiritual dangers?

Therefore, it is worthwhile for anyone making trips out of town to accept upon himself and to make resolutions to refrain from sinning, and to pray for himself and his sons and daughters that they should not stumble upon any spiritual pitfalls on the way (see the prayer to be said before travelling by Rav Chaim Volozhiner in *Keter Rosh*).

VOWS TO GIVE CHARITY

If a man makes a vow to Hashem ... (30:3).

A *darshan* asked why the section dealing with *nedarim* at the beginning of *Parshas Matos* comes after the section at the end of *Pinchas* which talks about the *korbanos* of the *Yamim Tovim*. He answered that it is customary to make a *neder* to give charity when saying *Yizkor*, or after receiving an *aliyah*, and sometimes people forget to fulfil their vows. The Torah therefore wants to emphasize that "he shall not violate his word; according to whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do".

In Rav Sternbuch's *shul* the wording of the *mi shebeirach* after an *aliyah* is *kesheyitein* (when he will give) instead of *ba'avur sheyitein* (in return for his giving), so that if he remembers to fulfil his vow by giving charity he will receive the blessing, but if he does not remember, he will at least not have breached a *neder*.

SILENCE CONSTITUTES CONSENT

And if her husband remained silent from day to day, he has upheld all the vows and prohibitions she has assumed; he has upheld them since he remained silent on the day he heard it (30:15).

This section teaches us that a husband's or father's silence in the face of his wife's or daughter's actions is tantamount to consent. Hence, if a husband or father remains silent for the entire day on which his wife or daughter made a vow, that vow becomes effective and can no longer be annulled by him.

If the head of a household witnesses breaches of morality amongst members of his household, he is obligated to tell them that they are acting against halacha, and must use his wisdom to find ways of preventing them from sinning. If he remains silent, and does nothing, he is considered in Heaven to have consented to their actions, and consequently bears responsibility for their sins, since his inaction and silence is considered the equivalent of consent.

TORAH NOT UP FOR NEGOTIATIONS

"Take revenge for the B'nei Yisroel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people. So, Moshe spoke to the people" (31:2-3). Rashi: *Although he heard that his death depended on the matter, he did it joyfully, without delay.*

Why was Moshe's alacrity on this occasion considered such a worthy deed? Since he had been commanded expressly by Hashem to send the nation to war, does it not go without saying that he would perform Hashem's command without delay?

Every second that Moshe *Rabbeinu* remained alive was of immense spiritual benefit to the nation. Therefore, it could have been argued that if Moshe would delay the war a little bit, even though that would mean delaying the fulfilment of Hashem's commandment, it would result in a tremendous benefit for the *avodas Hashem* of the entire nation, who would continue to be influenced for the good in their *yiras Shamayim* just by being in the vicinity of Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Therefore, the *pasuk* teaches us that nevertheless Moshe did not delay, and immediately fulfilled Hashem's command. Once he had been commanded to take revenge against the Midianites, he refused to water down this commandment in any way, even for the sake of immense spiritual benefit in another area.

We see from here that *mitzvos* cannot be performed along the lines of business negotiations, where one negotiates and bargains with the aim of losing a little in one thing and gaining a lot elsewhere. Instead, we are obligated to fulfil our duties faithfully, without compromise or calculations.

When the secular authorities expressed their desire to support *yeshivos* in *Eretz Yisroel* in order to gain a foothold and have a say in the running of those *yeshivos*, some *Roshei Yeshivos* agreed to this proposal, since the financial status of the *yeshivos* was dire at the time. However, the Brisker Rav was adamantly opposed, stating that the Torah was not the property of staff in the *yeshivos*, and one was obligated to oppose their consent. The Torah is not our property; it is not subject to negotiations in which we sell parts of it for the sake of profit elsewhere.

COUNTERBALANCING TUMAH WITH TORAH

Why was Moshe's death connected to the war against Midian? Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld explained this on the basis of the principle that "Hashem has made this corresponding to that" (*Koheles* 7:14). Whenever the forces of *tumah* increase in the world, Hashem makes sure to counterbalance them with corresponding forces of *kedushah*, so that the side of *kedushah* should be as strong as the side of *tumah*. The only reason the world was capable of tolerating Bilaam's power of *tumah* was because of the corresponding power of *kedushah* of Moshe *Rabbeinu*. Therefore, as long as Bilaam was still alive it would not be possible for Moshe *Rabbeinu* to pass away, because he was needed to counterbalance Bilaam.

In our times too, the forces of *tumah* and heresy are more intense than they have been at any time since we became a nation. On the other hand, Hashem in His great mercy has orchestrated events in such a manner that we have an unprecedented explosion of Torah with yeshivos and *kollelim* in every town. The Jewish nation can thereby continue to exist with the increased *kedushah* counterbalancing the forces of *tumah*. Our duty is to endeavor to increase the side of *kedushah* in response to the *tumah* so prevalent everywhere.

THE “MOFES” OF THE BEIS YISROEL

They were the same ones who were involved with B’nei Yisroel on Bilaam’s advice to betray Hashem over the incident of Pe’or, and so the plague was among the congregation of Hashem (31:16).

This *pasuk* implies that Hashem’s vengeance against Midyan was not only instigated by their having caused B’nei Yisrael to sin, but also by the fact that as a result of their actions, Hashem was forced to inflict a plague on the Jewish nation in which twenty-four thousand people died.

This teaches us that if someone causes another person to sin, he will be punished not only for having caused his friend to stumble in a sin, but also for having brought about a situation in which Hashem deems it necessary to punish the sinner. Since Hashem desires the best for us, and does not wish to punish us, if someone is instrumental in Hashem’s punishing another person, that is considered a sin in and of itself.

For this reason, *Gedolim* have always been particular about making sure that no one should be punished on their account. For example, Rav Sternbuch recalls being with the *Beis Yisroel* of Gur when the Rebbe was told that one of his major opponents had passed away, and that this must have been a “*mofes*” (wonder) of the Rebbe. When he heard this, the Rebbe was shaken to the core and said, “I don’t cause any Jew to be punished, *chas veshalom*, and whatever you do, please don’t associate me with any punishment that has befallen a Jew, *chas veshalom*.”

Rav Leib Chasman (see *Ohr Yahel*, chap. 2, p. 225) notes that since Hashem’s degree of benevolence is many times greater than His degree of retribution, if someone assists, or is instrumental, in the performance of another person’s *mitzvah*, not only does the actual act of that *mitzvah* accrue to the merit of the person who was instrumental in bringing it about, and he has a share in the reward for that *mitzvah*, but he also receives a reward from Hashem for the very fact that because of him Hashem has granted a benefit to another Jew, and showered that Jew with a reward for the performance of that *mitzvah*.

UNITY THROUGH SEPARATION

And Moshe gave to the children of Gad and the children of Reuven and to half the tribe of Menashe the kingdom of Sichon the Amorite king (32:33)

Only the tribe of Gad and Reuven had requested this territory on the other side of the Jordan river, so why did Moshe suddenly allot it also to half the tribe of Menashe, who had not even requested it?

The *Moshav Zekeinim* answers that the land on the other side of the Jordan was very large and the tribes of Gad and Reuven did not require all of it. Menashe was the tribe chosen to inherit this territory together with the other two tribes, because their forefather Yosef had caused his brothers to tear their clothes (*Bereishis* 44:13), and therefore Menashe’s inheritance was split into two parts.

This teaches us the depths of divine justice. Even though Yosef acted legitimately towards his brothers, nevertheless, since he was the source of their distress, he was punished for all future generations by having his tribe divided. By the nature of things, there would be a lot of interaction between the two parts of the tribe of Menashe. They would be unified socially and emotionally despite the natural separation of the Jordan River. Thus, this punishment served as an antidote to Yosef’s original sin, which stemmed from a lack of brotherly love.

SHMIRAS HABRIS IN OUR GENERATION

Alternatively, the late Satmarer Rebbe, Rav Yoel, suggested that knowing that it is not possible to survive *Galus* without guarding the *bris kodesh* properly, Moshe *Rabbeinu* decided that the tribes of Gad and Reuven needed to live in the vicinity of descendants of Yosef, who had excelled in the attribute of preserving

his morality, even in the most depraved surroundings. They would have a positive influence on the other two tribes, and ensure that their lives would be conducted with modesty, sanctity, and purity.

In this context, Rav Sternbuch recalls how Rav Schneider on Yom Kippur 5704 (1943) delivered his speech before *Ne'ilah*, sobbing throughout. Rav Schneider said that he had heard from a reliable witness that Rav Yaakov Lorberbaum, author of the *Nesivos*, spoke about the "*Cheit Hayadua*" in his *Ne'ilah drashah* and aroused his entire audience, including children, to tears, until they could be heard from a distance.

Rav Schneider said that if the *Nesivos* already found it necessary to address this issue, how much more so was it imperative to do so then, when hundreds of thousands of our brethren were being mercilessly slaughtered in Europe. Who knows, he said, if the "*Cheit Hayadua*" was not the cause of this, since the *Gemara* says that this sin is considered the equivalent of shedding the blood of infants? Perhaps, then, we were being punished for this act of cruelty on our part. He exhorted all those present to undertake to preserve the holy covenant, the *bris kodesh*, and Hashem, in turn, would preserve His covenant with His nation and protect us.

When parents used to come to him for a *bracha* prior to their sons' bar mitzvahs, the late Manchester Rosh Yeshiva, Rav Yehudah Zev Segal, would ask to say a few words to the child first. He would take the child's hand and explain to him his obligations with regard to *kedushah* (in thought, speech, and action).

Afterwards, he would explain to the boys' parents that even though in previous generations people did not talk about these matters so much, nowadays that *tumah* has become so prevalent everywhere it has become appropriate to speak to boys about them, even before they reach the age of bar mitzvah.

Rav Segal told Rav Sternbuch that many boys told him later how he had saved them, because had he not spoken to them, they would not have had any idea what *kedushah* was about.

When the father of a Bar Mitzvah boy once asked Rav Sternbuch to speak to his son about matters of *kedushah*, Rav Sternbuch responded that this was the father's personal obligation, and he should do this himself.

A *bachur* once came to see Rav Sternbuch complaining that he did not enjoy learning and asking for advice about how he could acquire a taste for learning. Rav Sternbuch took the boy's hands and stroked them several times. "I can see that you are a good boy", he told him. The boy then complained that he had already been thrown out of several *yeshivos*, he did not enjoy learning, and the yeshiva he was in now also wanted to expel him. Rav Sternbuch told him that if he did not enjoy *Gemara* he should start learning *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*. "Come to me in a little while and tell me what you are learning, and what progress you have made".

At that stage the boy burst out crying and said, "I need a *bracha* to be saved from the Internet". Rav Sternbuch comforted the boy and told him that once he would acquire a taste for learning Torah, he would no longer be faced with the trial of being drawn towards the Internet. He told him to start learning *Kitzur Shulchan Aruch*, and his situation would gradually improve. He also referred him to educational advisers who would help him by offering practical measures for dealing with his addiction.

Nowadays, the forces of *tumah* are prevalent not just in the street, but just about everywhere. In our times, especially, we have to guard [*shomer*] the *bris*. Anyone who ensures that his eyes do not see forbidden sights becomes elevated immeasurably, in addition to which Rav Shimon Shkop notes that it is a great method for remembering one's Torah. In the merit of guarding our eyes they will be holy and pure enough to witness the restoration of the divine presence to Tzion when our "eyes will behold Your return in mercy to Tzion".

DONATIONS FOR TORAH LEARNING

Novach went and conquered Kenas and its surrounding villages, and called it Novach, after his name (32:42).

The *Midrash* says that Novach did not have sons, and so he called the city "Novach" after his own name, in order to immortalize himself. However, in the end, as Rashi notes, this name did not remain permanently.

This teaches us that the way to commemorate ourselves is not by means of commemorative plaques and the like, but rather through benefiting the public by disseminating Torah and *yiras Shamayim*. This means

that one should not necessarily focus on donating funds for the construction of a building for a yeshiva or *cheder*, but also finance ongoing daily costs. Even if such donations are not officially acknowledged on some plaque, they are enshrined upon the souls of the donors for all eternity, and they will reap the fruits of their actions and the merits of being partners in increasing Torah learning. Anyone looking for eternal life should seek to be a partner in supporting a yeshiva, which produces students who are great in Torah and fear of heaven. Those students are considered to be like his sons for all eternity.

However, sometimes it is appropriate to have one's name publicized, if this would encourage others to emulate them. If the donors' intention is to publicize their name for the sake of Heaven, to encourage others to emulate them, they will also receive a great reward. Hashem searches each person's heart to determine their real motivations.

In this world, we cannot fathom Hashem's ways regarding reward and punishment, but we have a tradition that there is no merit greater than those who are partners in Torah.

Furthermore, based on the tradition we have received from our *rabbanim*, that the existence of Torah in *yeshivos* and *kollelim* depends on women, because without them *avreichim* and *bachurim* could not exist, someone who supports educational institutions for girls is also considered to be literally supporting Torah.

ACKNOWLEDGING MIRACLES

These are the journeys of the B'nei Yisroel ... and Moshe wrote their goings forth, stage by stage, by the commandment of Hashem (33:1-2).

The Torah is usually very sparing with its words, and yet in this *parsha* we find 42 journeys in the desert enumerated, together with all the place names. This may be in order to demonstrate the greatness of the Jewish nation. After a person witnesses revealed miracles many times, he can be expected to become used to them, and for them to cease having a major impact on him, and yet the Jews did not get used to the 42 journeys. They did not view them as one long trip, but upon each journey they became affected anew by Hashem's kindness towards them, and they contemplated Hashem's miraculous guidance each time, without becoming accustomed to their situation.

This teaches us to examine Hashem's kindness towards us throughout our long years in exile. Each generation produces individuals and nations who seek to harm us, but Hashem protects us. In the last few generations, in particular, we have been surrounded by nations who seek to destroy us here in *Eretz Yisroel*, and we have also suffered from those who hate religion and seek to enact anti-religious degrees, and Hashem has saved us from them.

KIVROS HATA'AVAH

They journeyed from Kivros HaTa'avah and camped in Chatzeros (33:17).

The *Maor Veshemesh* expounds this *pasuk* homiletically that only someone who has subdued his desires ("*journeyed from Kivros Hata'avah*") can go out into the courtyard and the street ("*camp in Chatzeros*") without sinning.

Rav Moshe Schneider would call *yeshivos* and *kollelim* cities of refuge because of the immorality rampant on the streets. What can one say nowadays, when the situation is much worse, and even an ordinary conversation with a person in the street can pollute us with spiritual poison?

We have to be especially careful during *bein hazmanim*, because during a short period one can lose all one's spiritual gains.

POSITIVE ENVIRONMENTS

Among the cities you shall give to the Leviyim shall be six cities of refuge ... (35:6).

The *arei hamiklat* (cities of refuge) were meant to be places where those who had unintentionally killed someone were forced to spend time away from their family and friends to determine what might have led to this terrible event, to reassess their spiritual status, and repent their deeds. The cities populated by the *Leviyim* were the most appropriate ones to house the *arei hamiklat*, because the *Leviyim* who dedicated their

lives to serving Hashem were likely to have the best influence on the inadvertent murderers, since they knew how to appreciate the sanctity of life and were therefore especially careful to keep away from any activity that even remotely endangered anybody's life. (Although the cities of refuge were only designated for those guilty of inadvertent manslaughter, even such people require atonement since if their actions would have been defined as complete *ones* (duress), they would not have been sent to those cities).

Alternatively, since all the murderers were to be concentrated in the city of refuge, the spirit of *tumah* and the *yezter hara* would increase in that environment (see the *Beis Halevi*, beginning of *Parshas Noach*). In order to counteract this effect, Hashem saw to it that these cities would also be the residences of *Leviyim* so that their power of Torah would protect the place and counteract the spirit of *tumah*.

Furthermore, if the murderers would have been located amongst different populations, the local residents would have been likely to learn from their ways. Therefore, Hashem placed them in the company of *Leviyim* so that they would bring the sinners closer to Torah, without themselves being negatively affected by them. Only *talmidei chachamim* such as the *Leviyim* are capable of doing that.

KIRUV TODAY

Just like someone who does cleaning work becomes sullied, so too can those active in outreach work become tainted by sin if they do not take precautions, and not everybody is cut out for such activities.

It is a great *mitzvah* to cause others to become observant, but nowadays entering the home of the irreligious and speaking to them is likely to be very harmful, since they are steeped in immorality and *tumah*. It is forbidden for an unmarried boy to enter their homes for *kiruv* work, and even married men are only permitted to do so if it is clear that based on their situation and spiritual level they will not stumble. They must take the advice of their *rabbanim* who will decide whether they are suitable candidates for outreach work.

Just being in the presence of the irreligious in our time poses a situation of *shachich hezeyka*, prevalent harm, in which case the principle "no harm will befall the one who observes a *mitzvah*" does not apply (see *Pesachim* 8b). Even though there are many *tinokos shenishbu* today, whom we are obligated to save, not everybody is an appropriate candidate for engaging in this holy work.

POWER OF PRAYER

The *Gemara* says (*Makkos* 11a) that the mothers of the *Kohanim Gedolim* would supply food and clothing to the murderers so that they would not pray for their sons to die. How great must be the power of prayer if even a sinner such as an inadvertent murderer has the power to bring about the death of the *tzaddik hador* through his prayer!

However, not every prayer is accepted, this depending on how pure the intentions of the person praying are, and if his prayer comes from the depths of his heart. Since the murderers in the cities of refuge knew that their only possibility of being allowed to leave was the death of the *Kohen Gadol*, their prayers were heartfelt and intense, and therefore had such a potentially powerful effect.

MANSLAUGHTER ON THE ROAD

These shall be for you a statute of justice for all your generations, in all your dwelling places (35:29).

The cities of refuge were designated only for someone who unintentionally killed another person. If a person acted so recklessly that his action was deemed to approximate a deliberate act (*shogeg karov l'mezid*) rather than a completely inadvertent action (*shogeg*), the perpetrator was not entitled to seek refuge in an *ir miklat* and had to protect himself his entire life from the *goel hadam* (person avenging the murder) using his own devices. Moreover, even someone whose action was accompanied by the requisite degree of inadvertency, was still permitted to be killed by the *goel hadam* should he step outside the *ir miklat*. Clearly, even completely inadvertent manslaughter is a grievous sin.

Traffic laws overseas or in *Eretz Yisroel* are not only binding *halachically*, but Torah legislation in fact mandates much stricter laws to ensure the safety of car passengers and pedestrians, so that anyone who does not abide by even the minimal standards of non-Jewish (or Israeli) regulations, such as those pertaining to

speed limits, is a wicked sinner, and the magnitude of his sin should something, G-d forbid, happen due to his negligence, cannot be overestimated. Even if nothing actually happens, if a driver for his part, has acted negligently, that itself will deduct from his merits in Heaven, because merits would have had to be used up to save him from his recklessness. Especially during the period leading up to *Tisha B'Av*, we are required to take special care in this area.

FLATTERING THE WICKED

And you shall not corrupt the land in which you live ... (35:33).

Some *Rishonim* rule that someone who flatters a wicked person transgresses the prohibition of "corrupting the land". Since the *pasuk* refers to the land "in which you live", i.e. to *Eretz Yisroel*, it would appear that someone who flatters wicked people in *Eretz Yisroel* commits an especially serious sin, because, in addition to the actual sin of flattery, he is also an accomplice to the desecration of the sanctity of *Eretz Yisroel* committed by the wicked people whom he flatters. By flattering them, he himself is considered, in addition to having flattered the wicked, also to have polluted *Eretz Yisroel*.

In this context, Rav Sternbuch always denounces in the strongest terms the phenomenon of senior irreligious politicians being invited to weddings of religious politicians, where they are welcomed and embraced, and then sometimes feted and sung to by local religious residents. As the Chofetz Chaim pointed out, if we are unable to prevent the actions of the wicked, the very least we can do is not to fawn to them.

CHILLUL SHABBOS AND THE THREE WEEKS

During his *hesped* on the occasion of Rav Elchonon Wasserman's Yahrzeit several years ago, Rav Sternbuch - who knew Rav Elchonon personally - mentioned that the late Sadigurer Rebbe, Rav Avrohom Yitzchok Friedman, told Rav Sternbuch that he met Rav Elchonon Wasserman at the *Knessiah Gedolah* in Marienbad, and told him that he was about to move to *Eretz Yisroel* and was going to settle in Tel Aviv. Rav Elchonon became alarmed, and responded that he would never be able to live in Tel Aviv, because if he would witness the *chillul Shabbos* taking place there, he would not be able to cope with the pain of seeing Shabbos being desecrated in the sanctuary of the King. How is it possible, he concluded, to be in the King's palace and remain quiet about *chillul Shabbos*?

Rav Sternbuch noted that nowadays we have unfortunately reached the stage in *Eretz Yisroel* where *chillul Shabbos* has become so prevalent, be it in the form of public transportation, government-sponsored activities or shops that are open, that the situation can be described as an uprooting of *Shabbos r"l*.

In truth, the destruction of *Shabbos* is a more severe matter even than the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*: keeping *Shabbos* overrides the construction of the *Beis Hamikdash* (*Yevamos* 6a), and if *Shabbos* is more important than the construction of the *Beis Hamikdash*, it stands to reason that the opposite is also true, namely that its destruction is a more severe matter than the destruction of the *Beis Hamikdash*. This is because *Shabbos* is the covenant connecting the Jewish nation to Hashem, and by uprooting it, we sever our connection to Hashem. We do not have prophets to arouse the nation, nor do we have personalities such as Rav Elchonon to vociferously bewail the public desecration of *Shabbos*, but we are nevertheless duty-bound to raise a tremendous voice of protest for the sake of *Shabbos*.