

OHRNET

SHABBAT PARSHIOT MATOT-MASEI · 26 TAMMUZ 5769 · JUL 18 2009 · VOL. 16 NO. 39

PARSHA INSIGHTS

VENGEANCE IS WHOSE?

“G-d spoke to Moshe, saying, ‘Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites.’ “ (31:2)

A well-known Rabbi was standing in line at Customs at an airport. In front of him were two equally religious-looking gentlemen. The customs officer came over to the two and asked them if they had anything to declare. Rather nervously, they both answered in the negative. Whether it was their nervousness or some other reason, the customs officer decided to ask them to open their suitcases.

After a few seconds of careful probing, somewhat reluctantly the cases disgorged two million dollars' worth of diamonds. They lay there on the counter. Both men collapsed in tears. Not just at being caught, but at the terrible desecration of G-d's name that they had perpetrated.

The customs officer turned his attention to the next in line, the Rabbi, and asked him: “Anything to declare, sir?” He replied “No, officer.” “Sir, would you mind opening your case, please.” “Officer, I will happily open my case, but I think I should tell you that you are wasting your time.” “Oh yes, sir. And why is that?” replied the officer, a cynical smile playing around the corner of his lips. The Rabbi continued. “Officer. I am an Orthodox Jew and the Torah strictly prohibits smuggling.” “I see, sir,” said the customs officer, sarcastically. “Do you see those two religious Jewish gentlemen over there, sir? And what are those two gentlemen, sir? Martians?” Replied the Rabbi, “Which two religious gentlemen are you referring to, officer? I'm afraid I don't see religious Jews. I see only diamond smugglers.”

When an Orthodox Jew behaves in a despicable fashion, the damage is felt on the other side of the cosmos. Someone who wears a *kippa* is an ambassador for the Jewish People to the whole world. However, the world will judge not only Judaism based on the actions of this person. They will also judge its Author.

Everything in this world was created for the honor of its Creator. When a person brings credit to the Jewish People, he also brings honor to the One who chose us from all the

peoples. He fulfills his purpose and the purpose of Creation itself. If he does the reverse, G-d forbid, he both writes himself out of reality and damages the whole cosmos. He blemishes Creation more than all the world's crude-oil spills and atomic meltdowns.

But there's another side to *chillul Hashem* (desecrating G-d's Name). When a Jew sees or hears someone doing an unspeakable act, he thinks to himself: “How could he have done that?! I would never do such a thing in a million years. You know something? I'm not such a bad person after all. I'm really a *tzaddik*. My small transgressions are nothing compared with this guy's. You know something? I'm really a *big tzaddik*!”

It takes a lifetime's work to correct the flaws in our character, both big and small. The only way we have a hope of improving ourselves is to sensitize ourselves to our shortcomings and realize that we have a long way to go. When someone behaves immorally it makes us think that we are really okay because we would never sink to that level, and thus we give up trying to be better. As a result, not only do we suffer, but the whole world becomes a darker place because we have given up on the light.

In this week's Torah portion, there is an interesting anomaly. In one verse G-d says, “Take vengeance for the *Children of Israel* against the Midianites.” And in the next verse Moshe directs the Jewish People “to inflict G-d's vengeance against Midian.” Which is it? Is it G-d's vengeance or is it ours?

The answer is that at the deepest level the Jewish People and G-d are one. When we blemish the good name of the Jewish People, we cause a diminution of G-d's light in the world. And when we do something that brings credit to the Jews, we bring the whole of mankind closer to G-d.

• Sources: Rabbi Mordechai Perlman and others

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Matot

Moshe teaches the rules and restrictions governing oaths and vows — especially the role of a husband or father in either upholding or annulling a vow. *Bnei Yisrael* wage war against Midian. They kill the five Midianite kings, all the males and Bilaam. Moshe is upset that women were taken captive. They were catalysts for the immoral behavior of the Jewish People. He rebukes the officers. The spoils of war are counted and apportioned. The commanding officers report to Moshe that there was not one casualty among *Bnei Yisrael*. They bring an offering that is taken by Moshe and Elazar and placed in the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Tent of Meeting). The Tribes of Gad and Reuven, who own large quantities of livestock, petition Moshe to allow them to remain east of the Jordan and not enter the Land of Israel. They explain that the land east of the Jordan is quite suitable grazing land for their livestock. Moshe's initial response is that this request will discourage the rest of *Bnei Yisrael*, and that it is akin to the sin of the spies. They assure Moshe that they will first help conquer Israel, and only then will they go back

to their homes on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moshe grants their request on condition that they uphold their part of the deal.

Masei

The Torah names all 42 encampments of *Bnei Yisrael* on their 40-year journey from the Exodus until the crossing of the Jordan River into *Eretz Yisrael*. G-d commands *Bnei Yisrael* to drive out the Canaanites from *Eretz Yisrael* and to demolish every vestige of their idolatry. *Bnei Yisrael* are warned that if they fail to rid the land completely of the Canaanites, those who remain will be "pins in their eyes and thorns in their sides." The boundaries of the Land of Israel are defined, and the tribes are commanded to set aside 48 cities for the *levi'im*, who do not receive a regular portion in the division of the Land. Cities of refuge are to be established: Someone who murders unintentionally may flee there. The daughters of Tzelofchad marry members of their tribe so that their inheritance will stay in their own tribe. Thus ends the Book of *Bamidbar/Numbers*, the fourth of the Books of the Torah.

ISRAEL Forever

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

The importance of maintaining the sanctity of *Eretz Yisrael* is highlighted by something which Jews throughout the world will hear this week as the Torah portion regarding the division of the Holy Land among the tribes is read in the synagogue.

Two of the cities in the portion granted to the tribe of Reuven had names that their original inhabitants had given them to honor the idols they worshipped. When the Torah

relates that Nevo and Ba'al Meon were developed by the Reuvenites, it mentions that they changed the names of their cities in order to avoid any mention of idolatry.

This should serve as a lesson to our own generation to avoid introducing any element of pagan culture into our Holy Land. Only by steadfastly preserving the unique holiness of our people and our Land can we secure Israel forever.

LOVE OF THE LAND- THE PLACES

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and *Eretz Yisrael*

MIRIAM'S SPRING

The miraculous spring that supplied the children of Israel with water during their forty years of wandering was known as Miriam's Spring because it was in the merit of Moshe's sister that it existed.

The Talmud relates that when our ancestors arrived



in *Eretz Yisrael* this spring was absorbed into Lake Kinneret, otherwise known as the Sea of Tveryah.

In the *Ethics of the Fathers* Miriam's Spring is listed as one of the ten things created in the twilight of Erev Shabbat of the six days of Creation.

OHRNET magazine is published by OHR SOMAYACH Tanenbaum College

POB 18103, Jerusalem 91180, Israel • Tel: +972-2-581-0315 • Email: info@ohr.edu • www.ohr.edu

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PARSHA Q&A ?

Matot

1. Who may annul a vow?
2. When may a father annul his widowed daughter's vows?
3. Why were the Jewish People not commanded to attack Moav, as they were to attack Midian?
4. Those selected to fight Midian went unwillingly. Why?
5. What holy vessels accompanied the Jewish People into battle?
6. Those who killed in the war against Midian were required to remain outside the "*machane*" (camp). Which *machane*?
7. Besides removing traces of forbidden food, what else is needed to make metal vessels obtained from a non-Jew fit for a Jewish owner?
8. "We will build sheep-pens here for our livestock and cities for our little ones." What was improper about this statement?
9. During the conquest of the Land, where did *Bnei Gad* and *Bnei Reuven* position themselves?
10. What promise did *Bnei Gad* and *Bnei Reuven* make beyond that which Moshe required?

Masei

1. Why does the Torah list the places where the Jewish People camped?
2. Why did the King of Arad feel at liberty to attack the Jewish People?
3. What length was the camp in the *midbar*?
4. Why does the Torah need to specify the boundaries that are to be inherited by the Jewish People?
5. What was the *nesi'im*'s role in dividing the Land?
6. When did the three cities east of the Jordan begin to function as refuge cities?
7. There were six refuge cities, three on each side of the Jordan. Yet, on the east side of the Jordan there were only two and a half tribes. Why did they need three cities?
8. To be judged as an intentional murderer, what type of weapon must the murderer use?
9. Why is the *kohen gadol* blamed for accidental deaths?
10. When an ancestral field moves by inheritance from one tribe to another, what happens to it in *yovel*?

PARSHA Q&A!

Answers to this week's Questions!

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary unless otherwise stated.

Matot

1. 30:2 - Preferably, an expert in the laws of *nedarim*. Otherwise, three ordinary people.
2. 30:10 - If she is under 12 1/2 years old and widowed before she was fully married.
3. 31:2 - Because Moav only acted out of fear against the Jewish People. Also, Ruth was destined to come from Moav.
4. 31:5 - They knew that Moshe's death would follow.
5. 31:6 - The *aron* and the *tzitz*.
6. 31:19 - The *Machane Shechina*.
7. 31:23 - Immersion in a *mikve*.
8. 32:16 - They showed more regard for their property than for their children.
9. 32:17 - At the head of the troops.
10. 32:24 - Moshe required them to remain west of the Jordan during the conquest of the Land. They promised to remain after the conquest until the Land was divided among the tribes.

Masei

1. 33:1 - To show G-d's love of the Jewish People. Although it was decreed that they wander in the desert, they did not travel continuously. During 38 years, they moved only 20 times.
2. 33:40 - When Aharon died, the clouds of glory protecting the Jewish People departed.
3. 33:49 - Twelve *mil* (one *mil* is 2,000 *amot*).
4. 34:2 - Because certain *mitzvot* apply only in the Land.
5. 34:17 - Each *nasi* represented his tribe. He also allocated the inheritance to each family in his tribe.
6. 35:13 - After Yehoshua separated three cities west of the Jordan.
7. 35:14 - Because murders were more common there.
8. 35:16 - One capable of inflicting lethal injury.
9. 35:25 - He should have prayed that such things not occur.
10. 36:4 - It remains with the new tribe.

TALMUDigest

BAVA METZIA 86 - 92

- The flight and death of the Sage Rabbah bar Nachmeini
- The feasts of the Patriarch Avraham and of King Shlomo
- The hospitality Avraham extended to the angels
- When it is proper to deviate from the truth
- The right of an agricultural worker to partake of the produce
- The limitations on this right
- Forbidden muzzling of an animal threshing grain
- Forbidden crossbreeding of animals
- Use of which part of body in work entitles worker to eat from produce
- Eating from produce in which worker is not directly involved
- Is there a limit to how much of the produce the worker may eat
- Can the worker take from produce for his wife and children

A HINT FOR HOSPITALITY

“I will bring you some bread,” said the Patriarch Avraham to his three guests as he invited them to partake of his hospitality. What he ended up doing was slaughtering three cows so that he could offer each guest a luxurious meal.

This shows, commented Rabbi Elazar, that the righteous offer little and deliver a lot, in contrast with the wicked who promise much and deliver nothing.

It would seem that it is sufficient for the righteous to merely deliver what they promise. Why should they begin by offering less?

Maharsha sees in this a valuable hint for true hospitality. If a host invites a potential guest to a lavish dinner there is a danger that his offer will be refused because of a reluctance to impose upon the host. Avraham taught us the strategy of offering something token that will not be turned down, and then surprising the guest with truly lavish hospitality.

• *Bava Metzia 87a*

What the SAGES Say

“How important is peace between people that even G-d deviated from the truth (to preserve peace between Avraham and Sarah.)”

• *The Yeshiva of Rabbi Yishmael - Bava Metzia 87a*

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RIGHT THE WRONG

From: Marnie

Dear Rabbi,

Some years ago I was in a flat-mate situation with some people I did not know beforehand so I did not know them and they didn't know me. They were renting the apartment and subletting a room to me so they had no longstanding connection to the flat, and they were not from that city anyway. We were not very close; I did my own thing and they did theirs. It was a short-term, summer arrangement, and I left with no intention or effort to stay in touch with them. To get to the main point, when I left, there was a disagreement about money and I didn't pay them what they thought I owed, and in retrospect, they were probably right and I was wrong. The question is, now that I have become religious after several years have gone by, what do I do now to rectify the wrong? Given the situation I described, there's no way of finding any of them. I don't even remember their last names or where they're from. What should I do?

Dear Marnie,

First, may I say that I admire your decision to become religious, and the decision to try to rectify this wrong is an example of why becoming religious was the right choice. Still, even religious people are not always so honest and eager to pursue what's right, so the fact that you are asking what to do in what seems a hopeless situation is also very admirable.

There are two basic approaches in Jewish teachings to this type of scenario.

One is based on the idea that even if you can't restore money or make restitution to those whom you owe or have harmed, you can still do something that might repay them or benefit them. The specific case discussed in the sources involves someone who has harmed the public in general, but does not know specifically who. He is advised to contribute to some public need with the understanding that those whom he harmed will eventually directly or indirectly derive benefit from his contribution and thereby receive restitution for the wrong. Although the example given (to build a public bathhouse) is not particularly relevant today, one may do the equivalent by contributing to a school, hospital, community center or the like with the hope that those he's harmed will benefit.

This scenario, while generally similar to yours, is still not quite enough. The reason is because you have no way of knowing where they are. So now what?

The second approach is to fully regret your wrong and express to G-d your desire to fix things if you could. Ask G-d to intervene on your behalf in order to enable you to find these people somehow so you can correct what you've done. You should also simultaneously forgive them of anything they may have done to wrong you and then offer a heart-felt prayer to G-d, that until you find them, just as you forgive them with a full heart, so may He cause them to fully forgive you.

This way, you will have done teshuva and expressed your willingness to correct things if you could. Regarding this our Sages taught that one who intends to do good but the circumstances prevent him from realizing his intentions is considered by G-d as if he actually did the good he intends. By fully forgiving them you fulfill the teaching that just as you judge others so you will be judged, and this will stir Divine favor on your behalf to cause them to forgive you.

This last approach might seem a bit far-fetched, but I know someone who was in a similar situation and it actually helped. He also wronged people with whom he shared a flat before becoming religious and later had no way of finding them to right the wrong. He did teshuva, prayed that he might somehow meet up with them some day and asked G-d to stir their hearts to forgive him in the meantime.

Every Elul he would recall this mistake of his and repeat his prayers. A full twenty years later, in Elul, he was on a plane to Israel and he couldn't believe his eyes — there was one of his old flat mates. The problem was that when this chance to atone finally arrived, he was so embarrassed that he couldn't muster up the courage to approach the person. And what if they started arguing right there in the plane?! So he decided to wait until landing to approach the person in the baggage claim area.

But by the time he got to the carousel the person was nowhere to be seen. He had lost the opportunity he had been praying for so long — or at least he thought so. As he was leaving the terminal, who pulled up just beside him through customs? The flat-mate. The offender introduced himself and made his declaration, explaining that he had become religious and had regretted his mistake all these years. The flat-mate waived his claim, explaining that he had also become religious and had decided to forgive him long ago!

WATER CONSERVATION

Question: Because of the lack of sufficient rain in Israel this past winter there is a serious possibility that water rationing by the government may prevent me from watering my garden or washing my car. I find this difficult to understand since I pay for the water I use. What is the right thing to do?

Answer: There is a famous story about the great ethicist Rabbi Yisrael Salanter. While washing his hands before a meal at a roadside inn he was seen using the minimum amount of water sufficient for this mitzvah. Asked why he did not wash with an abundance of water in order to

merit the prosperity promised by our Talmudic Sages for one who does so, he pointed to the maid who was carrying heavy barrels of water from a local well. Using more water to gain a blessing at the expense of the young lady who would have to carry more was something this moral giant refused to consider.

The limitations placed on your use of the limited supply of water for the general public are made out of consideration for everyone who needs water for essentials and you must be prepared to sacrifice comparative luxuries so that you do not enjoy them at another's expense.

THE HUMAN SIDE OF THE STORY

MERIT OF A MOTHER

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Sarah's was renowned as an extraordinary *tzaddik*. Two fascinating stories revolve around his unusual name.

His father Rabbi Yosef was widowed a few years after his marriage. He would come daily to the tavern that a Jew rented from the local gentile landlord of the village and served as the teacher and *shochet* of the area.

One day the son of the landlord announced that he intended to marry the 15-year old daughter of the Jewish tavern-keeper and threatened to kill her if this was denied to him. The girl, her parents and Rabbi Yosef anxiously discussed how to avert this tragedy and came up with a solution. If they could find a Jew to marry the girl her gentile suitor would realize that he missed the boat. But where in such a tiny village could a spouse be found so quickly?

Rabbi Yosef came to the rescue and announced that he was prepared to save her by marrying her despite the considerable difference in age. A wedding was quickly arranged and from this marriage was born Arye Leib, who paid tribute to his mother's piety in marrying someone so much older by calling himself by her name.

Many years later he arrived at a small village on the day

before Yom Kippur and was distressed to learn that together with him there were only nine Jews available for the services on the upcoming holy day. The only possible candidate for completing the required minyan quorum was the local landlord who had married a gentile and converted to Christianity many years before. Ignoring the fears of the villagers he decided to go to the landlord's palace. Upon arrival he pushed open the door and shouted at this converted Jew: "My mother married an old widower in order to avoid marrying a gentile and you married one!" He continued to reprove him and pointed out that since his gentile wife was no longer alive and had not borne him any children he had an opportunity to achieve repentance by completing the local minyan on Yom Kippur.

The villagers were surprised to see the arrival of this much-feared landlord at the synagogue and quickly supplied him with a talit and kittel. Throughout the holy day he fervently prayed and wept profusely over his sins. At the conclusion of the final prayer of *N'eilah* he shouted "*Shma Yisrael*" together with the rest of the worshippers, stuck his head into the open Holy Ark and returned his soul to his Maker as a genuine *Ba'al Teshuva*.