

# Toras Aish

## Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

**RABBI DOV KRAMER**

### Taking a Closer Look

“**T**ake revenge against the people of Midyan on behalf of the Children of Israel; afterwards you shall be gathered unto your people (i.e. you will die)” (Bamidbar 31:2). “Had Moshe wanted to live numerous years longer, he could have, for G-d had tied his death with taking revenge against Midyan. But this teaches you how praiseworthy Moshe was, for he did not say ‘in order that I can live I will delay taking revenge for the Children of Israel from the Midyanim.’ [Rather,] immediately ‘Moshe spoke to the people, telling them to mobilize men to wage war against Midyan.’ This Midrash (Tanchuma 3, see also Rashi, based on the Sifray) spells it out quite clearly: G-d gave Moshe the opportunity to extend his life by procrastinating fulfilling a divine commandment. The Chasam Sofer says that G-d gave Moshe this option for his (Moshe’s) benefit, so that no one can accuse Moshe of purposely delaying things in order to live longer. I would like to build on this suggestion, and in the process try to understand why and when Moshe might be accused of intentionally postponing G-d’s commandment.

One possibility could be based on the fact that the commandment to take vengeance against the Midyanim was mentioned in last week’s Parasha as well (Bamidbar 25:16-18), and Moshe might be accused of not taking action when it was first commanded, necessitating a second commandment (see Radal on Pirkay d’Rebbe Eliezer 47:48\*). However, Moshe’s death being contingent on first taking revenge on Midyan is only included the second time, making it impossible for Moshe to have known (until that second commandment was given) that he could extend his life by holding off on attacking. Additionally, the Midrash Lekach Tov and the Moshav Zekaynim understand the paragraph break in the middle of the verse right after that first mention (Bamidbar 26:1) to be an indication that the commandment to attack the Midyanim didn’t really belong there (only in our Parasha, where it was actually commanded). It was only mentioned in Parashas Pinchas because causing the death of 24,000 could not go unanswered; even if the response didn’t come until after the census (and other commandments were taught), a mention had to be made that a response would be forthcoming. This is

backed up by the wording of the Tanchuma, which says that Moshe responded “immediately” after being commanded.

Last week I discussed the death of the three leaders of the generation, Moshe, Aharon and Miryam, and how even though they couldn’t enter the Land of Israel because the generation they led did not, the Torah went out of its way to teach us that they were not included in the decree of the generation, because they were not guilty of the sins that prevented that generation from entering the Land. I also referenced the approach of the Abarbanel that the real reason Moshe could not enter was not because he hit the rock instead of speaking to it, but because he was a causal factor in the sin of the spies. Although I didn’t elaborate, the Abarbanel gets more specific, contrasting what the people asked for, what G-d approved, and what Moshe directed them to do. When they asked Moshe to send spies, all they asked was for an advanced scouting report to find out what the best route of attack was, and which cities to attack first (Devarim 1:22). G-d responded by telling Moshe that it was okay to send men to “explore” the land (Bamidbar 13:1). Yet, in Moshe’s instructions to them, he told the advanced scouts to do much more, instructing them to see whether the inhabitants were strong or weak, whether there were few or many of them, and whether or not the cities were fortified (Bamidbar 13:18-19). Although his intentions were pure, Moshe’s instructions may have played a part (according to the Abarbanel) in what kind of report was brought back. Not that Moshe wanted anything negative reported, but once the opening was given, the scouts/spies took it, and reported on more than just how they should attack (but whether they should).

When Moshe first returned to Egypt, the slavery became worse, leading Moshe to ask G-d why He mistreated His people and why He sent Moshe in the first place (Shemos 5:22). G-d’s response (6:1) was “now you will see that which I will do to Paro (Pharaoh),” which our sages (Sanhedrin 111a and Shemos Rabbah 5:23) understand to mean not just that things are about to turn around, but also as retribution, as “you (Moshe) will see the war against Paro, but you will not see the war against the 31 kings [of Canaan].” The Midrash continues by telling us that “Moshe received his judgment now (in Egypt, before the exodus) that he will not be able to enter the land.” This point is driven home by the Ri (Hazakain, quoted by the Moshav Zekaynim),

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who explains G-d's telling Moshe to "send for yourself men" (to scout the land) as literally being for Moshe's benefit, as Moshe was not able to enter it. Had there been no sin of the scouts, the nation would have entered the Promised Land shortly thereafter, but because scouts were sent, they wouldn't enter for another 39 years, allowing Moshe to live almost 40 years longer than he otherwise would have.

We know that Moshe wanted the scouts to come back with a glowing report about the land, and for the nation to (enthusiastically) enter it right away. That's not how it turned out, though, and some might suspect that Moshe purposely sabotaged the mission in order to extend his life. I would suggest that this is why G-d added the provision that before he died he had to wage war against Midyan, giving Moshe the option of delaying the war and living longer. Going to war right away proved to anyone that might suspect otherwise that Moshe would never deviate from doing exactly what should be done in order to extend his life. After all, he was told explicitly that he wouldn't die until after the war with Midyan, yet he immediately mobilized an army and sent them to war. © 2009 Rabbi D. Kramer

**RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN**

## Shabbat Shalom

**“W**e will then arm ourselves and go as an advance guard before the other Israelites...” (Numbers 32:17)

From the very first commandment given to the very first Jew Abraham - "Get thee forth from thy country, thy birthplace, thy father's house, to the land which I shall show thee" (Gen 12:1) - Zionism has been a fundamental Jewish ideal. And indeed, the major transgression of the Book of Numbers was the refusal of the freed Hebrew slaves to conquer and settle the Land of Israel. Our Biblical portion of Mattot, coming as it does at the conclusion of the Book of Numbers and describing the willingness of the next generation - the children of those who left Egypt but died in the desert - to wage battle for the Promised Land, even uses the Biblical phrase "halutz," (pioneer, advance guard) for the first time.

But can we speak of a Zionism that is properly motivated as opposed to a Zionism that is improperly motivated? In other words, for a modern Jew's Zionist

journey, can we posit the correct kind of motivation which will help insure a successful aliyah? And, given the many successful Diaspora Jewish communities like Teaneck, New Jersey, West Side Manhattan, Dallas Texas, Hendon London, how can the Babylonian Talmud declare that there is no authentic Jewish community (Kahal) outside of the Land of Israel (B.T. Horayot 3a)? I believe that the answer to these questions is found in a fascinating dialogue between Moses and representatives of the tribes of Gad and Reuven in Parshat Matot, the first half of this week's double portion.

Let us begin with Gad and Reuven who want to settle trans-Jordan immediately, and present their request to Moses (Numbers 32:1-5). Correctly, the prophet chides them, throwing out the challenge: "Why should your brother go out [to the other side of the Jordan] and fight while you stay here? Why are you trying to discourage the Israelites from crossing over to the land that G-d has given them?" (32:6). Responding to Moses' challenge, the tribal representatives agree to arm themselves and go forth as an advance guard (halutzim) "...before the other Israelites," settling the eastern bank of the Jordan River only after their brethren have captured and settled the western bank. The matter seems settled yet the dialogue continues for another nineteen verses, each side seemingly repeating their already stated positions. Why the repetition?

This dialogue opens with the words, "The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an extremely large number of animals, and they saw that the Ya'azer and Gilead areas were good for livestock. The descendants of Gad and Reuben therefore came and presented the following petition to Moses...." (32:1,2). Clearly, their motivation for settling the land was materialistic: the green slopes are excellent pasture lands for grazing their cattle!

Indeed, the introductory descriptions of these two tribes focus first on their livestock, and only later on their children: "We will bring enclosures for our sheep here and cities for our children" (32:6). Moreover, they refer twice to their willingness to fight "...before the children of Israel," whereas Moses stresses no less than six times the fact they must be an advance guard (halutzim) "...before the Lord" (32:20). Now we can understand why this dialogue is rather long-the necessity of recording a process that can only culminate when the Gadites and Reubenites finally internalize Moses' message: "Our children, wives, property and livestock will remain here in the cities of Gilead. Meanwhile, our special advance forces (halutz) will cross over before G-d to wage battle as my Master has spoken" (32:26,27). In a word, Zionism for materialistic reasons - and on behalf of the people of Israel alone - is not sufficient; Zionism must be for the sake of the future generations of Israel - Jewish continuity - and on behalf of G-d's divine mission that we teach justice, compassion and peace to the entire world.

And Israel is the land where King Solomon built the Temple, dedicating it as a place for gentiles as well as Jews, and from whence the entire world will recognize a G-d of love and morality, peace and redemption.

From this perspective, I also understand the Talmudic statement (B.T. Horayot 3a) about Kahal, community, only existing in Israel. Israel is the land wherein G-d charged Abraham "...through you shall be blessed the families of the earth" (Genesis 12:3); Israel is the land wherein G-d entered into His "covenant between the pieces" with Abraham, guaranteeing him an eternal progeny; Israel is the land wherein G-d charged Abraham with instructing all following generations to act with righteousness and justice (Gen 18); Israel is the land where Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Leah are buried. Israel is the land where our prophets walked and had visions of a future when all nations will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks -the messianic age of peace. And Israel is the land where King Solomon built the Holy Temple, dedicating it as a place for Gentiles as well as Jews, and from whence the entire world will recognize a G-d of love and morality, peace and redemption.

Israel is the land of Jewish continuity, the headquarters of the Jewish mission. The verse which the Talmud cites is from I Kings, where Solomon - in celebrating the dedication of the Temple - calls the Jews of Israel "Kahal Yisrael." From this perspective, the very stones and air of Israel pulsate with Jewish vision, the Jewish goal of world peace. Indeed, we settle the Land - most importantly - for our children and the G-d who desires world peace.

Indeed, we settle the Land of Israel not only for the sake of Israel in the present but also - and most importantly - for the sake of our Jewish children and for the sake of the G-d who created every human being in His image, the one law that must penetrate every human being before the world can achieve a permanent and lasting messianic peace. © 2009 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

#### **RABBI BEREL WEIN**

## **Wein Online**

**T**he reading of the book of Bamidbar concludes this week with the parshiyot of Matot and Masei. Jews are inveterate travelers. The long exile that we have suffered has of necessity forced us to travel a great deal. There is almost no place in the world that we have not visited, settled and eventually moved from to a different location. Thus the recording of all of the travels and way stations that the Jews experienced in their years in the Sinai desert is a small prophecy as to the future historical experiences of Jews over millennia of wandering.

The world of our enemies has always accused Jews of being "rootless." But that is untrue since we have always been rooted in the Land of Israel, consciously or subconsciously, during our entire history as a people. It is in the Exile that we are rootless, never certain of the shifting ground that lies under our weary feet. Thus we are always a restless people filled with curiosity over locations that we have not as yet seen and wonders that we have as not as yet experienced.

The history of the Exile is that Jews arrive at a new destination, settle there, help develop that country or part of the world, begin to feel at home there and attempt to assimilate into the majority culture and society. Suddenly all of this collapses. A mighty and unforeseen wind uproots them after centuries of living there and they move on to new shores.

There are no more Jews in numbers sufficient to speak of in Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, etc. This was the Jewish heartland for centuries. But now we have moved on again to other shores.

All of the travels and way stations described in this week's parsha had only one ultimate goal and destination in mind - entry into the Land of Israel and settlement there. The Israel deniers in our midst, religious and secular, leftists and rightists, academics and almost illiterate (certainly in Jewish history) all share a common delusion - that the home of Jews is somehow not necessarily, and certainly not now in the present, in the Land of Israel.

We are taught that the Jews stayed at the oasis of Kadesh in the desert for thirty eight of their forty year sojourn in the Sinai desert. They became accustomed to living there and felt comfortable there. The Land of Israel was a far off dream and goal of theirs but not an immediate imperative. But the Lord pushed them out of the desert to fight wars that they probably would have wished to avoid and to settle a land, harsh in character but with the potential of being one of milk and honey.

Every way station and desert oasis is recorded for us in this week's parsha in order to remind us that these places exist only in our past, but that our present and future lie only in the Land of Israel. The lessons of this parsha are as valid to us today in our Jewish world as they were to our ancestors long ago at Kadesh. © 2009 *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](http://www.rabbiwein.com)*

#### **MACHON ZOMET**

## **Shabbat B'Shabbato**

*by Rabbi Yehoshua Shapira, Rosh Yeshivat Ramat Gan; Translated by Moshe Goldberg*

**T**he warriors return from taking revenge on Midyan with a large amount of spoils. The Almighty gives detailed instructions how to divide the booty:

"Divide the spoils between the warriors who went to war and the rest of the nation" [Bamidbar 31:27]. If not for the verse, this matter could be looked at in two ways. The fighters put their lives in danger and fought valiantly, only in order to protect the peace of the people at home. Thus it might be assumed that they should have all the rights to the booty. On the other hand, since the entire war was fought as a mission in the name of the home front, "a messenger should not receive any more than the one who sent him." Based on this approach, the warriors should not get any part of the booty because of anything they did but only as representatives of the entire nation. This would mean that the entire nation should share equally in the spoils. The warriors should receive a portion but not any more than the other people.

The command in the Torah to give half to the warriors and half to the rest of the people can be viewed as a compromise between these two approaches. However, it can also be seen as a fundamental viewpoint which also appears in other situations. The two Yom Kippur goats, one sent to "Azazel"-to die in the desert-and the other offered as a sacrifice, must be exactly the same in appearance and height. The channel for the wine at the corner of the Altar was slightly bigger than the channel for water, so that when both wine and water were poured together (on Succot) the flow would end at the same time. Half of the blood of the sacrifice offered at Mount Sinai was placed in bowls and sprinkled over the people and the other half was sprinkled over the Altar.

Such equal divisions, which often exist, signify the full partnership that exists between the Almighty and the community of Yisrael. This can even be seen at the holiest site in the form of two Keruvim, one representing G-d and the other representing the nation, which were exactly the same. It is one of the mystic explanations of "tamati" [Shir Hashirim 5:2], a nickname for Yisrael? from the word for a twin, that the Almighty and the community of Yisrael are the same size. The truth can be recognized by all, that not only is the Almighty greater than Yisrael, but there really is no sense in making such a comparison at all. However, in terms of appearances within the existing universe, the Almighty is revealed in some sense as a twin of the community of Yisrael.

The first commandment given to the people of Yisrael is "Lech lecha" [Bereishit 12:1]? go (a Divine mitzva) for you (for your own benefit). Those who understand the mysticism of the Torah say: Not only do the two words have the same numerical value, their equality is so deep that they are written using the same letters, in the same sequence.

The same is true of the warriors who were commanded to forget their homes and their families while they were at war, carrying out a mission in a war of G-d, and those who were left to sit at home, for their own benefit. In the end, the tax of slaves taken from the

half that belonged to the warriors was only one out of five hundred, because they had shown a very high level of dedication to G-d. But a larger portion, one out of fifty, was taken from the half belonging to those who remained in the camp, and they were thus given the opportunity to share in the Divine dedication with respect to the actions of the War.

**RABBI SIR JONATHAN SACKS**

## Covenant & Conversation

The long journey is nearing its close. The Jordan is almost within sight. The Torah (Num. 33: 1-49) sets out an extended list of the stages of the Israelites' route. It sounds prosaic: "They journeyed from X and camped at Y", over and over again. But the effect is to heighten tension and increase anticipation. Finally the list draws to a close, and G-d tells Moses: "Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess" (33: 53). This, according to Nachmanides, is the source of the command to dwell in the land of Israel and inherit it.

With this we come to one of the central tensions in Judaism and Jewish history: the religious significance of the land of Israel. Its centrality cannot be doubted. Whatever the subplots and subsidiary themes of Tanakh, its overarching narrative is the promise of and journey to the land. Jewish history begins with Abraham and Sarah's journey to it. Exodus to Deuteronomy are taken up with the second journey in the days of Moses. Tanakh as a whole ends with Cyrus king of Persia granting permission to Jews, exiled in Babylon, to return to their land: the third great journey.

The paradox of Jewish history is that though a specific territory, the holy land, is at its heart, Jews have spent more time in exile than in Israel; more time longing for it than dwelling in it; more time travelling than arriving. Much of the Jewish story could be written in the language of today's sedra: "They journeyed from X and camped at Y".

Hence the tension. On the one hand, monotheism must understand G-d as non-territorial. The G-d of everywhere can be found anywhere. He is not confined to this people, that place-as pagans believed. He exercises His power even in Egypt. He sends a prophet, Jonah, to Nineveh in Assyria. He is with another prophet, Ezekiel, in Babylon. There is no place in the universe where He is not. On the other hand, it must be impossible to live fully as a Jew outside Israel, for if not, Jews would not have been commanded to go there initially, or to return subsequently. Why is the G-d beyond place to be found specifically in this place?

The sages formulated the tension in two striking propositions. On the one hand, "Wherever the Israelites went into exile, the Divine presence was exiled with them" (Mekhilta, Bo, 14). On the other, "One who leaves Israel to live elsewhere is as if he had no G-d." (Ketubot 110b). Can one find G-d, serve G-d,

experience G-d, outside the holy land? Yes and No. If the answer was only Yes, there would be no incentive to return. If the answer were only No, there would be no reason to stay Jewish in exile. On this tension, the Jewish existence is built.

What then is special about Israel? In The Kuzari, Judah Halevi says that different environments have different ecologies. Just as there are some countries, climates and soils particularly suited to growing vines, so there is a country, Israel, particularly suited to growing prophets- indeed a whole Divinely-inspired people. "No other place shares the distinction of the Divine influence, just as no other mountain produces such good wine" (Kuzari, II: 9-12).

Nachmanides gives a different explanation. G-d, he says, "created everything and placed the power of the lower creatures in the higher beings, giving over each and every nation 'in their lands after their nations' some known star or constellation... But the land of Israel, in the middle of the inhabited earth, is the inheritance of G-d... He has set us apart from all the nations over whom He has appointed princes and other celestial powers, by giving us the land [of Israel] so that He, blessed be He, will be our G-d and we will be dedicated to His name." (Commentary to Lev. 18: 25). Though every land and nation is under the overarching sovereignty of G-d, only Israel is directly so. Others are ruled by intermediaries, earthly and heavenly. Their fate is governed by other factors. Only in the land and people of Israel do we find a nation's fortunes and misfortunes directly attributable to their relationship with G-d.

Judah Halevi and Nachmanides both expound what we might call mystical geography. The difference between them is that Judah Halevi looks to earth, Nachmanides to heaven. For Judah Halevi what is special about the land of Israel is its soil, landscape and climate. For Nachmanides, it is its direct governance by G-d. For both of them, religious experience is possible outside Israel, but it is a pale shadow of what it is in the land. Is there a way of stating this non-mystically, in concepts and categories closer to ordinary experience? Here is one way of doing so.

The Torah is not merely a code of personal perfection. It is the framework for the construction of a society, a nation, a culture. It is about what R. Aharon Lichtenstein called, in a memorable phrase, 'societal beatitude'. It contains welfare legislation, civil law, rules governing employer-employee relationships, environmental provisions, rules of animal welfare, public health, governmental and judicial systems.

The Torah stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gnosticism and other world-denying philosophies that see religion as an ascent of the soul to ethereal realms of the spirit. G-d lives here, on earth, in human lives, interactions and associations. The Torah is terrestrial because G-d seeks to dwell on earth. Thus the Jewish task is to create a society with the Divine

presence in its midst. Had Judaism been confined to matters of the spirit, it would have left vast areas of human concern- the entire realms of politics, economics and sociology-outside the religious sphere.

What was and is unique about Israel is that it is the sole place on earth (barring shortlived exceptions like the Himyarites in the 6th century and Khazars in the 8th, whose kings converted to Judaism) where Jews have had the chance to create an entire society on Jewish lines. It is possible to live a Jewish life in Manchester, Monsey, Madrid or Minsk. But it is always a truncated experience. Only in Israel do Jews conduct their lives in the language of the Bible, within time defined by the Jewish calendar and space saturated in Jewish history. Only there do they form a majority. Only there are they able to construct a political system, an economy and an environment on the template of Jewish values. There alone can Judaism be what it is meant to be: not just a code of conduct for individuals, but also and essentially the architectonics of a society.

Hence there must be some space on earth where Jews practice self-government under Divine sovereignty. But why Israel, specifically? Because it was and is a key strategic location where three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia, meet. Lacking the extended flat and fertile space of the Nile delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley (or today, the oil-fields of Arabia), it could never be the base of an empire, but because of its location it was always sought after by empires. So it was politically vulnerable.

It was and is ecologically vulnerable, because its water-resources are dependent on rain, which in that part of the world is never predictable (hence the frequent 'famines' mentioned in Genesis). Its existence could never, therefore, be taken for granted. Time and again its people, surviving challenge, would experience this as a miracle. Small geographically and demographically, it would depend on outstanding achievement (political, military and economic) on the part of its people. This would depend, in turn, on their morale and sense of mission. Thus the prophets knew, naturally as well as supernaturally, that without social justice and a sense of divine vocation, the nation would eventually fall and suffer exile again.

These are, as it were, the empirical foundations of the mysticism of Halevi and Nachmanides. They are as true today as they were in ancient times. There is a directness, a naturalness, of Jewish experience in Israel that can be found nowhere else. History tells us that the project of constructing a society under Divine sovereignty in a vulnerable land is the highest of high-risk strategies. Yet, across forty centuries, Jews knew that the risk was worth taking. For only in Israel is G-d so close that you can feel Him in the sun and wind, sense Him just beyond the hills, hear Him in the inflections of everyday speech, breathe His presence in the early morning air and live, dangerously but

confidently, under the shadow of His wings. © 2009  
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### RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

## A Bridge to Nowhere

**M**oshe had been the consummate conciliator for the past 40 years. From the sin of the Golden Calf when he appeased Hashem through the many ordeals throughout the 40-year desert sojourn, he is constantly an advocate for the wishes of his nation. This week, however, Moshe he reacts totally different to what appears to be a simple requisition.

The children of Gad and Reuvain come to Moshe with a simple request. They are shepherds and do not want to cross the Jordan River into the Land of Canaan. They claim that the land on the east bank of the river is better for grazing. Before they even get a chance to fully present their request, Moshe releases a virtual tirade at them. For eleven verses, more than any single rebuke in the entire Torah, Moshe chastises them. He says that their request is subversive and will dissuade others from crossing the Jordan. He relives the fateful episode of the spies and their slander of the Land of Israel. He recounts the wrath of Hashem and details the suffering of Israel because of that sin. He compares the representatives who requested to remain to those terrible men, and claims that Gad and Reuvain "have risen in their place to add more burning wrath of Hashem against Israel" (Numbers: 32:6-16)

It is extremely difficult to comprehend why Moshe, normally so conciliatory, patient, and understanding, even during the most difficult of times, became so sharply incensed at this request. Obviously, Moshe's actions are a lesson to all of us. What is it?

David was driving to the Catskills for Shabbos but set out from his Manhattan office with hardly enough time to make the trip and arrive before sundown. Traffic was backed up on the Major Deegan and crossing the Hudson via the George Washington Bridge seemed an almost impossible task. Mid-span, after sitting nearly an hour in stop-and-go traffic, he realized that the red orb in the sky was about to sink below the horizon. He had never desecrated the Shabbos before and traffic on the George Washington Bridge was not going to make him violate the Sabbath now. In a panic, he pulled his car as close as he could to the guard rail, left the keys on the visor, removed his wallet and hid it together his personal effects and hoped for the best. At worst, the car would be stolen. Maybe the police would get to it first and tow it.

Feeling a little guilty about adding to the traffic delays on the bridge, David left his car, flashers blinking, and walked back toward New York City where he decided to spend the Shabbos at a friend who lived in nearby Washington Heights.

Saturday night he returned to the bridge and his car was nowhere to be seen. He went straight to the

police station and asked for the desk officer. "Did anyone see the gray Honda that was on the George Washington Bridge on Friday night?"

The officers eyes widened. "You mean the car with the keys on the visor?"

David nodded.

"Franky, get over here," the cop yelled to his friend," listened to this!" By now a couple of officers moved closer to David.

The sergeant raised his voice. "You mean the Honda with the flashers on?" Again David nodded, this time more nervously. You mean the Honda with the wallet with close to \$500 dollars left under the front seat!" he shouted. "WAS THAT YOUR CAR!?" David shook his head meekly. "Yes, officer, that's my car. Where is it?"

"WHERE IS IT??" mocked the officer, "WHERE IS IT? Do you know how many divers we have looking for your body in the Hudson!?"

Moshe understood that the worst of all sins is not what one does privately in his heart or in his home but rather when his actions affect the spirit of others. Often, one's self-interest mires any thought of how his conduct will affect others. The children of Gad and Reuvain had a personal issue. They did not want to cross the Jordan River because they wanted to graze in greener pastures. Yet they did not consider what effect their request might have on an entire nation. They did not take into account the severe ramifications their actions may have on the morale of hundreds of thousands of enthusiastic people wanting to enter the Holy Land.

In our lives, at home and at work, not everything that we do, say or act upon may be interpreted with the intent that motivated the action. And sometimes those misinterpretation can have devastating effects on morale, attitude and feeling. We may refuse to cross a river for a matter of convenience. Others, however, may see it as a calamity. Our job is to be conscious that everything we do affects not only ourselves, but is a bridge to many other people. © 1997  
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### RABBI AVI WEISS

## Shabbat Forshpeis

**I**n one of this week's portions Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe request to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan. A cursory review of their request gives us insight into why these particular tribes tried to remain outside Israel.

Reuven was, of course, the first son of Yaakov (Jacob). When the brothers returned from Egypt and told their father that the viceroy (who was really Joseph) insisted they bring Binyamin (Benjamin) to Egypt before they would be given more food, Reuven steps forward. Turning to his father he declares: "If I do not bring

Benjamin back you can kill my two sons." Yaakov rejects Reuven's overture. (Genesis 42:37-38)

Only after Yehuda comes forward saying he would be a surety for Binyamin "if I don't return him I will have sinned to you all my days" does Yaakov relent. (Genesis 43:9)

The difference between Yehuda and Reuven is obvious. Yehuda assumes responsibility. He expresses a total commitment to Binyamin and is ready to put himself on the line if he fails. Not so, Reuven. He guarantees Binyamin's safety by using his children as collateral rather than himself.

Not surprisingly the children of Reuven who don't understand the message of areivut, of caring for others, bear children and a tribe that prefers to remain apart from Israel.

Gad is one of the children of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. He is described as being very strong. In the words of Yaakov's blessing as explicated by Rashi: Troops (armies) shall be found of Gad. (Genesis 49:19) Still when Joseph is sold Gad does not come forward to protect him. Here again, it is understandable that Gad becomes a tribe that asks to live outside Israel.

Menashe is the eldest son of Joseph. When he is born Joseph calls him Menashe, "For G-d has made me forget (nashani, the root of Menashe) all my toil and all my father's house." (Genesis 42:51) Here is a description of one who breaks with his home. Not coincidentally Menashe's children wish to separate from Israel.

Moshe (Moses) tells the two and a half tribes that they may live outside Israel but only after they first help conquer and settle the land. Here Moshe teaches the message of areivut to those who come from a tribe where the sense of caring is missing. And these tribes get the message. They lead the way in helping liberate the land. They were able to turn around the lack of areivut in their family history into a sense of real commitment to the Jewish people.

An important message especially now for Jews in the Diaspora - in times of need we should, like the two and a half tribes, run to Israel rather than from Israel. © 2006 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 YAAKOV HABER**

## **Shabbat Shalom Weekly**

In the first of today's parshas, we read: "And the L-rd spoke to Moses, saying: Avenge the children of Israel from the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people" (Num. 31:2). There was to be a war of revenge against the Midianites because of their behavior in seducing the Israelites into idolatry and immorality, resulting in a plague in which 24,000 Israelites perished (Num. 25:9); and also because they

had attacked the Israelites for no reason: they could have sat out all the fighting!

What was Moses' response to this injunction from G-d? We might suppose that Moses, knowing that he was to die immediately after this war, would certainly procrastinate, set up a committee, and so on. However, Moses immediately made plans to carry this out. Why is this? Rashi explains that even though Moses realized that he would die as soon as he carried out this command, still he did it with joy, and without delay. So pleased was he to be performing a commandment of G-d. So important was a mitzvah in his eyes.

To take an analogy: as is well known, a mourner for a close relative must tear his garment. For a brother, sister, or child, this means only the outer garment, but for a parent, one must tear all one's garments, down to the skin. I used to think that the reason for this was simply the stronger grief which one feels at the death of a parent. However, as I recently discovered, the reason is the extra grief one feels (or should feel) at the realization that one can no longer perform the mitzva of honoring one's parent. So much is the possibility of performing a mitzva supposed to affect one.

That explains the joy that Moses felt at the thought of performing this commandment, even though his death would surely follow.

Now, what did Moses do with this precious Mitzvah? Did he grab a gun, and march off to war? No! Moses appointed soldiers and sent them off to fight. Why was this? He was certainly not a coward. The Daas Zekeinim gives the following explanation: Moses had spent many years as a shepherd in Midian, and had married a Midianite woman. He had an emotional attachment to Midian, and in spite of all his enthusiasm for carrying out the word of G-d, could not bring himself to the point of actually going and fighting against them himself. The Midrash quotes a saying that one cannot fill up a well from which one has once drunk.

We may ask if Moses' reticence was justified. To develop the analogy quoted by the Midrash: suppose you have once drunk from a well, and it has meanwhile become poisoned. Would you then be justified in filling it up? Of course! The Midian which had attacked Israel was not the Midian of Moses' youth, and he did not need to feel any compunction about attacking it. But notwithstanding such impeccable reasoning, such was his humanity that he could not bring himself to do it.

Moses was not born with such qualities of humanity. As the commentaries say (see Yoma 86 and Kitzur Shulchan Aruch 32:8) "Habit becomes second nature". He developed these qualities, and reached the stage where he would rush joyfully to do G-d's bidding, even though death was awaiting him afterwards; and yet nevertheless could not bring himself—in spite of G-d's bidding! -- to attack personally a country to which he had an emotional attachment. © 1987 Rabbi Y. Haber

**RABBI SHLOMO KATZ**

## Hama'ayan

One of the laws in this week's parashah is that an accidental murderer must flee to a City of Refuge and remain there until the incumbent Kohen Gadol passes away. Why is the fate of a manslayer bound up with that of the Kohen Gadol? R' Elya Meir Bloch z"l (1894-1955; founder and rosh yeshiva of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland) explains:

The Kohen Gadol's job is to bring the Shechinah to rest among the Jewish People. On the other hand, murder drives the Shechinah away. [Our Sages teach that even one who kills accidentally is considered a murderer in some sense because G-d protects blameless people from committing offenses even unintentionally.] One who has committed such an act cannot be part of the same society as the Kohen Gadol. Moreover, such a person must realize that he cannot continue life as usual. Instead, he must uproot himself and go to a City of Refuge and begin a new life. Only when the Kohen Gadol dies can the accidental murderer feel that the chapter of his life that was so inimical to the Kohen Gadol's mission is over, and then he can return to his former home.

This understanding has broader applications, R' Bloch observes. Any time a person has experienced a spiritual setback, even inadvertently and unintentionally, he must realize that he cannot go on with life as usual. Rather, some change is required to address the situation in which he finds himself.

(In addition, R' Bloch teaches, we learn from here that a person must act in a way that furthers the mission of the Kohen Gadol and other spiritual leaders.) (Peninei Da'at)

"The commanders of the thousands in the legions, the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds, approached Moshe. They said to Moshe, 'Your servants took a census of the men of war under our command, and not a man of us is missing.'" (31:48-49)

In his classic work on ethics and philosophy, *Chovot Ha'levavot / Duties of the Hearts*, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakudah z"l (Saragossa, Spain; early 11th century) relates the story of a tzaddik who met victorious warriors returning from battle. He said to them, "It is premature to rejoice, for you have won the battle and collected booty only in the small war. The greatest battle, though, still lies ahead."

The soldiers asked him, "What battle is that?"

He answered, "The fight against the yetzer hara and its agents." [Until here from *Chovot Ha'levavot*, Sha'ar Yichud Ha'maaseh Ch.5]

R' Moshe Gruenwald z"l (rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Khust, Hungary; died 1911) explains the above teaching of the *Chovot Ha'levavot* in light of

another story in that work. There it is recorded that a pious man said to his disciples, "If I believed that you were free of all sin, I would fear for your sake from something that is worse than sin, namely, that you might believe yourselves to be tzaddikim." Similarly, why must a victorious warrior prepare for battle against the yetzer hara? Because the haughtiness he feels makes him particularly susceptible.

R' Gruenwald continues: When the armies of Bnei Yisrael returned from the battle against Midian, as related in our verses, they knew that they had to prepare for the next battle, the one against the yetzer hara. And, they knew that this meant they had to subdue any feelings of haughtiness. But they did feel haughty. They "took a census" and felt as if "not a man was missing (i.e., lacking)." Therefore, the next verse (31:50) relates, "So we have brought an offering for Hashem—what any man found of gold vessels, anklet and bracelet, ring, earring, and clasp, to atone for our souls before Hashem." (Arugat Ha'bosem)

R' Shlomo Halberstam z"l (1907-2000; the Bobover Rebbe) finds the above teaching of the *Chovot Ha'levavot* alluded to in another verse, i.e., in Moshe's words to the tribes Reuven and Gad later in our parashah (32:22), "And the Land shall be conquered before Hashem, and then you shall return— then you shall be 'clean' before Hashem and Yisrael." After you successfully conquer the Land, then you also need to ensure that you are clean of any sin before Hashem and Yisrael. (Kerem Shlomo, Vol. III)

"They journeyed from Charadah and encamped in Makhelot." (33:25)

Literally, this verse describes the travels of Bnei Yisrael from a place called "Charadah" to a place called "Makhelot"—two of the 42 stops that Bnei Yisrael made in the desert, as our parashah describes. Many commentaries, in particular those by chassidic authors, search for lessons in these place names, for why else would the Torah relate them to us?!

R' Mendel Hager z"l (rabbi of Oyber-Visheve, Romania; died 1941) observes that "Charadah" means "fear." Our verse teaches: How can a person overcome ("travel away from") the fear that his prayers will not be accepted? By journeying to "Makhelot," as we read in Tehilim (68:27), "In Makhelot / gatherings bless Hashem." This relates to our Sages' teaching that G-d does not reject prayers that are offered with a congregation. (She'airit Menachem) © 2004 Rabbi S. Katz & torah.org

