

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI BEREL WEIN**

### Wein Online

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

This issue of Toras Aish is dedicated  
in memory of  
Sharon Leinkram  
ברכה שיינדל רחל בת מיכאל דוד ז"ל  
May her memory be a blessing  
for all of klal Yisroel

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. © 2008 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at [www.rabbiwein.com](http://www.rabbiwein.com). For more information on these and other products visit [www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory](http://www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory).

**RABBI AVI WEISS**

### Shabbat Forshpeis

In this week's portion, Moshe (Moses) gives to the tribe of Reuven, the tribe of Gad and half of the tribe of Menasseh the entire Kingdom of Og, ruler of Bashan (Numbers 32:33). Interestingly, just before Moshe and the Israelites conquered the land of Bashan, the Torah records that G-d tells Moshe "fear him [Og] not" (Numbers 21:34).

Why should Moshe have been fearful of Og? Rashi writes that "Moshe was afraid of doing battle lest he [Og] be protected by the merit of (his services to) Avraham (Abraham), as it is written 'and there came one that had escaped and told Avraham (of the capture of Lot-Avraham's nephew) (Genesis 14:13). The one that came was none other than Og." Rashi's comment is best understood with the backdrop of the Maimonidean understanding of reward and punishment.

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Maimonides, echoing the Talmud, notes that three books are open on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Those who are clearly meritorious are immediately inscribed for a good year on Rosh Hashanah. And those clearly sinful, are inscribed immediately for a bad year on Rosh Hashanah. The benonim—those in the middle, have their sentence suspended until Yom Kippur, when their destiny is sealed. (Rambam, Hil. Teshuvah 3:3)

For Maimonides, it appears that reward and punishment is a simple matter of weighing one's good deeds against one's bad deeds. A person's fate depends upon what he or she has done more-good or bad.

But, Maimonides adds, that one bad deed because of its particular circumstances, could outweigh all the good one has done. The reverse is also true. One good deed could outweigh all of the evil ones. (Rambam, Hil. Teshuvah 3:2)

In other words, for Maimonides, only G-d can be the accountant for our deeds. The evaluation is not a mere weighing of numbers, it is a qualitative one—and only G-d can know which deed will make the whole difference.

This may be the intent of Rashi. True, King Og was the wicked of the wicked. But Moshe was concerned that he may have performed one good deed, like alerting Avraham that his nephew was taken hostage—and that good deed could carry him forever.

It sometimes occurs when traveling, that former students approach me and say—"you know, there is something you said, something you did in class that made a great difference in my life." My heart then drops as I offer a little prayer that the one word or action that is remembered, made a positive difference and not a negative one.

Rashi's comments teaches that we all should take heed to every action, every deed—as it could make the whole difference and change an entire world.  
© 2008 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

## Taking a Closer Look

“**A**nd G-d spoke to Moshe, saying: 'take vengeance against Midyan' (Bamidbar 31:1-2). Rashi brings two approaches as to why Moshe was instructed to attack Midyan, but not Moav, despite the fact that it was Moav that initiated the confrontation with the Jewish nation. In the first, he mitigates what Moav did, explaining that they had started the confrontation out of fear, whereas Midyan joined the attack even though they had no reason to be afraid that the Children of Israel would harm them. The second approach doesn't refer to Midyan at all; stating only that the reason an attack was not also made against Moav was "because of two good young birds that I (G-d) will take out from them; Rus the Moavite and Na'ama the Amonite."

Referring to these women as "young birds" must have some significance, but what is more striking is the inclusion of King Solomon's wife Na'ama, as there had been no mention that the nation of Amon was involved in the confrontation. Why, when trying to explain why Moav wasn't attacked, was a reason given why Amon wasn't either? [As the source of the second approach is the Talmud (Bava Kama 38b), these questions are directed there as well, see Tosfos d"h Moavim.] It should be pointed out that there are Midrashim that include the Amonim in the sin of trying to seduce Jewish men, see Bamidbar Rabbah 21:4 and Sifray, Balak 131. Nevertheless, the Talmud is trying to explain why Moshe's "kal va'chomer" from Midyan to Moav had to be preempted, with the reason being Rus and Na'ama. Unless the Malbim (Devarim 23:4) is correct that Amon and Moav were, at this time, one nation, there is no apparent reason to mention Na'ama when explaining why G-d didn't want Moshe to attack Moav. And, being that when the nation passed by their lands, they passed by two distinct nations, first passing by Moav (Devarim 2:9) and then Amon (2:19), it would be difficult to say that they were considered just one nation. (This is especially true since there were different laws that applied to each, with only war being forbidden against Moav, while any provocation was off limits against Amon.) If Amon and Moav were two separate and distinct nations, why mention the future convert from Amon when trying to explain why the commandment to attack Midyan does not include Moav?

All five of the kings of Midyan were killed in the war (Bamidbar 31:8), including Tzur, who was the father of the Midyanite women killed (with Zimri) by Pinachas (25:15). Our sages, of blessed memory, tell us (Midrash Agadah, Bamidbar 25:2; see also Or Hachayim on 22:2) that Tzur was none other than Balak, the Moavite king that asked Midyan to join them against the Jewish nation (Bamidbar 22:4). Tzur the

Midyanite was appointed king over Moav after Israel had defeated Sichon and Og because of his familiarity with Moshe, the leader of Israel. How was he so familiar with Moshe? Besides being from Midyan, where Moshe had lived for years, he was the son of Tzipor, which refers to Yisro (Moshe's father in law), i.e. Balak was a descendant of Yisro, who was called "Tzipor" (bird) because after he abandoned idol worship he had to keep running and "flying" away from everyone (Zohar, quoted in Torah Shelaimah, Bamidbar 22:15). Instead of following in his grandfather's footsteps and worshipping the One true G-d, Tzur (a.k.a. Balak) becomes a major antagonist against the one monotheistic nation. And he is not alone, as all five kings were equally anti-Semitic (see Rashi on 31:8), leading a country that is so against monotheism that Yisro was made into an outcast (see Rashi on Shemos 2:16), and his daughters were terrorized whenever they tried to draw water for their sheep (ibid, 2:17).

The contrast between Moav and Midyan is therefore not just about which specific actions were done by one and not the other, or what their motivation was for doing them, or that one has a redeeming quality while the other doesn't. It is about the very nature of the two nations. Midyan did things because of their hatred against the Children of Israel, while Moav did them because of a perceived threat. The very fact that Rus could come from Moav proves that Moav was not as anti-Semitic as Midyan. Not just that a Moavite could be interested in converting, but that the environment that allowed for a Rus existed. When a famine hit the Land of Israel (Rus 1:1), Elimelech was able to move to Moav to raise his family. Granted, this might not be looked upon in a positive light from Elimelech's standpoint. But as far as Moav's willingness to accept Jewish expatriates, it shows us that any level of anti-Semitism that existed was at the very least tolerable. This might be what is being contrasted with Midyan, where one of their own "birds" (Yisro) was chased away, while Moav allowed (or at least tolerated) it's "young bird" to convert and marry into a Jewish family.

Mentioning Rus and Na'ama was not done as a means of comparing Moav directly to Midyan (which had no such future converts). There was a valid reason to attack Midyan, as their involvement in the seduction of Jewish men that led to idol worship and the loss of 24,000 was symptomatic of their deeply rooted and long-standing enmity towards monotheism. Moav didn't share that level of enmity, so there was no commandment to attack them. Mentioning Rus and Na'ama was not done in order to prove that Moav and Amon were less hostile to monotheism than Midyan was (although that is true too), but as an example of things that couldn't have happened in Midyan because of its hostility towards monotheism. You can't compare

Moav to Midyan, because had Rus or Na'ama been brought up in Midyan, they could never have found their way to G-d (the emphasis being that it couldn't have happened in Midyan, not that it happened in Moav and Amon). Even if Amon was not a part of the conversation, Na'ama is included to illustrate a real-life situation that could not have occurred in Midyan because of its hostile environment. Just because a decree was made against Midyan, which tried to undermine the holiness of the Jewish people because they hated holiness, and who would never stand for one of theirs converting, doesn't mean that there should also be one against Moav, whose hiring of Bilam was motivated by fear, and who would allow Israelites to move there and marry one of their daughters, a daughter that would eventually convert and become the mother of Jewish royalty. © 2008 Rabbi D. Kramer

### MACHON ZOMET

## Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Yisrael Rozen, Dean of the Zomet Institute

“**O**ne who wants to enjoy benefits (Rashi: provided by others) can accept them (and this is not forbidden), like Elisha (as we have seen with Elisha, who accepted them), as is written, 'We will put a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp there' [Melachim II 4:10]. And one who does not want to enjoy benefits is not required to do so (this is not considered exaggerated pride or hate), like Shmuel from Rama, (who did not want to accept a benefit), as is written, 'And he would return to Rama, because his home was there' [Shmuel I 7:17]. Rabbi Yochanan said, wherever he went his home was with him (wherever he went he would take along everything he needed and a tent, in order not to take any benefits from others)" [Berachot 10b].

In the passage quoted above, we see that the sages see two different types of behavior of a leader, both of them legitimate. A leader can enjoy the benefits of his position, like the prophet Elisha, or refuse to accept anything, like Shmuel. There is no doubt that the model of Shmuel is to be preferred and is closer to the ideal. But even so, Elisha is also to be respected. He was the one who performed the miracle of bringing the son of his hostess back to life? the great woman of Shunam who offered him "a bed, a table, a chair, and a lamp," so that "when he passed by he would stop there to eat bread" [Melachim II 4:8].

However, anybody who follows the simple meaning of this passage in the Talmud, that Shmuel was scrupulous and shunned corruption, carrying with him a large knapsack with all his needs wherever he went, while Elisha was well rewarded for his troubles and enjoyed a grandiose suite on his trips, is what the Rambam calls a fool! Here is what he writes in his commentary on the Mishna:

"Those in error declare, 'He who wants to enjoy the benefits should act like Elisha'... But as far as I am concerned this is a distortion since it is clear, with no room for doubt, that Elisha did not receive any money from the people. And he certainly did not require them to give him anything, G-d forbid. He received honor and nothing else, such as being a guest when he was on a journey, including eating with his host at night or during the day and then going on his way. But Shmuel would not enter into anybody's house, and he would not eat anybody else's food." [Avot 4:6].

According to the Rambam, the difference between these two leaders was in whether they accepted honors, and nothing more. Elisha did not flee from honor, but it can be assumed that he did not pursue any special honors. Shmuel was stringent even when he was allowed to accept something, and he lived in an ascetic way, denying himself any benefits of his position. His exemplary way of life rises as a cry from his heart when the people want to replace him by a king? he says that such a king will take their possessions for the good of his palace, his transportation, his fields, and his vineyards, "and he will give them to his assistants and his slaves... in order to perform his labors" [Shmuel I 8:15-16? the laws of the kings]. He also made a point of the fact that Shmuel himself never took anything from the people: "Whose ox did I take, whose donkey did I take, whom did I rob, to whom did I apply force, from whom did I take a bribe in order to ignore in court? and I will return it to you... And the people replied, [G-d is] a witness!" [Shmuel I 12:3,5].

[Two notes for the interested: (1) With respect to Shmuel, we find that one who asked for a blessing was told to give a "contribution." "And he said (Shmuel's servant said to Shaul): Behold there is a Man of G-d in this city, and the man is honorable, everything he promises takes place... And Shaul said to his servant, let us go. But what can we bring to the man, for there is no bread left in our dishes, and we do not have any gift to bring to the Man of G-d, what will be with us? And the lad replied again to Shaul, and he said, here, I have a quarter of a shekel of silver, and I will give it to the Man of G-d, and he will tell us which way to go." [Shmuel I 9:6-8]. The point was not that Shmuel became rich from "a quarter of a shekel of silver." Rather, the gift was necessary from the point of view of the one who wanted a blessing, so that it could have an effect on a specific object. But this is not the place to expand this theme. (2) Shmuel specifically acts in a way that appears to be nepotism: "And when Shmuel became old, he appointed his sons as judges over Yisrael" [Shmuel I 8:1]. Can this be? I tried to give a tentative answer to this difficult question in my book, "Shoftim from the Viewpoint of the Sages" (page 115, in the chapter about Avimelech), and there is no room to expand on this here.]

Perks and leadership do not go together, certainly not in the post-royalty world. The nation of Yisrael cannot accept or put its faith in a leader who pursues worldly pleasures, even if all the sources for the funding are completely above board and legitimate. Even if the people are not expecting an old-style leader who lives in a hut and wears khaki shorts, they will reject any ostentatious display of snobbery and "the good life."

Unfortunately, almost by definition democracy brings highly successful men and leading candidates in primaries to government office rather than people of vision and idealism. The latter will not run for office, they will not join in the competition of dispensing smiles and promises to the public. And that is a simple fact. (Let it serve as a footnote to all those who want to hold primaries for the proposed new religious Zionist party...) In any case, even among prominent politicians there are those who set a good personal example by putting aside their own interests in order to faithfully serve the public.

Israel in this time of great stress needs a leader who can be trusted, one on whom we can depend even with our eyes half closed. The people have been called upon by our leaders to engage in war, to save water, to defend ourselves against the horrors of a nuclear threat, to break through the poverty barrier, to waging war against crime, and to broaden government-supported medical care. All of these national missions and more will lead to nothing if the leader remains deeply involved in his own real estate deals, is busy languishing in a home sauna, wears the most expensive watches and dresses in the latest fashions, or takes care of his stock options from within a military command post.

Sooner or later (and most probably sooner than later), the people will turn their backs on leaders who are only interested in the perks of office. We deserve something better than that!

#### **RABBI BORUCH LEFF**

### **Kol Yaakov**

**F**or the past several years, our brethren in Israel have faced terrorism of the most horrendous kind. Dozens of suicide bombings, numerous sniper shootings, thousands dead, thousands of serious injuries, thousands of "light injuries," thousands traumatized, a country living in fear, and there is no end in sight. Jews worldwide have struggled to cope and to react, feeling helpless to do anything that could stop the madness.

Many of us are numb to any and all tragedies now. Can anything move us anymore? Do we still know how to cry? Do we hear about the latest bombing, ask where, when, how many, and take our next bite of dinner? Yes, we think about how terrible "the situation" is and we sigh, but are thoughts enough?

How can we regain our sensitivity? How can we learn to cry again? What can we do facing the greatest crisis for the Jewish people in recent history? A lesson from this week's Torah portion, Matot, can help.

The opening section of Matot discusses the laws of making and annulling vows. One law mentioned is that a husband has the right to annul his wife's vows if she makes vows that affect their relationship negatively.

Rashi (30:6) describes the following case: "The verse says, 'G-d will forgive her.' This is describing a case in which a woman took a nazirite vow (no wine, haircuts, or becoming defiled from the dead) and her husband annulled it for her. She was unaware though that it was nullified and she violated her vow by drinking wine and becoming impure from the dead. She needs forgiveness even though her vow had been annulled. And if those whose vows were nullified need forgiveness, how much more do those whose vows have not been nullified."

The woman is being told that she needs atonement and forgiveness for merely intending to commit a transgression without actually committing one. This leads us to a perplexing question. Doesn't this contradict a statement from Talmud Kiddushin 40a, "G-d does not take evil intentions into account if they were not carried to fruition"? This being the case, why does G-d hold the woman's evil intentions against her? The fact is that she did not violate her vow, since her husband had annulled it. Why does it matter if she was unaware of his annulment or not?

We derive from the solution of this quandary a fundamental lesson for Jewish living. Actions are what count, not merely thoughts. If you think about murdering someone but never do anything to act upon it, then you've done nothing wrong and G-d holds nothing against you. But if you make concrete plans to kill, you prepare the weapon, the getaway, and the alibi, but the gun is broken and the shots are not fired, then while it is true that you haven't murdered anyone, it is also true that you will be prosecuted for attempted murder.

"G-d does not take evil intentions into account if they were not carried to fruition" only applies if the evil intention remained solely in the realm of thought. But if any solid and definitive actions were taken to bring the evil to its realization, the perpetrator needs forgiveness and atonement. Albeit, the atonement will not be as difficult to achieve had the action been carried out just as a criminal gets less jail time for attempted murder than for actual murder.

Actions are what count, not merely thoughts. This applies to performing good and positive deeds as well. Let's face it, does anyone really believe that "it's the thought that counts"? If you get yet another tie for Father's Day, do you really feel that "it's the thought

that counts," or do you think that if the person really cared they would have put more effort into finding a more appropriate and meaningful gift? Is it enough to tell your spouse that you thought about calling them during the day, or do you need to actually call for it to be consequential?

Why are actions so important? Why aren't thoughts enough?

Sefer HaChinuch (circa 1300) addresses the issue (paraphrased): "Why did G-d bind us with so many commandments? Know that a man becomes who he is based on his actions. Thoughts of his heart, and his intentions, always follow the lead of his actions, whether for good or evil. Even a very wicked person, who decides to suddenly perform good actions, will transform quickly into a righteous individual. The same is true for a righteous person who carries out evil actions. He will become evil."

There are other sources that praise the powerful effects actions can have upon a person. Professor William James once wrote: "Action SEEMS to follow feeling, but really action and feeling go together. By regulating action, which is under the more direct control of will, we can indirectly regulate the feeling, which is not. Thus, the sovereign voluntary path to cheerfulness, if our spontaneous cheerfulness be lost, is to sit up cheerfully and to act and speak as if cheerfulness were already there. If such conduct does not make you cheerful, nothing else on that occasion can. So, to feel brave, act as if you are brave, use all of your will to that end, and a courage fit will very likely replace the fit of fear."

The classic mussar (ethical) work, Mesilat Yesharim, by Rabbi Moshe Chaim Luzzato, circa 1700, (Chapter 7, Chelkai Zerizut-Steps Toward Enthusiasm) put it this way: "The man whose soul burns in the service of G-d will certainly not become lazy in the performance of His commandments, but his movements will be like that of a rapid fire. He will not rest or be at ease until the deed is completed. In addition, just as "zerizut," enthusiasm can result from an inner burning, so too it will create one. This means that one who perceives a quickening of his outer, physical movements in the performance of a commandment causes himself to experience an inner flaming movement as well, through which longing and desire will continually grow. If, however, he is sluggish in the movement of his limbs, the movement of his spirit and soul will die down and become extinguished. We all know this from experience."

The feelings of empathy we experience for our brethren in Israel must be attained, but they cannot remain mere feelings. They must translate into actions. We have all, most likely, accepted something upon ourselves and improved spiritually during these tumultuous and tragic times. The question though is whether we have been consistently successful in

maintaining our commitments. We must re-assess our status in our new acceptances. And if we find that we have failed, we should reduce them or change focus to another area we find more manageable. In this way, we don't allow our strong, spiritual, compassionate feelings to dissipate without becoming attached to a more permanent and meaningful action. (See Kol Yaakov, ACT, DON'T JUST REACT, [http://www.aish.com/torahportion/kolyaakov/Act3\\_Dont\\_Just\\_React.asp](http://www.aish.com/torahportion/kolyaakov/Act3_Dont_Just_React.asp))

Actions are what count, not merely thoughts.

If we cannot naturally cry anymore when we hear of bombings and horrific tragedies in Israel due to our numbness, we must not surrender to what, in effect, becomes apathy. As hard as it has become for us, we must dwell on the tragedies, read of the details, read of the victims, put ourselves in their position, imagine the suffering they have gone through, and cry.

This is our responsibility as Jews to "feel the burden of our colleagues and friends" (Avot 6:6). And what if after all this, we still cannot bring about the pain and tears?

At such a point, we must make ourselves cry, even artificially. We could begin to think of some tragic event that could occur in our lives that might bring us to tears. If this brings us to grief, we can then re-apply our tears to the tragedies in Israel. By externally producing tears, we will affect our deadened internal feelings to a soulful flame of passionate and sincere sadness for the situation in Israel. © 2008 Rabbi B. Leff & aish.com

#### **RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

### **Shabbat Shalom**

**H**ow was Moses different from the many other prophets recorded in the biblical tradition? Was there a distinction only in degree, or was there a much more fundamental difference, a difference "in kind" between Moses and those who came after him?

The opening verse in this week's portion of Matot may well provide us with an insight concerning this issue. We read, "And Moses spoke unto the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel saying: This is the thing [zeh hadavar] which G-d has commanded. When a man vows a vow unto G-d...(Numbers 30:2-3)

In his commentary, Rashi cites a Midrash (Sifrei, B.T. Nedarim 77) which makes the following distinction: whereas Moses as well as the other prophets introduced their prophecy with the word, 'Thus said G-d,' (koh amar haShem), the expression 'zeh hadavar asher tzivah haShem' "this is the thing which G-d has commanded" is unique to Moses, and represents Moses' additional and superior prophetic status. Rashi is apparently contrasting Moses with the other prophets; he does not seem to flesh out, however, the substance of this superiority. One of the most important super commentaries - or commentaries on the primary commentary Rashi - Rabbi Eliyahu Mizrachi, the R'em (1448-1526, chief rabbi of

Constantinople), suggests that the phrase "koh amar haShem" ("Thus said G-d...") expresses the intention or the essence of the vision, though not necessarily the vision itself; after all, the other prophets only see 'through a glass, darkly,' (aspaklarya sh'ainah me'irah). On the other hand, Moses' prophecy is through '...a glass, brightly,' (aspaklarya me'irah) and therefore he had the power to express precisely what was given to his eye or communicated to his mind, word for word.

In Emek HaNetziv, the classic commentary on the Sifri written by Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin (1817-1893), he questions any interpretation which could possibly suggest that even the vision of the other prophets was anything less than an exact transmission. Moreover, the Netziv proves the use of the word 'koh' elsewhere in the Torah as taken by the Talmudic sages to indicate something absolute and exact. After all, when the priests are commanded to bless the Israelites, we read the following words, "And G-d spoke unto Moses telling him to speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying: 'This is how [koh] you must bless the children of Israel... (Num. 6:23). And our sages insist that the blessing is to be recited exactly as presented in the text, 22 words, no more and no less. The Netziv therefore explains that what makes the prophecy of Moses unique, and the significance of "this" rather than "thus," lies in the fact that Moses communicated the divine word immediately upon his having received it, whereas the other prophets could only present their message after a delay of a period of time; after all the prophetic state had a paralyzing and debilitating affect on the other prophets, weakening their physical condition, while Moses received the G-dly message naturally, without the requirement of time-in-between for recuperation.

Rabbi Isaac Bernstein, the late erudite Rav of London, called my attention to the following commentary of Rabbi Yitzhak Zev Soloveitchik (Hidushei HaGryz): when the young shepherd Moses is confronted by a burning bush which is not consumed, the Almighty attempts to convince him to accept the responsibility of Jewish leadership. Moses is hard to convince, "Who am I that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Ex 3:11). But G-d counters Moses' resistance: "Certainly I will be with you" (Ex. 3:12).

The Gryz points out that the real significance of this dialogue is more profound than Moses' seeking assurance and G-d guaranteeing "back-up." Moses is questioning the efficacy of human involvement altogether in what he thinks ought to be a divine mission. After all, did not the Almighty promise the patriarchs that he, G-d himself, would act as the redeemer (Midrash Rabbah 15)? The divine response "I will be with you" is G-d's explanation that indeed He will act as the redeemer but that G-d acts through human instruments. G-d requires, as it were, human

beings to be His full partners; the ground rules with which the world is governed require divine objectives to be realized through human agency. Hence, G-d must insist that He and Moses go to Pharaoh and redeem Israel 'together,' G-d is choosing Moses to redeem the Israelites alongside of Him!

I would suggest that herein lies the truest distinction between Moses and the other prophets, as well as the significance of the differences in phraseology in the Hebrew text. The other prophets succeeded in receiving and transmitting a divine will; Moses succeeded in living a life and doing deeds which were the human extension of the divine plan, "this is the thing which G-d commands." The other prophets conveyed words in accordance with the divine message; Moses, however, changed reality in accordance with the divine plan. The other prophets spoke words which were a transmission of the divine; Moses lived a life which was an extension of the divine.

Perhaps this is why the Sifrei chooses to point out this distinction in the context, the laws of oaths and promises. Human beings have the power to alter reality by the oaths and words which they utter, as well as to effectuate forgiveness and absolution (Numbers 30). The realm of oaths and promises unmistakably points out the almost G-d-like powers of human beings, the ability of humans to serve in an almost divine capacity. It is indeed the most exalted goal of every person to become a vehicle for the expression of the divine will. Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch so interprets the biblical words sung by the Israelites after the splitting of the sea: "This is my G-d, and I shall be His sanctuary" (Exodus 15:2). ('Zeh eili V'anvehu,' is usually translated, This is my G-d and I shall glorify Him, but Rabbi Hirsch takes 'neveh' as sanctuary or home).

Moses' physical being, Moses' every act, was indeed a sanctuary and extension of the divine. Moses is therefore the greatest of all prophets and the highest human achievement of Jewish history. © 2008 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

### **RABBI ADAM LIEBERMAN**

## **A Life Lesson**

**I**n this week's Torah portion, G-d tells Moses that the Jewish people should wage war against the people of Midian. Moses then gave them specific instructions on how they should wage this war. When they returned from the battle, however, Moses learned that they failed to follow his exact instructions and:

"Moses... and all the leaders of the assembly went out to meet them outside the camp. Moses was angry with the commanders of the army..." (Numbers 31:13-14)

Even though Moses was clearly upset with those who were in charge of the battle, he did something so vitally important in leadership-he went out to meet them outside the camp. Moses practiced one of

the most important concepts in dealing with people-and that's always to reprimand people in private. In fact, the blockbuster best-selling book entitled "The One Minute Manager" devotes much time to this powerful principal.

Sadly, people in a position of authority don't like doing this because they have a strong ego-based need to put their power on display for all to see. So, in an effort of to show everyone that "they're the boss," they actually like to reprimand people in front of others. This makes you no better than a school yard bully and clearly makes you much more of a coward than a leader.

Ironically, people act this way because they wrongly believe that they'll actually gain respect by occasionally (or regularly) letting everyone know that they're in charge. But great leaders have long recognized that people truly want to do the right thing and publicly adding salt to their wounds is just plain stupid.

Parents are the most important "leaders" in the world. G-d entrusts them with the responsibility of raising His children, and He certainly doesn't want His children to be publicly ridiculed. There are certainly times that parents have a rush of frustration when their child does something wrong and have a powerful urge to yell at them for all to hear. But this isn't at all how to discipline or educate your child. Even though Moses was angry with his commanders, he didn't let it get the better of him. He chose to go outside the camp so he wouldn't embarrass them in front of their men.

There are countless times throughout the day that you'll be in a position of being a "boss." Whether as a customer in a store, a patron at a restaurant, or hiring a landscaper-for a brief period of time you can act any way you choose. While you might feel a need to let these people know "who's in charge," it will only make you look like a fool. And if there is something they did that you're upset about, then let them know without anyone else being able to hear. This will not only make them actually listen to what you're saying, but it will also build your own self-esteem by not living in the fantasy world that you can get taller by publicly knocking someone else down. © 2008 *Rabbi A. Lieberman & aish.com*

### **RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER**

## **Weekly Dvar**

**P**arshat Matot begins by describing the different kinds of vows a person can make, and how to annul them. But it also adds (30:3) that a person 1) shouldn't violate their own words, and 2) should perform all that leaves their mouth. Why the double commandment? Commentaries point out that the Torah is pointing to the fact that it's elevating a person's words and turning them into a commandment, as if it was biblical. They describe how we're above animals because we can speak, and we should use that power

wisely. They also point out the speech really is a power, able to raise and lower people's spirits. Some commentaries have even pointed out how we have 2 eyes, 2 ears, 2 nostrils, but only one mouth (proving that one mouth can do damage or cause good like two of any of the others). But there's something else that can be used to symbolize the power of speech...

Our mouths have sharp teeth (most of them), but have two soft lips to protect us from exposing those teeth. The symbolism is that we may have sharp/bad things to say, but we have to use our lips to prevent ourselves from uttering those words. But we also have a tongue, which is soft. The symbolism there may be that we should learn to protect our insides from THINKING negatively about others, so that we won't have to come to use external measures not to say them. It all starts by being soft and nice on the inside. By softening our internal thought process, we can improve our outer expressions and interactions. The Parsha tells us that not only are we able to brighten someone's day with a few kind words, but it is our duty to do so! © 2008 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

**RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY**

## Tricks of the Trade – Trade of the Tricks

“Those who live by the sword,” the clichéd expression goes, “die by it as well.” What about those who live by other means of evil? What happens to those who live by the curse, do they die by the curse? Or do they die by the sword as well?

Parshas Matos tells us of the fate of Bilaam ben Be'or, the world's most trusted and experienced sorcerer, whose curses never failed to hit their mark. Bilaam was hired by the king of Moav to curse the Jews and only through the merciful intervention of the Almighty's Divine Hand were his efforts thwarted.

After his original scheme had failed, Bilaam devised a plot that found the chink in our spiritual armor. He advised Balak to seduce Klal Yisrael to sin with Midianite women.

The Jews unfortunately fell prey to his plot and the wrath of Hashem was unleashed against His people. Thousands of Jews were killed in a plague and if not for the brave intervention of Pinchos, the grandson of Ahron, the toll would have been higher.

But now it was time for payback. Moshe amassed an army led by Pinchos, which struck Midian hard. The Torah tells us: “They massed against Midian, as Hashem had commanded Moses, and they killed every male. They killed the kings of Midian along with their slain ones - Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian; and Balaam son of Beor they slew with the sword.” (Numbers 31:7-8).

The final few words of the posuk raise a question: Does it really make a difference how they

killed Bilaam? They killed him. Does it make a difference if they killed him by drowning or they killed him by arrows. Perhaps the Jewish nation gave him a taste of his own medicine and cast a spell upon him like he attempted to do to Klal Yisrael? Is it really significant to tell how the Jews killed Bilaam? Why does the Torah tell us how he died?

The commentaries contrast the normal method in which Jews did battle - their mouths, with the way our Biblical nemesis Esav did battle - his sword. In this case, the roles seem reversed. Bilaam used his mouth, we used the sword. Is there a lesson in that as well?

World champion heavyweight boxer Joe Lewis reigned for over a decade from the late 1930s to his retirement in 1949. As a black man, he endured racist abuse despite his status as a major sports hero.

During his period of army service, he was driving with a fellow GI, when he was involved in a minor collision with a large truck. The truck driver got out, yelling and swearing racial epithets at Louis, who just sat in the driver's seat smiling.

“Hey you're Joe Louis! You're not gonna let him get away with that! Why didn't you get out and knock him flat?” asked his buddy after the truck driver had moved on.

“Why should I?” replied Joe. “When somebody insulted Caruso, did he respond by singing an aria?”

Rashi explains the Torah's underlying aim in telling us how Bilaam was killed. Bilaam was a descendant of Esav, whose existence and métier was decreed centuries before by his father Yitzchak, “And by your sword you shall live” (Genesis 27:40). Yaakov's weapon of choice throughout history came from Yitzchak's words, “the voice is the voice of Yaakov,” it is through Yaakov's mouth - through prayer and petition, persuading and cajoling that he was most successful. Bilaam did not use his trademark weapon - the sword - against Israel. Instead he attempted to cast a spell upon the Israelites, Bilaam switched venues and used the mouth - the instrument of brother Yaakov.

And so, explains Rashi as Bilaam exchanged his métier for the métier of Israel, Hashem showed the world that we do not have to rely solely upon our weapons of choice. As Bilaam exchanged his weapon, we, too, exchanged ours.

When it comes to dealing with our enemies, we have to use every appropriate means that fits the needs of the hour. Despite the fact that we are the people of words, we must know when to put our forte aside and use a different tool. Because in order to survive, we need not only know the tricks of the trade, but also how to trade our tricks! © 2005 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & Torah.org

