

# *Parshas Mattos-Masei*

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## *1. The Power of Speech*

The Torah states, **“If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate (*chillul*) his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do.”** Rashi cites Chazal who explain that after one takes a vow, “he may not make his words ordinary (*chullin*)/desecrate one’s word (*chillul*).” This Negative Commandment relates to vows. The Positive Commandment stated by the Torah regarding the one who abides by his vow is, **“whatever comes from his mouth shall he do.”** Since the Torah uses the word “*chillul* (desecration)” regarding the breaking of one’s vow, it is inferred that one’s speech is sacred. Desecration only has relevance to the defilement of something that is sacred. The Torah is telling us that since one’s word is sacred, if one transgresses his vow or oath, the consequences are very severe.

The Gemara in *Tractate Shavuos* states, “For the transgression of one’s vows a man’s wife and children could pass away” (G-d forbid). We see from this passage of the Gemara the tragic consequences of violating one’s vow. It is interesting to note that for transgressing one’s vow, although he is violating a Negative Commandment (similar to many other Negative Commandments), the consequences of transgressing one’s vow is much more severe.

Before Rosh Hashanah there is a tradition that one should nullify all vows, oaths, and any other verbal commitment that one had made (intentionally or unintentionally) during the year. This is done so that one should not enter into the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashanah) with the liability of vows. How do we understand the severity of violating one’s speech?

Of all living species, the human being is the only one that was endowed with the power of speech to express his intellect. The Torah tells us (at the time of Creation) that G-d said to His heavenly retinue of angels, “Let us make Man in our image and form.” The Torah continues to describe how man became a living being- “G-d blew into his nostrils a Soul of Life, and man became a living being.” Targum Onkeles (Aramaic translation) interprets the words, “living being” to be “a speaking spirit.” Man’s expression of speech is an outgrowth of his spirituality/soul. As the Torah states, it was only after man was infused with a soul that he became a “speaking being.” Since speech emanates from the soul, which is the spiritual essence of man, it is considered sacred. Therefore, when speech is invested properly, it can bring about positive results. As the Talmud tells us, “Do not take lightly even the blessing of an ordinary man.” On the other hand misuse of speech or violation of one’s verbal commitments have severe negative ramifications.

There are many Commandments (*Mitzvos*) which require verbalization. For example the recitation of the Shema, the Amidah (daily prayer) and the Birchas HaMazon (Grace after meals), require verbalization in order to fulfill one’s obligation. If one only meditated the Shema or did not articulate the Amidah, he would not fulfill his obligation. Since the power of speech is an expression of our spirituality then it is clear that it should be invested in areas of spirituality. Thus, to fulfill one’s obligation of the Shema, which is

a declaration of one's belief in Hashem, one must make the declaration through verbal expression.

The Gemara in Tractate *Eruvin* tells us that Bruria, the wife of Rebbe Meir, was passing a student who was studying silently without verbalizing what he was learning. She rebuked him and said that his manner of study was incorrect because the verse states, "Life comes to the one who finds them" which means, "life comes to the one who enunciates the Torah with his mouth." Why is the meditation of Torah not sufficient, since it is inherently G'd's Word (Holy)? Because Hashem endowed man with a spiritual faculty (speech), it must be invested in the ultimate spirituality, which is the Torah itself. Therefore, the one who finds life through the Torah is the one who enunciates it.

When one speaks *Lashon Hara* (*speaking negatively*) about another individual (when the comment has no constructive value), besides violating a Negative Commandment, the ramifications of such speech is serious. Since speech is a spiritual faculty, the consequences are grave when it is misused.

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us that if one interrupts his Torah study to take notice of a tree by saying, "how beautiful is this tree" (although he is admiring G-d's creation) the consequences are grave. With our understanding of the value of speech, we are able to understand the statement of the Mishna. If one is utilizing his expression of speech (which is spiritual faculty) in the context of studying Torah, which is the ultimate source of spirituality, if he disengages even to admire G-d's creation, it is considered a misappropriation of an invaluable resource.

The Midrash tells us that the concept of teshuvah (repentance), the ability for one to rehabilitate his spirituality, was created before existence. Rambam states that teshuvah without verbal confession (*vidui*) does not bring about spiritual rehabilitation. If one is remorseful, regrets his sins and commits himself to never transgressing again, his teshuvah is not valid unless his feelings of remorse are verbalized. Why is this so? Spiritual rehabilitation can only come about through verbal expression, which is the spiritual faculty with which man was endowed. Thus, one is only fully atoned through *vidui*.

## ***2. The Priority of the Jew***

The Torah tells us that prior to entering into the Promised Land (after 40 years of wandering), the tribes of Reuvain and Gad approached Moshe and requested if they could receive as their portion the Trans-Jordan side rather than entering into the Land to receive their portion. The Torah states, "**The children of Reuvain and the children of Gad had abundant livestock – very great. They saw the land of Yazeir and the land of Gilead (Trans-Jordan) and behold! – it was a place for livestock.**" Moshe reacted to their request suspecting that Reuvain and Gad were creating an opposition to entering into the land. Given the fact that he had previously experienced the incident of the spies and the mutiny of Korach and his community, Moshe had good reason to be concerned that their request to not to cross the Jordan would cause an unrest among the Jewish People.

It is interesting to note that whenever the Jewish people were on the threshold of a spiritual ascent, they were confronted with an issue that interfered with that ascent. At Sinai, the Jewish people had reached their pinnacle of spirituality to the point that they were reinstated to the level of Adam pre-sin. If they had not engaged with the Golden Calf/idolatry, they would have lived forever. However, Moshe (according to their calculation) was delayed in returning from the mountain, and it created a serious doubt

whether he (their leader) was still alive, thus setting the stage for the sin of the Golden Calf to occur. In the second year after the exodus, when the Jews were about to enter into the Promised Land, they requested that spies be sent into the Land to scout it out in order to see if it was truly conquerable. Consequently, because of the negative report of the spies, the Jews needed to wander the desert for a period of 40 years (until the entire generation (between the ages 20 and 60) passed away).

When the tribes of Reuvain and Gad approached Moshe with their request, the Jewish people were about to enter into the Land that G-d had promised. There was nothing standing in their way. They were about to ascend to another spiritual level by entering into the Land. At this moment, the tribes of Reuvain and Gad wished to remain outside of the Land and Moshe felt that this had the potential to be another serious breach.

Moshe recounted to the tribes of Reuvain and Gad what had happened to the Jewish people in the past and said, **“Shall your brothers go out to battle while you settle here? Why do you dissuade the heart of the Children of Israel from crossing to the Land that Hashem has given them?”** They agreed to cross the Jordan with the Jewish people and participate with them in conquering the Land of Israel. After this, they would return to the Trans-Jordan territory. They had said to Moshe, **“Pens for the flock shall we build here for our livestock and cities for our small children. We shall arm ourselves swiftly in the vanguard of the Children of Israel until we have brought them to their place...”**

Moshe was satisfied with their commitment to their fellow Jews and responded by saying, **“If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves before Hashem for the battle... and the Land is conquered before Hashem...then you shall return...Build for yourselves cities for your small children and pens for your flocks.”** The reason Moshe questioned the motives of the tribes of Reuvain and Gad was that it was not plausible to him that when the Jewish people were about to enter into the Land that was promised to them by Hashem, that they should not want to also settle there with their brothers. Additionally, the Gemara in Tractate Kesubos states, “whoever dwells outside of the Land it is as if he has no G-d.” Within the context of spirituality, it was not logical that the tribes Reuvain and Gad should not want to enter into the Land – especially after being immersed in a spiritual environment for the 40-year period in the desert. How is it possible that these tribes would exchange the ultimate spiritual setting (the Land of Israel) for grazing land for their livestock?

The manner in which the tribes of Reuvain and Gad had spoken to Moshe revealed their priorities - what was first and foremost. They had said to Moshe that they wished to “build pens for their livestock and cities for their small children.” The fact that they had placed the importance of housing for their livestock before providing residences for families indicated to Moshe that their order of priorities was not correct. They placed the material before and above all else. Moshe responded to them by saying, “You shall build for yourselves cities for your small children and pens for your livestock **(in that order)**,” indicating to them that their first priority must be to their families and then to their material possessions.

This brings to mind a story about the nephew of the Vilna Gaon. His wedding gifts had been stolen after the wedding and subsequently he discovered that the thief could be found in the city of Vilna. He decided to travel there to apprehend the thief and reclaim his gifts. While in Vilna, he decided to visit his uncle the Vilna Gaon z’tl. The Vilna Gaon joyfully greeted his nephew and inquired as to why he was in Vilna. His nephew explained what had occurred and he was in Vilna to reclaim what was stolen from

him. The Vilna Gaon was taken aback by what he had heard. He could not comprehend how his nephew could exchange valuable Torah study time for the sake of the material. The Vilna Gaon prioritized spirituality above of everything else.

Moshe could not understand why the tribes of Reuvain and Gad wished to remain outside of Israel when they had the opportunity to be in the Presence of Hashem in the Land of Israel. We read in Pirkei Avos (Ethics of Our Fathers), “One should make Torah primary and his work (livelihood) secondary.” When the tribes of Reuvain and Gad made their request, it immediately indicated to Moshe that their spirituality was not their priority. It is not that it was a sin for them to remain outside of the Promised Land, but it was an indication that their priorities were not in order. This was confirmed with the fact that they wished to build “pens for their livestock” before building “cities for their small children.”

The manner in which a person expresses himself is an indication of who he is. One may outwardly behave within the context of the Torah – causing us to believe that he truly aspires to spirituality; however, it is often the case that through one’s verbal expression we are able to identify his true aspirations.

### ***3. Reflecting on the Survival of the Jewish People***

The Torah in the Portion of Masei identifies the 42 locations in which Jewish people had camped during their 40-year trek in the desert. What is the value of enumerating these locations?

The Midrash Tanchuma states, “Hashem said to the Jewish people, “My children, be careful regarding the observance of My mitzvos and keep the Torah and understand how many miracles and wonders I have performed for you from the time that I had taken you from Egypt. I have toppled your enemies. I took you across the Sea and brought fear and dread upon your enemies... I have destroyed the Amorites and the giants. During the 40-year period that you were in the desert, I did not for a moment leave you unattended. Many enemies came upon you and you did not need to flee from them. How many snakes and scorpions did I kill in your presence in the desert? I did not allow them to harm you. It is because of all these miracles that I want you (Moshe) to record all of the travels of the Jewish people in the desert so that they should know the many miracles that I performed for them within every travel. And how will the Jewish people come to know about the miracles – when they will read about their travels.” If Moshe had not recorded all the locations the Jewish people would have never known about the miracles and wonders from which they had benefited.

One, who has not been a beneficiary of miracles and believes in G-d, has a different understanding of Him then one who has personally benefited from His miracles. In addition, even the Jew who was not a member of that generation who directly benefited from G-d’s personal attention, will have a greater appreciation of Hashem’s concern for His people knowing what He had done for the Jewish people in the past. The Jewish people continuously experienced miracles during their 40-year journey in the desert. They were the direct beneficiaries of these miracles; yet, Hashem commands Moshe to record all of the travels of the Jewish people so that they should appreciate what He had done for them.

It is interesting to note that it was decreed by G-d that the Jewish people should wander the desert for 40 years because of the incident of the spies. Had they not believed the false report

of the spies, they would have entered into the Land of Israel without delay. Despite the fact that the 40-year period in the desert came about because of a lack of faith, this period was invaluable to the spiritual development of the Jewish people. It was during this period that Hashem performed continuous miracles on their behalf. They were immersed in an all-encompassing spiritual environment. If the Jewish people had not remained in the desert for this extended period, Hashem would not have had a setting in which to demonstrate His concern/kindness for them through the performance of miracles. After the Jewish people entered into the Land of Israel, their daily existence was on a natural level. Miracles could only be witnessed in the Mishkan/Bais HaMikdash (Temple).

This understanding is similar to what the Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh writes at the beginning of the Portion of Shelach. The Torah states "Send for yourself spies..." It was decreed by Hashem that Moshe should not enter into the Promised Land. Thus, when the Jews would enter he would have to pass away. Hashem alluded to Moshe that the value of the sending of the spies was for himself – meaning if the Jews would fail and believe the spies, his life would be extended an additional 39 years. Thereby Moshe was able to extend his life and the Jewish people were the beneficiaries of his influence. Being exposed to Moshe for an additional 39 years, even within the context of tragedy/punishment, was a period of spiritual growth that will have impacted upon the Jewish people until the end of their existence.

Since the 40-year period in the desert was an essential component in the spiritual growth of the Jewish people, Hashem wanted Moshe to record all of their travels to appreciate the miracles that they had experienced during this time.

Dovid HaMelech (King David) writes in Tehillim (Psalms), "The nations of the world will praise Hashem... because the chesed (kindness) of Hashem has overwhelmed us (the Jewish people)." The Gemara Tractate Pesachim asks, "Why would the nations of the world praise G-d when the Jewish people are the beneficiaries of His chesed (and not them)?" Reb Yehoshua Leib Diskin z'tl explains that the Jewish people throughout the ages are unaware of the continuous plotting of the nations of the world to eliminate and destroy them. The nations of the world are the only ones who are aware of their own plans to destroy the Jewish people. Thus, when their plots are foiled, they fully appreciate Hashem's chesed on behalf of the Jewish people. The Jewish people themselves cannot praise G-d for this kindness because they are unaware of the machinations of the world. Therefore, it is only the nations of the world who understand to what degree Hashem values the Jewish people.

Similarly, the Jewish people were not fully aware of all the dangers and difficulties from which Hashem protected them in the desert. Moshe was told to record each one of the encampments in order to give the Jews an understanding of all of the miracles that Hashem had performed for them.

We live in a world where our enemies are continuously scheming to undermine and destroy us, yet they fail and are not able to succeed. We are not at all aware of the continuous miracles that Hashem performs on our behalf. We need to reflect on the fact and be beholden that despite our lengthy exile, we survive and continue as a Jewish people only because of the Chesed

of Hashem.

#### ***4. The Culpability of the Inadvertent Murderer***

The Torah tells us that if a person inadvertently kills another, he must flee to one of the cities of refuge that is designated by the Torah (*Aarei Miklot*). He must remain there until the passing of the *Kohen Gadol* (High Priest). Some examples of what the Torah considers as inadvertent murders are: if one threw a stone into a forest (without realizing that there may be a person in that location) that strikes and kills an innocent victim; if one was chopping wood and the head of the axe dislodged itself killing a bystander.

The Gemara in Tractate Machos asks, “Why is the release of the inadvertent murderer from the city of refuge contingent on the passing of the *Kohen Gadol*?” The Gemara explains that if the *Kohen Gadol*, who is the spiritual representative of the Jewish people, had prayed sufficiently, the tragedy of one Jew inadvertently killing another would have been averted. The level of *Rachamim* (Mercy), created by the prayers of the *Kohen Gadol*, would have prevented the tragedy. The circumstances, which led to the unfortunate killing of an innocent person, came about because of negligent behavior (one not being cognizant of the consequences of his actions). If the *Kohen Gadol* had prayed sufficiently, the Mercy of Hashem either would have averted the danger, thus saving the victim, or would have made the potential murderer aware of the consequence of his actions. Thus, the Torah tells us that the inadvertent murderer must remain in the city of refuge until the passing of the *Kohen Gadol*.

The Gemara tells us that the value of the incarceration in the city of refuge for the inadvertent murderer is atonement for taking the life of an innocent victim. It is obvious that that he is in need of atonement since he must be incarcerated until the passing of the *Kohen Gadol*. However, if in fact the victim was innocent and did not deserve to be killed, then how was the murderer able to kill him? If in fact the victim deserved to die, then why does the inadvertent murder require atonement? Evidently, he needs atonement because he committed a crime, albeit inadvertently.

There are two levels of judgment. There is the judgment of G-d, which emanates from his Mercy, which is referred to as the Attribute of Mercy (*Midas HaRachamim*), and there is the Attribute of Justice (*Midas HaDin*). If G-d were to judge the world with His Attribute of Justice, no human being would be perfect enough to withstand His Justice. *Dovid HaMelech* (King David) states (as we say on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur), “Do not allow me to enter into judgment because no living creature can be vindicated.” Within the context of Judgment, even the smallest infraction or failing deserves serious punishment, even death. The reason humanity is able to continue and even thrive, despite its shortcomings, is only because of G-d’s Attribute of Mercy (*Midas HaRachamim*).

The Ten Commandments state, “Thou shall not commit murder.” It is evident that this commandment has relevance to every human being within the context of choice – to commit murder or not (as every other Commandment in the Torah is subject to one’s choice). It is

important to note that in order for one to commit murder there must be a victim. If the victim deserved to die because of his own transgressions, then why would one be culpable of committing murder? On the other hand, if the victim did not deserve to die then why would the murderer be able to kill him? How does one's choice (to murder or not to murder) affect another person's existence?

Based on the Attribute of Justice there is no one in existence who deserves to live – because there is no human being one who is perfect. As King Solomon says in Koheles (Ecclesiastics), “There is no tzaddik in the land who does good and does not sin.” However, because of G-d's Attribute of Mercy we are able to exist and succeed in our lives. When one chooses to take another's life (G-d forbid), it causes the Attribute of Mercy to be suspended for that person. Within the context of G-d's Justice, the person deserves to die. When the person is actually killed by the murderer, his demise is brought about based on his own spiritual account. The person who caused the Attribute of Mercy to be suspended and the Attribute of Justice to be implemented is classified as the perpetrator of the crime. Because the Kohen Gadol did not pray sufficiently for Mercy, the choice of the inadvertent murderer was still able to suspend the Midas HaRachamim –thus resulting in tragedy. However had the Kohen Gadol prayed sufficiently, the Midas HaRachamim, (despite the choice of the potential inadvertent murderer), would not have been suspended. Thus, there would not have been a murder victim.

The Chofetz Chaim writes (in his work “Chofetz Chaim”) that when one speaks Lashon Hara (negative speech that has no constructive value) about another, it brings about the greatest level of prosecution against the Jewish people. He cites the Zohar, which states that Lashon Hara brings death and destruction upon the world. Thus, because of the serious repercussions of Lashon Hara, the speaker has a grave level of culpability. Until one speaks Lashon Hara, satan, who is the prosecutor of the Jewish people, is not able to prosecute. Since satan cannot prosecute, the Attribute of Mercy remains intact. Thus, the Jewish people are able to benefit from G-d's blessing. However when satan is permitted to prosecute, it activates the Attribute of Justice against the Jewish people. The one who speaks Lashon Hara empowers satan so that he should be able to prosecute the Jewish people. If one acts as a prosecutor towards his fellow by speaking Lashon Hara, Hashem allows satan to prosecute. The culpability of the person who speaks Lashon Hara is no different from the inadvertent murderer - who suspends the Attribute of Mercy from his victim. So too the speaker of Lashon Hara suspends the Attribute of Mercy and brings about tragedy.

When one commits murder inadvertently, he must flee to a city of refuge where he will remain cut off from his community until the passing of the Kohen Gadol. So too, the Torah tells us that when one speaks Lashon Hara and becomes a leper, he must be sent outside of all the camps of Israel until he recovers. He must remain outside of the camps with no interaction whatsoever with anyone – which is the equivalent of incarceration.

The Torah tells us that there is a Positive Commandment to judge one's fellow favorably in situations where there is a reasonable doubt. The halacha (law) dictates that if one witnesses his fellow, who is a middle of the road Jew (one who vacillates between good and bad), doing something that could be viewed as appropriate or inappropriate, one must give that person the benefit of the doubt - putting him in a positive light. Rabbeinu Yonah writes in his work Shaarei Teshuvah (Gates of Penitence) that even in a situation where the evidence seems to indicate that his fellow did something wrong – although he has no obligation to judge him favorably, he still should not judge him negatively. Why is the Torah so demanding that one must put his fellow in the most positive light?

When one judges his fellow negatively in the absence of conclusive evidence, there is prosecution and The Attribute of Mercy is suspended. Without Hashem's Mercy, one cannot survive. When one puts his fellow in a positive light Hashem causes His Midas HaRachamim to remain in place – thus guaranteeing existence and its blessings. Therefore, we are obliged to view our fellow in the most positive light so as not to bring about prosecution.

### **5. The Qualifying Factor for Torah Leadership** *(From Pinchas)*

The Torah states, **“Hashem said to Moshe, “Take to yourself Yehoshua Ben Nun, a man in whom there is spirit, and lean your hand upon him.”** Rashi explains, **“a man in whom there is spirit”** means, he is able to deal with every type of personality. He further explains that **“lean your hand upon him”** indicates that Moshe should appoint Yehoshua Ben Nun as his successor and that he should begin disseminating Torah during Moshe's lifetime.

The Torah continues, **“You (Moshe) shall place some of your majesty/splendor upon him (Yehoshua)...”** Rashi explains that Hashem told Moshe to transfer some of his radiance to Yehoshua his disciple. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos tells us that Moshe's radiance resulted from the special level of spirituality that he received at Sinai. This occurred after the Jewish people forfeited their spiritual crowns because of the Sin of the Golden Calf. When the Jewish people accepted the Torah unequivocally by declaring, **“Naaseh V'Nishmah – we will do and we will listen”** Hashem endowed each Jew with two levels of spirituality (referred to as crowns – one for Naaseh and one for Nishmah). As a result of receiving the special level of spirituality of the entire Jewish people, Moshe radiated with holiness. The verse, **“You (Moshe) shall place some of your majesty/splendor upon him (Yehoshua)...”** is telling us that Moshe was to bestow some of that radiance on Yehoshua – who was to be his successor. Yehoshua was not only the successor of Moshe because he was chosen to be, but as Moshe's successor, he reflected a semblance of Moshe's holiness.

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us that Moshe's radiance could be compared to the sun, while Yehoshua's is that of the moon. This indicates that Yehoshua Ben Nun was only a reflection of his rebbe, Moshe Rabbeinu. Since Yehoshua had the capacity to receive his rebbe's splendor, this was a confirmation that he was the one qualified to succeed him. What was the basis for Yehoshua meriting the capacity to reflect the spirituality of Moshe?

The Mishna in Pirkei Avos tells us, **“Moshe received the Torah at Sinai and transmitted it to Yehoshua...”** Rashi asks, **“Why did Moshe not transmit the Torah to Elazar, Pinchas, or the Seventy Elders of Israel? It is because Moshe only wanted to transmit it to one who sacrificed his life for Torah. This was Yehoshua, as he is referred as “the youth who did not remove himself from the tent (of Torah).”** He selflessly sacrificed for the study of Torah and this qualifying factor caused him to be worthy of being chosen as Moshe's successor. What characteristic must one possess to sacrifice for Torah at this level?

The level of sacrificing for Torah is contingent on one's degree of self-negation.

The fact that Yehoshua had unceasingly been associated with Moshe from the very beginning was an indication that nothing else mattered in his life other than Torah. This is only possible when one totally negates his own aspirations. It is because of this self-negation that Yehoshua had the capacity to receive part of Moshe's radiance and to be the conduit for the transmission of Torah for the Jewish people. Moshe, of course was at the most advanced level of negation; however, Yehoshua was second to Moshe in this regard.

Ramchal writes in his work *Derech Hashem* (The way of G-d), that even if an ordinary person assists a tzaddik in his mission, to the degree that his involvement will determine the success of the tzaddik, he will rise to an advanced level of spirituality because of this attachment. It is analogous to the grafting of a branch onto a tree where the branch becomes part of the ecosystem of the tree. Despite the fact that he himself is not worthy of that special level of spirituality, he will attain it because of his degree of association with the tzaddik. Yehoshua, not only achieved his special level because of his self-negation, but he rose to a greater capacity because of his attachment to Moshe. Thus, he reflected Moshe's holiness as the moon reflects the radiance of the sun.

The determining factor for success in Torah study is the willingness to sacrifice and negate oneself. As the Gemara tells us, when Yehoshua was chosen to be the successor of Moshe Rabbeinu, the other elders (who were the colleagues of Yehoshua) were embarrassed. Although they may have been more intellectually qualified, they were not considered because genius alone is not the qualifying factor. Yehoshua was chosen because of his dedication to Moshe and his level of negation.

Thus, even the ordinary Jew can have a great degree of relevance to Hashem, who is the infinite/unlimited Being, by attaching himself to His infinite system. This could be accomplished through one's level of involvement with a tzaddik and selfless dedication to Torah and Mitzvos.

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