



Parshas Matos/Masei

For the week ending 28 Tammuz 5757
1 & 2 August 1997

Overview

MATOS

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. The *Bnei Yisrael* go to war against *Midian*. They kill the five Midianite kings, all of the males, and *Bilaam*. Moshe is upset that women were taken as captives, because 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 the *Bnei Yisrael*. They bring an offering, which is taken from them 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 remain where they are and not traverse the Jordan river into Israel. They explain that the land where they are presently located is quite suitable as grazing land for their livestock. Moshe's initial response is that this request will discourage the rest of the *Bnei Yisrael*, and is akin to the sin of the spies. They assure Moshe that they will first help the *Bnei Yisrael* wage war and 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 forty-two encampments of the *Bnei Yisrael* on their forty-year journey from the Exodus to the crossing of the Jordan river into *Eretz Yisrael*. Hashem commands the *Bnei Yisrael* to drive out the *Canaanim* from *Eretz Yisrael* and to demolish all vestiges of their idolatry. The *Bnei Yisrael* are warned that if they fail to rid the land completely of the *Canaanim*, 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 forty-eight cities for the *Leviim*, 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 Tzlofchad 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.

Insights

THE SONG REMAINS THE SAME

"These are the journeys of the Bnei Yisrael..." (33:1)

The Baal Shem Tov's carriage sped through the swirling mists of a Russian morning. Inside the carriage the Rebbe and his *shamas* (attendant) sat in silence. All that could be heard was the dull thud of hooves cantering on thin turf.

The Baal Shem Tov's face was impassive. Suddenly he motioned to the *shamas* to stop the carriage. The *shamas* leant out of the window and shouted to the driver to stop. The carriage came quickly to rest. The horses snorted and whinnied, pawing the ground with their hooves.

Silence. Apart from the horses. And the birds singing their dawn chorus to the Creator. Silence.

Then, quite distinctly, there came from the field the most beautiful sound. The voice of a man singing a song that almost made the trees cry. It was the most beautiful song you could imagine.

The Baal Shem Tov listened intently to the song for some time. His brow was creased as though he was trying to remember something. A memory that went so far back that it seemed to be beyond this incarnation.

Suddenly, his eyes narrowed and his mouth widened with a smile of all-encompassing joy.

"Please ask the man to come here!" he ordered his *shamas*.

After a few moments the *shamas* returned with a Russian peasant to whom the voice belonged.

"When I heard you singing," began the Rebbe, "I couldn't help thinking what a beautiful tune that is."

"Yes, I like it" said the peasant.

"I'm not sure I heard all of it. Would you mind singing it for me again?" the Baal Shem Tov said.

"Why not?" said the peasant, and with that he began to sing the tune again. After he had finished, it seemed that even the birds had stopped to listen.

"Beautiful" said the Rebbe. "I wonder, would you be so kind as to sing it again?"

"All right" said the peasant, and he repeated the tune.

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Prepared by Ohr Somayach in Jerusalem, Israel

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After he had finished singing this time, the Rebbe said "Yes, I think I have it. Does it go like this?" And the Baal Shem Tov began to sing the tune. As beautiful as the peasant's rendition had been, the Rebbe infused into the tune a heart-breaking yearning like the re-uniting of a mother and child.

"Yes. That's it exactly" said the peasant.

"I wonder... would it be asking too much... if before I go, could I hear you sing it one more time?"

"All right." said the peasant, and he opened his mouth to sing.

Nothing came out.

Not a note. Not a squeak. He closed his mouth and tried again. Nothing.

The Baal Shem Tov looked at him with a strangely intense look, and then said to him slowly "Good Morning..." And with that, he climbed back into the carriage.

The Rebbe and his *shamas* sat in silence for a good few minutes and then the *shamas* could no longer contain his curiosity.

"What happened back there?"

"When I heard that peasant singing, I realized that he was singing one of the songs that the *Levi'im* (Levites) sang in the *Beis Hamikdash* (Holy Temple). For two thousand years that tune has been in exile, passed from one stranger to the next, wandering from one country to another. That peasant was like a shell containing a precious spark of holiness. As soon as the spark had been returned to its owners — the Jewish People — there was no further need for him to remember the tune any longer, and therefore, he forgot it.

GATHERING THE SPARKS

At the beginning of *Parshas Masei* the Torah lists the forty-two places where the Jewish People encamped on their way to *Eretz Yisrael*. What is the reason for these forty-two stops in the desert?

There is a mystical concept that the purpose of these encampments was for the Children of Israel to release and *gather the sparks of holiness* which are trapped in the desert's emptiness.

Each of these stopping places corresponds to a letter of Hashem's Name, and so by *gathering the sparks* from each place, a little more of Hashem's Name — His recognition in the world — is revealed.

Haftorah: Yirmiyahu 2:4-28 & 3:4

MUDDY WATERS

"For My people have perpetrated two evils: Me have they forsaken, the source of living waters; to dig themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." (2:13)

In this, the second Haftorah of the "three (Haftorahs) of affliction," the prophet speaks out, not only against Israel's disloyalty to Hashem who saved them from slavery, but also against the

Three thousand years later, the Jewish People are still journeying. A hundred years here, two hundred there. On their journeys through Spain, England, China and America, etc., the Jewish People 'extract' and redeem *the sparks of holiness* which are trapped throughout the world.

When this process is complete, the *Mashiach*, the anointed one, will gather all the Jewish People to the land of Israel and all the songs of holiness will be heard once again.

Then it will be that Hashem will be revealed as the One True G-d. His Name will then be complete. "On that day, Hashem will be One, and His Name, One".

STATIC AND DYNAMIC

"Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel..." (30:2)

Matos and *Masei* are two *parshios* joined together, but their names are opposites.

The word "*mateh*" (of which the plural is "*matos*") means a staff. A staff is something inert, cut off from the tree from which it sprouted. It has ceased to have the power of furthering itself, of bringing forth new life. It will always remain what it is now. Static and unchanging.

Masei (from the verb 'to journey') is the opposite. It is the essence of dynamism, of development and growth. For the journey is the paradigm of furtherance.

Really, this juxtaposition of *Matos* and *Masei* is symbolic of the Torah itself. The Torah has the power to take the lifeless and change it into life. To take Aaron's inert staff and cause it to flower and bloom. To change it into a serpent.

A simple, inert staff becomes the instrument of the great signs and wonders wrought in Egypt, for splitting the sea asunder. A simple, inert staff becomes the symbol of the beginning of life itself for the Jewish People. The ultimate reversal of the lifeless staff — the *mateh* — brings furtherance and an eternal future — the *masei* — to the journeys of the Children of Israel throughout history.

Sources:

The Song Remains The Same - The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh; The Malbim; Rav Shmuel M'Ostropole; Rabbi Mordechai Perلمان; Rabbi Dovid Gottlieb
Static and Dynamic - Rabbi Shlomo Yosef Zevin

disloyalty to the Torah which had been exchanged for the empty vanities of foreign culture. Our Sages teach us that Hashem lamented: "If they had forsaken only Me, but had kept the Torah, its spiritual light would have influenced them to return to the path of righteousness." However the Jewish People, seduced by the superficial glitter of the foreign ideologies, abandon the Torah, their only lifeline, and imbibe the brackish water of false ideas which constantly change and contradict themselves. From this, only tragedy and exile can ensue.

Fatherly Advice - tidbits from the 'Ethics of the Fathers' Traditionally Studied on Summer Sabbaths

Do not be a wicked person in your own estimation.

Rabbi Shimon, Avos 2:13

One who has no self-esteem as to his spiritual level has no hesitation to continue sinning. ("Another log on the fire!") This does not mean that he should consider himself to be a righteous *tzadik*. Our Sages (*Niddah 30b*) tell us that before a child is born his soul is challenged with this oath: "Be a *tzaddik* and not a wicked person. But even if the entire world considers you a *tzaddik*, you should consider yourself to be wicked."

One should not evaluate himself as a *tzaddik* who needs no further growth nor as a wicked person beyond redemption. He should consider himself as being balanced between credit and debit, with each action capable of tipping the scales.

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