

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Israelites are almost within sight of the promised land. They have waged a victorious campaign against the Midianites. We feel the tempo quicken. No longer are the Israelites in the desert. They are moving inexorably toward the Jordan, to the west of which lies their destination: the land 'flowing with milk and honey'.

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they are travelling is ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would like to stay there, to the east of the Jordan. Moses is angry at the suggestion: "Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, 'Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them?'"

The tribes meet his objection with a compromise formula: "Then they came up to him and said, 'We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we are ready to arm ourselves and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan.'"

We are willing, they tell Moses, to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead. Indeed we are willing to go on ahead, to be the advance guard, to be in the forefront of the battle. It is not that we are afraid of battle. Nor are we trying to evade our responsibilities toward our people as a whole. It is simply that we wish to raise cattle, and this land to the east of the Jordan is ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agrees. If they keep their word, they may settle east of the Jordan.

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said: "Then they came up to

him and said, 'We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children.'"

Moses replies: "Build cities for your children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised."

The ordering of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they speak of their flocks first, their women and children second. Moses reverses the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes:

"They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: 'Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks.'"

The midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 22: 9) makes the same point through a dazzling interpretation of the line in Ecclesiastes: "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left." (Ecclesiastes 10:2)

The midrash identifies 'right' with Torah and life: "He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand (Deut. 33:2). 'Left' refers to worldly goods: "Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour." (Proverbs 3: 16)

The men of Reuben and Gad put 'riches and honour' before faith and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong. The midrash continues: "The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: 'Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.'"

One of the most consistent patterns of Jewish history is the way communities through the ages put children and their education first. Already in the first century Josephus was able to write: "The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls." In twelfth century France a Christian scholar noted: "A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of G-d's law- and not only his sons but his daughters too."

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organise the educational

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system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family: "The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys' school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son. The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her sons schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew-for her the two are synonymous."

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshivah heads and Hassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilization that is as child-centred as Judaism, nor any that has predicated its very existence on putting their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues-Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor detail but a fundamental statement about Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary.

Civilizations that value the young, stay young. Those that invest in the future, have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our belief and way of life into the next generation. © 2005 Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks is Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

At the end of the War of Midyan, after taking the booty and setting part of it aside as a gift to G-d,

the commanders of the army come to Moshe. "And the commanders of the army, leaders of thousands and leaders of hundreds, approached Moshe and said to him: Your servants counted the warriors under our command, and not one of them was missing. And we offered a sacrifice to G-d: every man who found a golden utensil, a bracelet, or an armband, a ring, an earring, or a nose-ring, will give it as atonement before G-d" [Bamidbar 31:49-50]. What is the meaning of this? Why did the commanders need to repent?

Evidently this event is related to what is discussed right before this, when the men returned from the battle. "And Moshe was angry with the commanders, the leaders of the thousands and the leaders of the hundreds, who returned from the war. And Moshe said to them: Did you let every female live? They were the ones who approached Bnei Yisrael in the affair of Bilam, to cause them to rebel against G-d..." [31:14-15]. Indeed, this was an outrageous act, keeping the Midyanite women alive, even though they were the specific reason the war was fought. G-d had already explained this, as he said to Moshe: "Harass the Midyanites and strike them, for they harassed you, with their traps that they set for you with respect to the affair of Peor and with respect to Kozbi, daughter of the leader of Midyan, their sister" [25:17-18].

Thus, it seems likely that the commanders did indeed feel guilty about what they had done. Their feeling was enhanced by the fact that together with the great victory over Midyan, "not one of them was missing." In spite of the miraculous progress of the war, the leaders of the army did not refrain from taking such problematic captives. Thus, as part of their repentance, they wanted to offer their booty as a sacrifice: a golden utensil, a bracelet, or an armband, a ring, an earring, or a nose-ring. This jewelry was evidently linked to the women of Midyan (see Rashi), and offering it as a sacrifice was a way to counterbalance their previous actions in relation to these women.

Because of this reason, the purpose of the contribution of gold given by the commanders was different than the purpose of the fraction of the booty captured by Bnei Yisrael that was given to G-d. This was "one part in fifty from among the men, the cattle, the donkeys, and the sheep, from all the animals" [Bamidbar 31:30]. It was meant for the Levites. "Give it to the Levites, who keep watch over the Tabernacle of G-d" [ibid]. The gift of gold by the commanders, on the other hand, which was given as part of the repentance for the sin of the Midyanite women, was not set aside for any specific purpose. "Moshe and Elazar the Kohen took the gold from the leaders of thousands and hundreds and brought it to the Tent of Meeting, as a memory for Yisrael before G-d" [31:54]. This is similar to the pans of the community of Korach, which were used to cover the Altar, "a memory for Yisrael, that no foreigner who is not descended from Aharon shall offer incense, and he will not be like Korach and his

community." [17:5]. Thus, the gold was also set aside in memory of a sin, but in this case the sinners managed to repent for their actions before it was too late.

Wars of the Jews and the Foreign Nations

by Rabbi Tzion Tawill, Rabbi of Netzarim, Head of Yeshivat "Netzer Mata'ai"

The Almighty commands Moshe, "Take the revenge of Bnei Yisrael from the Midyanites" [Bamidbar 31:2], while Moshe tells the people to "take G-d's revenge of Midyan" [31:3]. Rashi explains this apparent difference as referring to the same thing. "One who stands up against Yisrael is in effect also standing up against G-d." This is similar to the way Rashi interpreted the verse about carrying the Ark. "And your enemies will be scattered-This refers to those who hate Yisrael. Everybody who hates Yisrael also hates the one who created the world." [Rashi, Bamidbar 10:35].

Thus, we see that even if it seems that the reason the other nations fight Bnei Yisrael is for such things as territorial gain, the truth is that the wars fought by the other nations against Yisrael stem from much deeper roots.

In the prayer of Rabbi Nechunia Ben Hakaneh, it is written, "Please, strong one, keep watch over those who seek your uniqueness." Rabbi A.Y. Kook explains, "The community of Yisrael seeks the unity of G-d in the world, in order to unite all the creatures to become one, to do the will of G-d with a pure heart. Because of this idea, which is always present in the hearts of Bnei Yisrael, many others rise up against them and they therefore must be protected from all sides." [Olat Re'iyah].

By its very existence, the nation of Yisrael sends out a message to all the other nations, a message of the unity of G-d. There is an owner of the "palace," and the world is moving in the direction of spiritual progress. There is a path which must be followed by man, society, and the world, and this message is limiting and constricting. The other nations are upset by the obligations of this message, and they fight against Yisrael to prevent us from becoming established in the material world of return of the exiles and territorial gains, to prevent our influence from increasing. Obviously neither individual people nor entire nations explicitly give this reason for their actions. Their wars against Yisrael have material goals, but in depth "even though they do not see the truth, it is part of their fate."

This concept is used by the Maharal to explain the Talmud, when it gives as one of the signs of redemption that "in the seventh year, there will be wars" [Sanhedrin 97]. Why is war one of the harbingers of redemption? The answer is that when Yisrael's strength increases the resistance of the other nations increases, they have more to fight against and they can identify a specific foe. This is different from the time of

hibernation, during the exile. (See Netzach Yisrael, 32-36).

The stronger and more courageous Bnei Yisrael become, the more of them return to their land, and-most important-the stronger is their yearning to return to Jerusalem, the greater will the resistance by the other nations become. It is not in vain that the nations want to take Gush Katif away from us, in order that we will not reach Jerusalem! The Almighty "gives strength to His nation" [Tehillim 29:11], and "He who dwells in heaven will laugh... at them" [2:4]. He will bring us to all the corners of our land, and He will bring us to stand upright within the land.

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Moses gave to them, -- to the children of Gad, to the children of Reuven, and to half the tribe of Menashe-the kingdom of Sihon the King of the Emorites, and the kingdom of Og the King of the Bashan..." (Numbers 32: 33)

From where did this half tribe of Menashe come into the story? Initially Moses had been approached by the tribes of Gad and Reuven to allow them to remain on Trans-Jordan where there was ample grazing lands for their abundant cattle (Numbers 32: 1,2). Moses explains to them that only after they participate in the battle for the conquest of the rest of the land of Israel together with their brothers of the other tribes will they be permitted to receive Trans-Jordan as their inheritance, and they agree to Moses' conditions. And then, when Trans-Jordan is given, we suddenly find one-half of the tribe of Menashe entering as partners in the Trans-Jordan land parcels. When and why did the half-tribe of Menashe enter the scene?

The Ramban is sensitive to this issue, and suggests that, although Moses had initially been approached only by Gad and Reuven, it soon became apparent that the land in Trans-Jordan was plentiful enough to include another partner. Moses called for volunteers, and members of the tribe of Menashe responded to his call, "perhaps because they were also herdsmen seeking grazing lands" (Numbers 32: 33, Ramban as/oc) would add that perhaps they volunteered for another reason altogether: perhaps they were materialistic opportunists, seeking lush farmland and desiring to be distanced from the more spiritual tribe of Judah, from the more centralized location of the Sanctuary, from the eventual divinely-centered capital city of Jerusalem. In this regard the people of Menashe were acting true to their namesake and tribal forbear: remember that Joseph says about the name he chose for his eldest son Menashe, "G-d has enabled me to forget (nashe', forget) all of my toil and everything involved in my father's house," including much of the Abrahamic traditions. Moreover, Menashe was the politically adept, linguistically fluent son who aided his

father in his sale of grain to the various representatives of various countries of the world; he was not like his younger brother Ephraim, who studied Torah with his elderly grandfather, Jacob-Yisrael. And indeed, it would seem that these two and one-half tribes did attempt to build an altar to Idolatry in their Trans-Jordan land during the period of Joshua, until they were dissuaded from doing so by a delegation of Pinhas together with representatives from the rest of the tribes (Joshua 22:12-19). Apparently geographical distance from Jerusalem creates ideological difference as well-until this very day.

A very different scenario is suggested by the Naziv, Rav Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin, in his late nineteenth century Biblical commentary called HaAmek Davar. He insists that Moses specifically chose half the tribe of Menashe to join together with Gad and Reuven in Trans-Jordan because Moses was concerned lest "far from the eye makes one far from the heart" since absence often makes the heart grow absent. After all, the ancient and persistent enemies of the land of Israel and the Torah of Israel were Datan and Aviram, scions of the disgruntled and "disinherited" tribe Reuven; leaving the tribe of Reuven so far away and isolated from mainstream Israel was certainly asking for trouble.

And the tribe of Menashe, on the other hand, were perfect "religious supervisors" (mashgihim ruhaniim) for the less trustworthy Reuven. Did not the wise, the righteous, the committed lovers of Israel, the daughters of Zelafhad, come from the tribe of Menashe? And Yair ("he will shine forth light," literally) the son of Menashe (Deut. 3:14) is considered by our Talmudic Sages to have been equal to the majority of the Sanhedrin.

Hence the sincerely Zionistic and learned tribe of Menashe are the perfect individuals to religiously influence the suspect tribe of Reuven, who together with Gad, were to be far from the spiritual center of the land of Israel and so removed from the majority of the Israelite tribes. They were to serve in a capacity very similar to Habad emissaries or Amiel Rabbis of the Joseph Straus Rabbinical Seminary, emissaries to Jews in far-flung places, to bring the traditional religious message to those who are distanced from it, geographically as well as ideologically.

And why only half the tribe of Menashe? When someone is sent to a far-flung community, hopefully he will influence them-but the danger always exists that they will influence him. If half the tribe still has another familial half-uncles, aunts, brothers, sisters, cousins-closer to the religious center, chances are that the emissaries will make frequent visitations to, and receive familial visitors from, the more religiously involved central areas; this situation of frequent communication between family members of the tribe of Menashe enhances the chances that the emissaries will remain unchanged, and firm in the commitment with which they

must inspire their neighbors in Trans-Jordan. © 2005 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

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.

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 faith 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. © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

DR. AVIGDOR BONCHEK

What's Bothering Rashi

In this week's parsha the laws of vows are discussed. We find the following: "But if her father restrained her on the day of his hearing, all her vows or prohibitions that she established on herself shall not stand and Hashem will forgive her, for her father had restrained her." (Numbers 30:6)

"And Hashem will forgive her"-RASHI: "To what case is the Scripture referring? To a woman who took the Nazarite vow. Her husband heard and nullified it, but she was unaware of this. She then violated her vow by drinking wine and defiling herself by contact with a corpse. She is in need of forgiveness even though it was nullified. Now if those who[se vows] have been nullified require forgiveness, certainly those who[se vows] have not been nullified."

[NOTE: some change this to aviha ("her father") because these verses refer to a father nullifying his daughter's vow, not a husband nullifying his wife's vow. In our analysis we will refer to the father.] What would you ask about this comment?

A Question: Rashi feels the need to explain the particular circumstances that these words are referring to. Why? What is not clear?

Hint: Rashi's statement, "She is in need of forgiveness even though it was nullified," implies a question. What question?

An Answer: Our verse speaks of a situation where a young woman makes a vow but her father immediately nullifies it. Then it says that the woman is forgiven. "Forgiven for what?" we would ask. If her father nullified her vow, even if she acts contrary to the vow, she has not "violated" anything, since the vow was legitimately annulled. In such a case, what need is there for G-d's forgiveness? This is the question that Rashi is dealing with. How does his explanation help matters?

An Answer: Granted the woman's father nullified her vow, but she was not aware of that. She thought her vow was still valid. So we have a situation where she thought that the vow was valid, but nevertheless she went ahead and violated it by drinking wine. This is an unusual case, where a person intended to commit a sinful act, yet, in fact, did not. Rashi tells us that even though formally and legally she has not sinned, her sinful intention is nevertheless in need of Divine forgiveness.

This is an important message. Judaism has always placed its emphasis on man's actions more than on his intentions or beliefs. Granted that the Talmud (Sanhedrin 106a) makes a point of the importance of intentions by saying, "G-d desires the heart," meaning

that He wants our right intentions. Nevertheless, we know, for example, that giving charity, even for selfish motives, is better than not giving. In such a case, intentions are secondary to actions. The Israelites' declaration at Mt. Sinai "We will do and we will hear (i.e. understand)" (Exodus 24:7), which gave precedence to action over intention-is a central credo of the religious Jew. Nevertheless, intentions are not irrelevant. They are the spurs to action. "The heart desires and body implements" for right or for wrong. A person who eats a piece of kosher meat though he thinks it is not kosher, has not transgressed a law for which he can be punished. Yet Rashi's comment teaches us that G-d does hold him accountable. He must ask forgiveness for his sinful intention.

Rashi used a kal v'chomer, a logical induction: If one need ask forgiveness for a permissible act, but for which one had a sinful intention, (the woman who "violated" a vow that had already been annulled), we can logically assume that he must certainly ask forgiveness for actually committing a sinful act.

A Question: Is this not all too obvious? Doing a transgression is obviously worse than not doing one! Why the need for Rashi to even mention it. Anyone could have made the same deduction.

Rashi's source is the Talmud (Tractate Kiddushin 81b) where it says: "When Rabbi Akiva would read this verse he would cry and say: 'If a person intended to take a piece of pork and by mistake took a piece of [kosher] veal, even so he is in need of atonement and forgiveness,' how much more so, the person who intended to take a piece of pork and in actuality did take a piece of pork!"

It is clear that Rabbi Akiva's reaction was an emotional one (he cried), not merely a logically deduced one. He was shaken by the awesome responsibility of keeping G-d's commandments and the dire consequences for the one who transgresses them, even in mind only. His was a musar reflection. So, asking why such a deduction is necessary, since it is logical, misses the point. The point was not a deduction, analytically arrived at, but an awesome existential awareness. This also may be Rashi's intention. © 2005 Dr. A. Bonchek & aish.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

“We will build enclosures for our sheep here and cities for our children” (Bamidbar 32:16).
 “They cared more for their money than for their sons and daughters, for they mentioned their cattle before their little ones. Moshe said to them 'it should not be so. Make the main thing (i.e. the cities for their children) primary and what is secondary (the housing for the animals) secondary. First build the cities for your little ones and then the enclosures for your sheep” (Rashi, based on Midrash Tanchuma). Many have

asked how the Tribes of Reuvein and Gad could have considered their livestock more important than their children. However, there seems to be a legitimate justification for building the shelters for the animals first.

Midrash Rabbah (Bamidbar 19:17) tells us that G-d caused that Sichon be given over to us without any pain. It then elaborates: "Even if Cheshbon (the city that Sichon was in after conquering it from Moav) were full of mosquitoes (rather than warriors) no creature would have been able to conquer it (it was so well fortified). And even if Sichon was in a valley no creature would be able to rule over him (he was so strong); there's no need to mention [the difficulty being that] he was strong and was staying in a fortified city. Even if he and his armies were in his other cities (i.e. not Cheshbon) it would have been exhausting for (the Children of) Israel to conquer each city (individually). So G-d gathered [all of] them before [Israel] in order to defeat them without pain. As it says (Devarim 2:31) 'see that I have begun to give [Sichon] over to you.' They killed all the warriors that came out to meet them (in war), and then they needed no effort to defeat the women and children (who were left behind in the cities)." When they conquered Sichon it says explicitly that "Sichon gathered all of his people and went out towards Israel to the desert" to wage war with them (Bamidbar 21:23), which would leave the no-longer-needed housing back in the cities still standing, and available for the new inhabitants. A similar thing happened with Og, who "came out" with all of his people to wage war with Israel (21:33). That being the case, there was really no need to build new housing for their families, as they were able to live in the houses vacated by the previous inhabitants!

The existing facilities for the livestock, however, were still in use (as the Emori's animals were still in them), and additional ones had to be built. The cities did have to be fortified, in order to protect the members of the family left behind while they led the war to conquer the rest of the Land. As they told Moshe, "our little ones will reside in the fortified cities, to protect them from the inhabitants of the land" (32:17), i.e. fortified now for protection (see Rashi and Gur Aryeh).

So there were two tasks that had to be accomplished before they helped the rest of the nation on the other side of the Jordan River - building additional animal shelters and creating a protective barrier (i.e. a wall around the city) for their family members. If you asked them which was more important, protecting their families or expanding the animal shelters, there is no doubt that they would have opted to protect their families. But this protection wasn't needed until after they left, and the animals needed shelter right now! Therefore, from a practical standpoint, it made sense to first build the shelters and then fortify the cities. And this was what they told Moshe they would do.

Now that we understand what the Tribes of Reuvein and Gad might have been thinking, the

question becomes why they were taken to task for it. Imagine how the families must have felt, knowing that their fathers/husbands were going off to war and leaving them to fend for themselves. Sure, they were reassured that G-d would protect them, and that there would be protective structures built to prevent any attacks. But until the cities were fortified, it is understandable if they felt uneasy. Had the animal shelters been built first (as had been planned), it would have left them with this uneasy feeling for longer, plus may have placed a doubt in their minds about what was really more important to the men, their families or their possessions. Especially since they had asked for this land in the first place specifically because of their possessions.

There were two options here. Either build the animal shelters first because it was a more immediate need than fortifying the cities, or fortify the cities first to ease any (unfounded) concerns about future safety and about where their priorities lay - despite the fact that the livestock couldn't be cared for properly until the shelters were built. The men may not have even realized that by choosing to build the shelters first it would have an affect on their families, but only looked at the practical side of things - that one need would be filled even if it was built later and the other would not be met until they built it. Moshe, however, pointed out to them the inappropriate message that would be sent if they took care of the needs of the animals before taking care of the needs of their families. Even if, practically speaking, it made more sense to do it the other way around.

Notice that Rashi doesn't say that they actually thought that their animals were more important, only that they "cared" for them more, i.e. were more concerned about them. Not because they thought they were more important, but because they were more concerned with their needs than the emotional needs of their families. It was Moshe who told them to do what's more important first. They got the message, and fortified the cities first. © 2005 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI NOSSON CHAYIM LEFF

Sfas Emes

The Parsha begins with Moshe Rabbeinu in a meeting with the leaders of the Shevatim: Moshe tells them "Zeh Hadavar Asher Tsiva HaShem." (This is- exactly-what HaShem has commanded.") The Sfas Emes cites Rashi, who, in turn, follows the comment of the Sifri.. (The Sifri is a classical commentary-dating from Tana'itic times-on Bemidbar and Devarim.) The Sifri tells us that whenever Moshe transmitted the words of HaShem, he sometimes introduced those words, as did other prophets in communicating their prophecies, with the sentence "Koh Ahmar HaShem." "Koh" means: "more or less like this." Hence, the introductory sentence as a whole is: "This is- approximately-what HaShem said..." Moshe Rabbeinu, however, operated at a level much higher

than all other prophets. As a result, Moshe was often able to transmit HaShem's message with such precision that he could introduce the message with :: "Zeh Hadavar..." ("This is exactly what HaShem said.") The Torah signals this higher degree of clarity and precision by using the word "Zeh" rather than "Koh."

Now the Sfas Emes asks a basic question: If the greater degree of clarity that "Zeh" implies is a virtue, why were some of Moshe's Nevu'os (prophecies) preceded by "Koh?" The Sfas Emes answers: There are things in the world which cannot really be clarified, things that we cannot really grasp. We can handle these topics, only imprecisely-with similes, allusions, parables-that is, only approximately, only "more or less." That is, there is a whole realm of reality for which "Koh" is the best that can be applied; "Zeh" invokes a standard that is unattainable.

I have the impression that when the Sfas Emes refers to the things that we cannot really grasp, he has in mind much more than what the Navi says (Yeshayahu, 55:8): "For My thoughts are not your thoughts..." Much more seems to be involved than merely "thoughts." Whole configurations of reality seem to be the issue.

An example from another context may help to clarify the difference between "... My thoughts" and "entire configurations." The example comes from our Tefila of Shacharis on Shabbos, the Piyut that begins "Hakol Yoduch." Nusach Ashkenaz goes on to say: "Ein Ke'erkecha"- "We cannot measure Your greatness." By contrast, Nusach Sefard says "Ein Aroch Eilecha"-We don't even have the METRIC with which we could even conceivably measure Your greatness.")

Where is this realm that we cannot really understand? The Sfas Emes tells us it is "Olam Hazeih." Note the double play on words: "Olam" evokes the thought of He'eleim-"hidden." By contrast, "Hazeih" implies definite clarity. You may ask: Which is it: Hidden or definite clarity? The Sfas Emes seems to be saying: Both-that this double play on words is telling us that we live in a world of ambiguity.

You may find this confusing. And indeed that is exactly what the Sfas Emes is telling us: That the world is a very confusing place and by all indications that is exactly how HaShem wants it to be.

Moshe was on a level so high that he could pierce the Hester and perceive the world as it truly is, with the quality of "Zeh." So, too, were Bnei Yisroel at the time of Matan Torah. Unfortunately, we lost this capability when we made the golden calf. As the Torah says (Shemos, 33:6): "Vayisnatzlu Bnei Yisroel Es Edyam..." (ArtScroll: "And the Children of Israel were stripped of their jewelry... "). What "jewelry?" The crowns that we had been given when we said "Na'aseh Venishma."

The Sfas Emes makes the point all the more forceful as he reads "Edyam" not as their "jewelry" but as coming from the root "Eid"-witness or testimony. This

reading gives us the Pasuk just cited as: "Bnei Yisroel lost the clarity of perception that they had been granted at Sinai."

But all is not lost! The Sfas Emes quotes a ma'amar of Chazal, who tell us that the crowns of truthful insight are restored to Bnei Yisroel on Shabbos. The Zohar explains that, by observing Shabbos, we are testifying as witnesses ("Eidim") that HaShem created the world and gives the world its existence. Thus, by keeping the Mitzvos of Shabbos, we have greater access to HaShem and-penetrating the shroud of Hester-to an accurate picture of reality.

Shabbos, then, takes on the quality of "Zeh Hadavar!" This quality of enhanced perception stands in sharp contrast to the situation on Yemos Hachol (days in which the world may seem "empty" (from the root "chalol") of HaShem's presence. During the week, the most we can achieve is to see the world as if through darkly stained glasses; i.e. with the imperfect vision of "Koh."

Note how high are the Sfas Emes's standards and expectations when he tells us what we must do to reach even the inferior level of "Koh." How can a person achieve "Koh?" By doing everything that his action Leshem Shamayim (to bring honor to HaShem) and by doing so even though the truth concerning the world is hidden.

One might expect that the Sfas Emes would rank Shabbos above Yemei Hama'aseh (the days of work) in all respects and without qualification. In fact, the world is more complex. The Sfas Emes remarks that Shabbos also depends on the days of work since, to reach the level of "Zeh Hadavar"-fully accurate metaphysical perception-a person must start with "Koh"-incomplete, and hence, unsatisfying perception. That's us. © 2005 Rabbi N.C. Leff & torah.org

RABBI ZVI MILLER

The Salant Foundation

The Torah (Bamidbar 32:22) instructs us: "You shall be clean from HaShem and from Israel." This injunction cautions us to conduct all of our affairs with integrity and to be beyond reproach.

The Midrash (Kohelles Raba 9:1) records an incident that illustrates this standard of excellence. Aba Tachanah Chasida approached the gates of his city on Erev Shabbos just as the sun was setting. He carried a pack on his shoulder that contained all of his money and valuables. Suddenly, he came upon a sick man, who was smitten with boils, lying in the road. The incapacitated man said, "Rabbi, please do me a great favor and carry me into the city."

Aba Tachanah Chasida thought to himself, "If I leave my satchel here, how will I provide for my family. Yet, if I leave this helpless man on the road, I will be accountable for his life."

He struggled with this moral dilemma until he overcame his negative impulse. Quickly he put down his personal belongings and picked up the sick man, and carried him into the city. He then ran back to retrieve his belongings and entered the city just as the last rays of sun were fading away.

The inhabitants of the city were shocked that Aba Tachanah Chasida, a very pious man, made his way into the city so close to Shabbos. Indeed, he, himself, was concerned that he had perhaps violated the prohibition of carrying on Shabbos.

In order to alleviate his fears HaShem intervened and caused the sun to cast an extra illumination upon the earth-demonstrating to all that Aba Tachanah Chasida had not defiled the Shabbos. Moreover, a Bat Kol proclaimed (Kohelles 9:7): "Go on your way and eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with happiness; for your deeds are pleasing to HaShem". Meaning, your deeds were performed correctly and you will receive your just reward in the World to Come.

Implement: Let your conscience empower you to act morally, even in challenging circumstances.
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RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

A person's word should be that person's bond. In Jewish law, oral agreements when properly witnessed at the time of the agreement 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 stated in Kohelet that "it is better not to vow at all than to vow and not 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 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 the 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 once elected, often completely disregard their publicly stated pledges and policies. If the Torah holds a private individual to his word, then how much more so public officials and elected leaders should be held to those statements which form 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. © 2005 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/jewishhistory.

