

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

Etre ailleurs, "To be elsewhere -- the great vice of this race, its great and secret virtue, the great vocation of this people." So wrote the French poet and essayist Charles Peguy (1873-1914), a philosemite in an age of Anti-Semitism. He continued: "Any crossing for them means the crossing of the desert. The most comfortable houses, the best built from stones as big as the temple pillars, the most real of real estate, the most overwhelming of apartment houses will never mean more to them than a tent in the desert." (Basic Verities, New York, Pantheon, 1943, 141)

What he meant was that history and destiny had combined to make Jews aware of the temporariness of any dwelling outside the Holy Land. To be a Jew is to be on a journey. That is how the Jewish story began when Abraham first heard the words "Lech Lecha", with their call to leave where he was and travel "to the land I will show you." That is how it began again in the days of Moses, when the family had become a people. And that is the point almost endlessly repeated in parshat Masei: "They set out from X and camped at Y. They set out from Y and camped at Z" -- 42 stages in a journey of forty years. We are the people who travel. We are the people who do not stand still. We are the people for whom time itself is a journey through the wilderness in search of the Promised Land.

In one sense this is a theme familiar from the world of myth. In many cultures, stories are told about the journey of the hero. Otto Rank, one of Freud's most brilliant colleagues, wrote about it. So did Joseph Campbell, a Jungian, in his book, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Nonetheless, the Jewish story is different in significant ways:

[1] The journey -- set out in the books of *Shemot* and *Bamidbar* -- is undertaken by everyone, the entire people: men, women and children. It is as if, in Judaism, we are all heroes, or at least all summoned to an heroic challenge.

[2] It takes longer than a single generation.

This issue of *Toras Aish* is dedicated by Ariella Lerner's new sister on the occasion of her birth! I love you and can't wait to find out my name!

PS - sorry for keeping your parents up all night - still getting used to this whole in-body experience



Perhaps, had the spies not demoralised the nation with their report, it might have taken only a short while. But there is a deeper and more universal truth here. The move from slavery to the responsibilities of freedom takes time. People do not change overnight. Therefore evolution succeeds; revolution fails. The Jewish journey began before we were born and it is our responsibility to hand it on to those who will continue it after us.

[3] In myth, the hero usually encounters a major trial: an adversary, a dragon, a dark force. He (it is usually a he) may even die and be resurrected. As Campbell puts it: "A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man." (*The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, New World Library, 2008, 23) The Jewish story is different. The adversary the Israelites encounter is themselves: their fears, their weaknesses, their constant urge to return and regress.

It seems to me, here as so often elsewhere, that the Torah is not myth but anti-myth, a deliberate insistence on removing the magical elements from the story and focussing relentlessly on the human drama of courage versus fear, hope versus despair, and the call, not to some larger-than-life hero but to all-of-us-together, given strength by our ties to our people's past and the bonds between us in the present. The Torah is not some fabled escape from reality but reality itself, seen as a journey we must all undertake, each with our own strengths and contributions to our people and to humanity.

We are all on a journey. And we must all rest from time to time. That dialectic between setting out and encamping, walking and standing still, is part of the rhythm of Jewish life. There is a time for *Nitzavim*, standing, and a time for *Vayeilekh*, moving on. Rav Kook spoke of the two symbols in *Bilaam's* blessing, "How goodly are your tents, Jacob, and your dwelling places, Israel." Tents are for people on a journey.



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Dwelling places are for people who have found home.

Psalm 1 uses two symbols of the righteous individual. On the one hand he or she is on the way, while the wicked begin by walking, then transition to standing and sitting. On the other hand, the righteous is compared to a tree, planted by streams of water, that gives fruit in due season and whose leaves do not wither. We walk, but we also stand still. We are on a journey but we are also rooted like a tree.

In life, there are journeys and encampments. Without the encampments, we suffer burnout. Without the journey, we do not grow. And life is growth. There is no way to avoid challenge and change. The late Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l once gave a beautiful shiur <<http://bit.ly/2KM00UB>> on Robert Frost's poem, 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,' with its closing verse:

"The woods are lovely dark and deep. / But I have promises to keep, / And miles to go before I sleep, / And miles to go before I sleep."

He analyses the poem in terms of Kierkegaard's distinction between the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of life. The poet is enchanted by the aesthetic beauty of the scene, the soft silence of the falling snow, the dark dignity of the tall trees. He would love to stay here in this timeless moment, this eternity-in-an-hour. But he knows that life has an ethical dimension also, and this demands action, not just contemplation. He has promises to keep; he has duties toward the world. So he must walk on despite his tiredness. He has miles to go before he sleeps: he has work to do while the breath of life is within him.

The poet has stopped briefly to enjoy the dark wood and falling snow. He has encamped. But now, like the Israelites in Masei, he must set out again. For us as Jews, as for Kierkegaard the theologian and Robert Frost the poet, ethics takes priority over aesthetics. Yes, there are moments when we should, indeed must, pause to see the beauty of the world, but then we must move on, for we have promises to keep, including the promises to ourselves and to God.

Hence the life-changing idea: life is a journey, not a destination. We should never stand still. Instead we should constantly set ourselves new challenges that take us out of our comfort zone. Life is growth.

Covenant and Conversation 5778 is kindly supported by the Maurice Wohl Charitable Foundation in memory of Maurice and Vivienne Wohl z"l ©2018 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

This week's double portion records how the Jews finally cross the Jordan River on their way to conquer the Promised Land. The tribes of Gad, Reuven and half the tribe of Menashe possess a great multitude of cattle, and "paradise" for cattle is good grazing land, which happens to be what these two and a half tribes find in their present location of Trans-Jordan. They then petition Moses with a special request. "If you would grant us a favor, let this land be given to us as our permanent property, and do not bring us across the Jordan." (Numbers 32:5)

Moses' response is sharp. "Why should your brothers go out 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? This is the same thing your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land," (Numbers 32:6-8). Moses' reference is an especially damning one: just as the scouts decided to remain in the desert because they lacked the courage and will to fight for the Promised Land, you are acting similar to them by your desire to stay where you are, saving yourselves from the harrowing experience of war. And Moses makes this comparison even though Trans-Jordan is considered to be part of the holy land (Mishnah Kelim 1,10).

What moved these two and one-half tribes to remain in Trans-Jordan? According to Rabbi Simcha Zissel of Kelm, they petitioned not to have to cross the Jordan because of their cattle, which expresses a certain degree of materialistic greed on their part; it doesn't take a great flight of the imagi-nation to see the correspondence between cattle and graz-ing lands in those days to economic opportunities in the work place today. Why do Jews continue to live outside of Israel, further away than the other side of the Jordan, on the other side of the Atlantic? Because they've found good grazing lands for their cattle and it's a shame to give that up, especially since our present-day descendants of Gad and Menashe rarely question a contemporary Rabbinic authority about their choice. If they did, he would more than likely repeat Moses' message "Why should your brothers go out and fight while you stay here?" (Numbers 32:61).

After all, world Jewry has certainly benefited from the State of Israel, ever since its inception and to this very day. After the holocaust, which resulted in the tragic loss of 1/3 of our people and 4/5 of our religious, intellectual and cultural leadership, it seemed as if Judaism had finally faded from the world stage of viable

“peoples”, nations and religions. The renowned historian Alfred Toynbee called the Jews a “fossil” in the history he published in 1946, the Chief Rabbi of Rome converted to Christianity and conversion was rampant in every campus in America immediately following the Holocaust. Not only did world Jewry experience a miraculous renaissance after the Declaration of Israeli Statehood – and then again with the liberation of Jerusalem after the Six Days War in 1967 – but Israel is now the greatest provider of religious and educational leadership for Jewish communities throughout the world as well as the most effective fount of inspiration for searching and struggling assimilated Jews whose lives become significantly transformed through programs like Birthright Israel. All of the successful diaspora Jewish communities today owe their development in no small measure to the Jewish State.

Rabbi Yitzchak Arama, gives a slightly different interpretation. The author of the Akedat Yitzchak, describes the tribes of Gad and Reuven as practical materialists who never the less are planning to eventually join their siblings in Israel’s heartland. But only eventually; not right now. At present the personal needs of the family and the tribe must come first – until the leader of the family can amass sufficient material goods to make the big move to the middle east a less risky venture. Their personal needs – and not historic Israel’s national needs – must come first. Hereto Moses took them to task.

The Ohr Hachayim approaches the situation in its simplest, most “religious” terms: suggesting that the two and a half tribes built their argument around Divine intervention: “The land which G-d conquered on behalf of the congregation of Israel is a land for cattle, and your ser-vants have cattle.” (32:41). In other words, this is the land that G-d conquered for us and therefore this is the land we wish to remain in. If G-d wants us somewhere else, let Him take us there, let Him conquer that land too. Until then, this is where we’re going to stay and this is where our cattle will stay. It is good for our cattle and therefore it is good for us.

In many ways, the Ohr Hachayim’s reading sees the two and one half tribes as being the counterparts of the devotees of Natura Karta. They are waiting for G-d Himself to bring them to Israel – and if not G-d, then at least His Messiah! When G-d is good and ready to redeem Israel completely, He’ll do it in His own time. Everything depends on G-d, and we are more than happy to wait it out in our pleasant grazing land until then....

The truth is that Gad and Reuven had forgotten their history. They cannot rest on their grazing laurels while the rest of the nation fights their wars for them. When the Is-raelites reached the Reed Sea chased by the Egyptian hordes they asked Moses to pray to G-d. “Why are you crying out to me?” G-d says to Moses.

“Speak to the Israelites and let them start moving.” (Exodus 14:15). The sea does not split until Nachshon ben Aminadav and Caleb ben Yefuna jump in.

Similarly, when Moses tells Gad and Reuven that they have to bear arms and fight, he’s really pointing out that G-d’s promise to Israel is that everyone has to be partners — G-d with the nation, and the nation with each other, sharing in a mutual responsibility and privilege. At the end of the day, if our fledgling State proves to be even more vulnerable than we think by dint of less man-power in war and a smaller population than is required, Jews will have only themselves to blame for not rising to the challenge offered by the greatest Jewish adventure in 2000 years. © 2018 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

In a certain sense we may view this week’s Torah reading as being the concluding chapters of the written Torah of Moshe himself. Even though the fifth book of the written Torah, the book of Dvarim, is also to be treated with the holiness and eternal awe, regarding the four preceding books, there are opinions in the Talmud that they are to be assigned to a different category as far as rabbinic exegesis is concerned.

There is no question that there is a definite tone of finality in the concluding chapter of this week’s Torah reading. The story of the formation of the Jewish people into a nation through its exodus from Egyptian slavery and its forty-year sojourn in the desert of Sinai is now complete. A new generation of Jews, no longer constrained and embittered by slavery in Egypt, now stands at the threshold of entering the promised land. The great leaders of Israel who have guided them to this point in their national existence have all passed on. And, in the case of Moshe, he is about to leave them for his eternal reward.

It is interesting to note that as this story of nation building concludes, the Torah chooses to record for us a review of the encampments of the Jewish people in the desert of Sinai. The Torah does not intend this to be a travelogue. Rather, it is meant to create that necessary ingredient of national memory that alone can preserve the Jewish people throughout its long history and many challenges. For without that national memory, Jews generally and individually are lost in the swirl of current events and changing fortunes.

As Rashi points out, each of the way stations and encampments listed in this week’s Torah reading represents an event in the history of the Jewish people. It is not merely a list of places and oases that exist in the Sinai desert but rather it is meant to focus the memory of the people on the events, triumphs and mishaps that were experienced in the development of the Jewish nation.

The Torah could well have omitted mentioning

these places and just given us a general overview of the fact that we were freed from Egyptian bondage, witnessed the Divine revelation at Mount Sinai and wandered in that desert for 40 years before finally arriving at the borders of the land of Israel. But the Torah wishes to emphasize that every step in that long journey was meaningful and taught us lessons of faith and hope and charted a course for us as to how the Jewish national entity was to be created and strengthened.

For that to happen, we have to be able to recall our errors and mishaps so that we somehow learn not to repeat them. We also have to remember our great moments of glory and of accomplishment so that these may be preserved in our memory and repeated throughout the existence of our national life. Past events, no matter how seemingly minor they may appear to be at the moment, are the stuff of nation building and accomplishment. That is why all the facets of memory are so much a part of Jewish life and observance. ©2018 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. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In 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. When the brothers returned from Egypt and told their father that the viceroy (who was really Joseph) insisted they bring Binyamin 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 God 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 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. ©2018 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 DAVID S. LEVIN

Experiencing Growth

Hashem sends us many messages through the words of the Torah as hints and hidden clues within its words. The more that one studies Torah the easier it is to locate these clues but one may read a text hundreds of times and still miss the simplest of clues. In this week's double parasha, Parshiot Matot - Mas'ei, we find an obvious clue through a reversal of words. Once we have discovered a clue, however, the more difficult task of understanding what message we have now been given takes place. Keep in mind, the message we receive today may change into a different message in the future. That is one of the most amazing delights of Torah study. The Torah is written on so many levels that the message will constantly change based on our needs. This realization helps us to understand how the Torah is a living document, a Torat Chayim, which serves all times and all generations.

In Parashat Mas'ei we find, "Vayichtov Moshe et motza'eihem l'mas'eihem al pi Hashem v'eileh mas'eihem l'motza'eihem, and Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys by the word of Hashem and these are their journeys according to their goings forth." It is clear that the two words motza'eihem (their goings forth) and mas'eihem (their journeys) are reversed between the beginning of the

pasuk and the end of the same pasuk. HaRav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch notes the difference in these phrases and comments, "According to the way G-d takes it, they were motza'eihem l'maseihem, to them [the B'nei Yisrael] they were maseihem l'motza'eihem." Hashem made them leave one place to go to a new fresh goal and a new learning experience. Each step along the way was for the purpose of educating the people. When the lesson was learned it was time for them to learn a new task and accomplish a new goal. A more difficult task may need to be accomplished in stages or may take years to become incorporated while other tasks and goals may be achieved in a much shorter time. The B'nei Yisrael only moved twenty times in thirty-eight of the forty years that they were in the desert. They remained in some places for many years while they stayed in other places only overnight.

For the B'nei Yisrael these "stayings and journeys" appeared to have the reverse effect. They were dissatisfied wherever they were and were anxious to leave. They were impatient the entire time because they were constantly desirous of coming into Eretz Yisrael and completing their journeys. Breaking camp was their real goal because they looked upon it as leaving an undesirable stopping place and coming closer to their final destination. They were like the little child complaining "are we there yet?", only wanting to get to the end of the journey. For them the recollection in Mas'ei of where they had traveled and what they had done was necessary so that they could now reflect on the entire experience and finally comprehend the importance of each step along the way.

The Rambam explains that the B'nei Yisrael had many experiences in the desert that were miraculous in nature. Since they were part of these journeys they were aware of the accuracy of the report of each aspect of these miracles. But generations in the future would call into question what had really occurred. The desert is a dangerous and difficult place with little food and water. Yet Hashem led the Jews through this desert for forty years with a miraculous food that fell each day from the heavens and a Well which followed them on their journeys. Other nations, years later, would assume that the B'nei Yisrael survived because they had managed to locate the different oases and the few larger settlements that existed in the desert. They would not bother to think logically how these oases and settlements could have somehow accommodated nearly two and a half million people. With the listing of the itinerary it is clear that the B'nei Yisrael were not near those oases nor were they camped near large settlements.

The Rambam adds that other nations could argue that the reason that the journey took so long was that the people consistently were wondering aimlessly unable to find the correct path to take which would have brought them to the land sooner. The Arabs call the

desert Altih, "the desert of going astray." The Torah makes it clear that each journey was al pi Hashem, this wandering was all on the word of Hashem. Every journey had its purpose. Even though the journeys appeared to be irregular and many cities were left only to be returned to later, every journey was directed by Hashem with a specific message in mind.

Returning to our original explanation of the difference between the terms motza'eihem l'maseihem or maseihem l'motza'eihem, Sforno looked upon both the leaving and the going forth as a difficult time for the B'nei Yisrael. On several occasions the B'nei Yisrael were aware of the impending journey even though they might not have been aware when it would begin. Other times they were totally surprised by the suddenness of the need to pack and move. There were also times that the place that they left was good and the place to which they traveled was evil. That made every departure as well as every arrival a difficult and trying experience. Sforno believed that Moshe was commanded to record these events at this time to demonstrate that the B'nei Yisrael were being rewarded for their willingness to follow Hashem in spite of the difficulty, so that it was now evident that they deserved this reward of the land of Israel.

We go through many experiences in our lives and each experience prepares us for the next level of accomplishment. We experience good times and bad, easy times and rough times, joys and disappointments. Each experience is a challenge that Hashem has placed before us to improve our character and to teach us. When we look at life this way we begin to understand that even those difficult times, those rough years, sicknesses, deaths, and disappointments are all gifts from Hashem for our eventual benefit. That is not to say that we are not saddened by our losses and troubled by our hardships. Our emotions are still our emotions. But at no point should we believe that Hashem has abandoned us. May Hashem help us to see and know that He is always there for us and is always willing to help us grow from each of our experiences. © 2018 Rabbi D.S. Levin

RABBI YITZCHOK ADLERSTEIN

Machshava

Hashem spoke to Moshe, saying: Take vengeance for the Bnei Yisrael against the Midianites...Moshe spoke to the people, saying: Arm men from among yourselves...that they may be against Midian to inflict Hashem's vengeance upon Midian. (Bamidbar 31:1-3)

Both the obvious question and its solution are well known. Was the war against Midian waged to avenge the honor of G-d, or of the Bnei Yisrael? There was room for both. We are taught that each of the two aggrieved parties, so to speak, worked for the honor of the other. Hashem spoke of the crime against the

Jewish people; Moshe spoke of acting to correct the dishonor done to G-d.

We can take this further. The issue here was not a semantic one. This was not a competition in politeness, or in humbly overlooking one's own honor in favor of the other party. There were practical consequences of framing the battle avenging the dishonor of Hashem or the dishonor of the Bnei Yisrael.

Assume, for the sake of argument, that the primary beneficiary was to be Hashem's honor. If the entire Midianite army would spontaneously cease breathing and die, Hashem's honor would be well served. The miracle would make it be clear that He got the last word against them; He would clearly be the active agent, avenging His own honor. If the main focus was to be Jewish honor, however, the death of the Midianite army at the hands of G-d would not do -- at least not if Hashem gave explicit instructions for the Bnei Yisrael to "take vengeance."

To be sure, Tanach knows of several examples where Hashem acts as the Warrior fighting, so to speak, His own battle. This happened at the Reed Sea, where the Jews were told to stand back in silence -- not even davening -- while Hashem did the fighting against the Egyptian army. It happened once more in the miraculous destruction of the army of Sancheriv, which besieged Yerushalayim. In both of these cases, the glorification of Hashem's Name was immense. We would be hard pressed, however, to say that the Jews took vengeance against their enemies in either episode.

Enemies can be dealt with in different ways. The sudden downfall of a long-time enemy is often sufficient for his opponent to feel relief, closure -- and to move on. The need for revenge comes from a slightly different place. It can come after a period of subjugation, where one's essential worth has been denied. The disappearance of the enemy will not be enough. The victim wants to reverse the tables -- to bring the enemy to his knees, demonstrating that the worthlessness is with the other party. The victim must subjugate his erstwhile oppressor by his own hand. That is what we call revenge.

Hashem told Moshe that the honor of the Bnei Yisrael had been damaged; they should take revenge. Soldiers, weapons, combat -- all those followed from Hashem's instruction. There could be no other way; they would have to be full participants in the battle. Moshe demurred -- at least in his speech. Addressing his people, he made it to be all about Him, rather than about them. His honor had been imperiled, and He was going to do something about it. He -- not they -- would be the active agent in the defeat of Midian.

Moshe, of course, did not intend to change Hashem's directive in the slightest. There was never any question that he would raise an army, and send them into battle. He spoke the way he did only to give

honor to Hashem. He wished to say that, despite what G-d had told him, the only issue of importance before them was restoring the honor of HKBH.

(Based on Melech Machsheves by R. Moshe Cheifetz, 1663-1711.) ©2018 Rabbi Y. Adlerstein and torah.org

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Hatarat Nedarim

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

A person who vows and then regrets making this vow, may approach a Rabbi to have it annulled. Our sages have stated that the term in Hebrew for annulment (Hatarat) means to untie that which was previously tied. Others say that it comes from the word "Heter" (permissible) as opposed to "Issur" (forbidden).

As to the source for "Hatarat Nedarim" (annulment of Vows) some Rabbis state that its source is this week's portion when it states "Lo Yachel Devaro" to mean that the one making the vow cannot be forgiven for his words (coming from the Hebrew word "Mechila") however someone else can give him "Mechila" (forgiveness).

Our Rabbis further state that "Hatarat Nedarim" really has no basis in the Torah and is a law given to Moses from Almighty G-d and in essence gives the Rabbi the ability to annul vows using the formula sited, even though it has no logical or scriptural basis.

With reference to the annulment itself, the Rabbi who annuls the vow in essence destroys the vow from its source as if it never existed. This is the difference between a Rabbi who annuls a vow and a husband who annuls the vows of his wife (Hafarat Nedarim). The former destroys the vow from its source, while the latter only nullifies the vow from the moment the husband becomes aware of his wife's vow, but not prior.

What is the actual annulment ceremony? The person comes before the Rabbi or three laymen and announces his regret for making the vow. At that time they say "The vow is annulled" using the Hebrew formula "Sharu Lach" or "Mutar Lach" or "Machul lach" or similar language signifying the annulment of the vow. Some have the tradition of reciting the formula three times as a sign of strength, however even if said once it is sufficient. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

A Bridge to Nowhere

Moshe 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. ©2018 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

Virtual Beit Medrash

SICHOT ROSHEI YESHIVA

HARAV YEHUDA AMITAL

Summarized by Ari Mermelstein

This week's parasha opens with a discussion of nedarim (vows), addressing its words to the heads of the tribes. In order to understand why this section was designated for the heads of the tribes, we must examine the unique formulation with which the Torah prefaces the details of the law (30:7): "This is the thing which the Lord has commanded." In the wake of the tragedy at Ba'al Pe'or, the heads of the tribes apparently recommended that Moshe take steps to prevent such an event from recurring. Apparently, they felt that abstinence through self-accepted vows sanctioned by Halakha could serve as the means towards this end, and Moshe in the beginning of this week's parasha responded to this request. "This is the thing which the Lord has commanded" represents the initiation of a category of voluntary vows focused on abstinence, to be included under the rubric of Halakha. The fact that Halakha recognizes vows as a legitimate halakhic norm requires our closer attention.

The Rambam (Hilkhot Nedarim 13:23) writes,

"He who takes vows... to correct his ways... is praiseworthy." Nonetheless, in the next halakha he discourages the acceptance of vows on a regular basis, and subsequently (13:25) sharpens this point in saying that "He who takes vows is tantamount to having built a 'bama" (a sacrificial altar outside the Temple, upon which it is forbidden to offer sacrifices). What is the meaning of this comparison? A bama represents a person's desire to depart from the standard route of worship in the Temple in order to establish his personal, alternate route. Likewise, self-imposed prohibitions taken on through vows also represent a retreat from the normal world of mitzvot; the person adopts an additional track through which to worship God. Rather than remaining content with the mitzvot that God gave, the person chooses the Torah-sanctioned track of vows, thereby isolating himself from the standard world of avodat Hashem (divine service).

Taken at face value, this scenario does not seem to be negative; on the contrary, the person is motivated by the desire to accept upon himself more obligations. However, one must know where he stands in his avodat Hashem. There is no reason to desert the multitude of commandments which we are bound to fulfill in search of more. Who are you to think that you have exhausted the 613 mitzvot which are the most basic level of observance?

This issue of nedarim parallels a phenomenon which is widespread throughout the contemporary world of Jewish observance. Often, Orthodox Jews dismiss what the Halakha requires of them as being undignified, and opt for "chumrot," or a stricter adherence to the laws. I strongly object to this ubiquitous practice -- it must rather remain the province of rare individuals of great spiritual attainment. Often, by taking on a stricter level of observance which exceeds what God requires of us, we lose the spiritual component in our worship and instead become overly ritualistic. Instead, we should recognize who we are, and not deem ourselves above the basic level of observance.

There was a time when one could look up to the gedolim, such as the Chazon Ish and Rav Chaim Brisker, and admire their strict observance of the law, marvel at the chumrot which they took upon themselves. However, chumrot are no longer relegated to the realm of the gedolim; every simple Jew thinks it his task in life to live as the gedolim do.

I once rode in a car with a student in the Yeshiva who is now an important rabbi. I turned to him and remarked: "I would wager that you wear an especially large garment on which to place the tzitzit." "Rebbe," he responded, "how did you know?" I answered, "Since the Mishna Berura writes that a God-fearing person should don a larger garment, I assume that you see fit to heed his words. I, on the other hand, do not fancy myself to be in that exclusive category,

and therefore am satisfied wearing a smaller garment."

Obviously, I am not suggesting that there is no room for creativity in our worship. However, we must recognize the need to properly channel this creativity. There is ample room within the mitzvot, on their basic level, for each person to leave his mark. Although wearing tefillin has a uniform procedure in a formal sense, as far as spiritual content is concerned, no two people don their tefillin in the same way.

So, to summarize, we must exercise a dual caution with regard to adopting chumrot. 1. We must honestly assess our spiritual level and avoid overreaching ourselves and adopting practices which are not consonant with our level. 2. We must try to find our own personal expression within the standard level of mitzva observance required by the Torah. In order for our own creativity to come through, we must do not have to adopt a personal brand of Judaism expressing our unique qualities. (*Originally delivered at seuda shelishit, Shabbat Parashat Matot-Mas'ei 5757.*)

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

Upon their return from the battle against Midian, Moshe angrily reprimanded the officers for not following his orders. Subsequently, when it was necessary to make the utensils taken in the booty kosher, Elazar the Kohen said: "This is the decree (for making utensils kosher)" Numbers 31:21).

Why did Elazar teach this law and not Moshe?

The Talmud answers that Moshe had forgotten the law due his anger. "If a person becomes enraged, if he is wise, he loses his wisdom, and if he is a prophet, he loses his prophecy" (Pesachim 66b).

Writes Rabbi Yehudah Leib Chasman, "The suspension of Moshe's prophetic powers and intellect was not a punishment. Far from it. Moshe's wrath was directed at those who failed to protect the Israelites from improper actions, and it was thus in the interest of Israel and for the greater glory of God. Nevertheless, Moshe suffered suspension of his enormous powers because of the toxic effects of rage are a natural phenomenon. A person who put his hand into a fire is not 'punished' by being burned. It is a natural consequence. Similarly, the loss of one's powers due to rage is a natural consequence rather than a punishment."

It is vital that one works to break the character trait of anger. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D. ©2018 Rabbi K. Packouz & aish.com*

