

Parshas Mattos-Masei

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1. The Necessity for Moshe to Destroy the Midianites

The Torah states, **“G’d spoke to Moshe saying, ‘Take vengeance for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered unto your people.’”** G’d had instructed Moshe to take vengeance against the Midianites because of the incident of Baal Peor which brought a plague upon the Jewish people. The Midianite women had enticed the Jewish men to engage in idol worship of the Baal Peor as a prerequisite to having sexual relations with them. The verse concludes, **“afterward you will be gathered unto your people,”** meaning, after the Midianite people are destroyed Moshe would pass away.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the verse **“afterward you will be gathered unto your people”** does not necessarily mean that Moshe would pass away immediately after exacting revenge against the Midianites; but rather, he was spiritually prepared to pass on (whenever G’d chooses that time to be). Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh cites Chazal who explain that initially when the incident of Zimri was taking place, Pinchas approached Moshe and Aaron to ask them what should be done to stop the public Desecration of G’d’s Name. The Midrash tells us that Moshe and Aaron were *“rafu yadeihem – their hands were weakened”* – meaning they were not able to respond. Moshe did not respond immediately to quell the Chilul Hashem because he had forgotten the Law which pertains to the situation. Pinchas had remembered the Law of *“kanaim pogim bo – he who is a zealot must respond – even to kill the perpetrator of the public desecration of G’d.”* Since Pinchas was the one to recall the Law, Moshe instructed him to be the one to carry out the act. Moshe’s inaction was considered a spiritual failing on his behalf.

Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh continues, that in order for Moshe to correct his spiritual diminishment, it was necessary for him to destroy the Midianites who caused a desecration of G’d’s Name. Thus, allowing his level of spirituality to be reinstated at an appropriate level. Only then will there no longer be a claim against Moshe for his initial passivity. Because G’d judges tzaddikim with an exactness that if they deviate as much as a hairbreadth they are held culpable. Therefore it was necessary for Moshe to make the correction.

Daas Zikaanim Baali Tosfos ask, “If Moshe was commanded to avenge the vengeance of the Jewish people against Midian, why did he delegate it through Pinchas rather than acting on his own?” They answer: the Midrash Tanchumah tell us, “The well from which you drank –you should not destroy.” Since Moshe developed in Midian after fleeing from Egypt and married there, it would be inappropriate for him to be the one to destroy the community from which he benefited. Thus, Moshe delegated the task of destroying Midian to Pinchas. Ultimately the correction for Moshe’s inaction came about through Pinchas’ zealotry.

Chazal tell us that Moshe did not strike the Nile during the plague of blood and frogs because he was saved through the Nile. He did not strike the earth to bring about the plague of lice because he benefited from the earth. When Moshe had killed the Egyptian (who had violated a Jewish woman), he used the earth to hide the body. Something from which one benefits, one should not destroy. Regarding Midian, it is even more so the case

that it was considered inappropriate for Moshe to destroy them because the necessity for his destruction of Midian was only as a result of his own inaction – which was considered a failing. Therefore Moshe had to delegate G'd's commandment to Pinchas.

It is interesting to note that Moshe's hesitation regarding the incident of Zimri was not seemingly because of his "lack of alacrity" but rather because he had forgotten the law pertaining to this type of situation. Nevertheless there was a claim against him as Chazal state, "Their hands were weakened." Rambam in his commentary on the last Mishnah in Tractate Makkos explains that the only way one could merit the special location in the world to come that is meant for him is to perform a mitzvah *b'shleimus* – in the most perfect manner. If there is any level of claim/prosecution that the mitzvah should have been performed in a more perfect manner, then one would not merit his special location in the world to come. Thus, Moshe needed to correct his failing in order for him to assume his proper place in the world to come.

2. An Approach to Spiritual Correct

We are approaching the midpoint of the three weeks of mourning which intensifies during the nine days of the month of Av and increases in severity during the week of the fast of the Ninth of Av (*Tisha b'Av*). During this time we reduce our involvement in joyous activities to commemorate the destruction of the First and Second Temples - among many other tragic events which have befallen the Jewish people on this date, - as stated in the Mishnah in Tractate Taanis.

The Torah tells us that due to the zealotry of Pinchas, G'd did not destroy the Jewish people. As it states, "***B'kino es kinahsee, (when he (Pinchas) zealously avenged My Vengeance...)***" Why does the Torah state – "Avenge My Vengeance" rather than "Avenge My Honor?" In reality, the act of zealotry that was performed by Pinchas was a Sanctification of G'd's Name – which is in its essence honoring G'd. Rashi explains that since Pinchas was angered to the same degree that G'd was angered (demonstrated by his act of zealotry), the Jewish people were spared and not destroyed. Because Pinchas experienced a semblance of G'd's anger it was not necessary for G'd to express His wrath. Pinchas could not tolerate the *Chilul Hashem* (desecration of G'd's Name) that was perpetrated by Zimri. Chazal tell us that the act of zealotry of Pinchas put his life in jeopardy. It was only because of the many miracles that were performed on his behalf that he was able to survive. The basis for the correction of the *Chilul Hashem* was not only the *Kiddush Hashem* (Sanctification of G'd's Name) which took place, but rather it was Pinchas internalization of G'd's pain.

The basis for all illness is rooted in one's spiritual failing. Thus, when one becomes ill it is part of the rehabilitative process for one to atone and thus recover one's spiritual state. It is through illness and suffering that one atones for his sins. Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl in his work *Nefesh Ha'Chaim* asks, if the purpose of illness is to atone for one's sins, then how do we understand the blessing of Healing found in the Amidah (silent Prayer) "Heal us, Hashem... bring complete recovery for all our ailments...?" One should not pray to be healed because in essence one is asking G'd not to be rehabilitated. It would be analogous to a doctor suggesting that the only way one could recover from a specific illness (and not die) is to undergo a certain therapy and the patient pleads with the doctor not to administer the therapy. Seemingly, this is what we are asking G'd. Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl explains the request for healing with an allegory:

A man had a son who had experienced a serious accident in which every bone of

his body were broken and needed resetting. The doctor told the father that after the bones are all set properly, the son would have a full recovery and return to his full function. The father when hearing this news was elated; however, when he stood by and watched the doctor reset the bones, although he experienced joy and felt fortunate that this procedure will bring about a full recovery, simultaneously he was tremendously pained and anguished to see his son suffering to such a degree. Similarly, although G'd brings illness upon a person for the sake of atonement, which is rehabilitative, He is simultaneously "pained" that His child needs to experience and undergo such suffering.

Reb Chaim of Volozhin z'tl explains that if one would feel and internalize G'd's pain, out of his love and reverence for Him, then that pain experienced by the person who is praying, would atone for the sin which brought about the illness. If one could truly internalize the pain that G'd "feels", when He punishes His children, then that pain itself reinstates and rehabilitates the spiritual diminishment that was caused by the sin.

We are able to draw from the incident of Pinchas, that if a public desecration of G'd's Name takes place and no one is pained sufficiently to respond, then G'd Himself will react. When G'd chooses to bring about negative events in order to awaken us one must address his spiritual failings. However if one dismisses these difficulties or tragedies as mere happenstance, then G'd will force him to acknowledge the gravity of the problem by intensifying the severity of his misfortune. However, if one preemptively recognizes his shortcomings and failings and is pained by them (remorse/teshuvah) to the point of penitence, then Hashem has no need to further intervene.

The Shulchan Aruch (Code of Jewish Law) rules that every Jew has an obligation to mourn the destruction of Jerusalem (the Bais HaMikdash) on a daily basis. This obligation is rooted in the concept of being preoccupied with the pain of one's fellow. The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that every day a Heavenly Voice calls out, "Woe to the Father who exiled His children from His table. Woe to the children who have been exiled from their Father's table." If one feels the pain of G'd relating to the exile and the loss of the Bais HaMikdash, then he in essence is experiencing a semblance of G'd's pain. Ultimately this will bring about a correction.

As we learn from the incident with Pinchas and the explanation of Reb Chaim Volozhin z'tl, the spiritual correction/rehabilitation for sin comes through experiencing G'd's pain. Experiencing and internalizing G'd's pain is an indication of one's love and reverence for Him.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that the Bais HaMikdash will be rebuilt whether the generation is all meritorious or all unworthy. How could the Temple be rebuilt if the generation is unworthy? If the behavior of the generation is not meritorious in the ultimate sense; however, they experience G'd's pain regarding the exile of His people, then the Temple will be rebuilt. The internalization of G'd's pain is in itself part of the rehabilitative process.

The average person is consumed with his own needs and concerns and therefore is only sensitive to what he does or does not have. However, if one would feel G'd's pain or the pain of others, then spiritual correction is possible. The value of experiencing and internalizing the void of spirituality will cause G'd to no longer extend our exile. May we merit the rebuilding of the Bais HaMikdash speedily through our understanding and internalizing the seriousness of exile.

3. What is the Setting to be Appreciative?

The Torah tells us that Moshe was commanded by G'd to destroy the nation of Midian. Men were conscripted from each of the Tribes to go to battle against Midian. The Torah states, **“So there were delivered from the thousands of the Children of Israel, a thousand from each Tribe...”** The Torah uses an unusual expression **“there were delivered.”** Rashi cites Chazal who state that those who were conscripted to go to battle were compelled to do so. They did not wish to go because Moshe's passing was contingent on the destruction of Midian. Therefore since they did not wish Moshe to die, they needed to be compelled to go to battle.

Rashi cites Chazal who state, “We see from here how praiseworthy are the leaders of the Jewish people. Before the Jewish people were aware that Moshe would pass away, their opposition towards his leadership was so intense that Moshe concerned that he would be stoned by them. However when they became aware that Moshe would pass away as a result of the battle of Midian, they needed to be compelled to go to war.” One would think that from here we would extrapolate how praiseworthy are the Jewish people themselves (not the leaders). Because when the Jewish people ultimately recognized and appreciated the value of their leaders they did not wish to do anything that would jeopardize them. How is the obstinacy of the Jewish people not wanting to go to battle an indication of the praiseworthiness of their leaders?

We are able to learn from the words of Chazal that if the Jewish people did not realize the unique leadership of Moshe, although they would understand that the battle would be the cause of his death, they would have willingly gone to battle. They would have not realized and appreciated the consequences to themselves. How do we understand this?

One only takes something for granted when he believes that whatever he is a beneficiary of will continue regardless of his deservingness. However if there was a benefit that its continuation is in question, then that benefit will not be taken for granted. Why does one value and appreciate the kindness afforded by a stranger more than the kindness given by a parent? The value received by a child from a parent is endlessly greater than that received from a stranger. Nevertheless, the kindness of the stranger is valued to a greater degree. The kindness of a parent is given to their offspring regardless of the worthiness of their child. Thus, it is taken for granted and not appreciated. However, that which is given by a stranger is continuously in question and not defined. The stranger continuously selectively chooses to give or not to give. Thus that which is received from stranger is appreciated.

Moshe's selfless leadership and concern for the Jewish people was taken for granted by the Jewish people because his dedication to them was no less than that of a parent. Regardless of their behavior, Moshe served them and represented them in the most unwavering manner – even to the point where he was willing to be obliterated for the sake of saving the Jewish people. As he had said, “Please obliterate me from Your Book.” However, when the Jewish people realized that Moshe would pass away as a result of the destruction of Midian, they understood and appreciated that his selfless kindness and dedication would come to an end. Only then did they appreciate him, minimally as one values the kindness of a stranger. Thus, the Jewish people needed to be compelled to go to battle against Midian. Now we are able to understand the words of Chazal who extrapolate from the obstinacy of the Jewish people to go to war indicates the true praiseworthiness of their leader Moshe.

A true leader of the Jewish people does not “choose” to do or not to do- to act selflessly or not on behalf of his people. A true leader's essence is selfless dedication to

his people, regardless of the cost to himself. On the other hand if one acts for the sake of his own glory, then he will continuously evaluate and choose (based on the situation) to see if his actions will further or diminish his honor. It is an ongoing decision process – to act or not to act. However when a leader is dedicated to his people as a shepherd is to his flock, then his decision process is based only on what is in the best interest of his people. The fact that the Jewish people needed to be compelled to go to battle against Midian (understanding the consequences to Moshe) reveals with absolute clarity that Moshe was that uniquely dedicated and praiseworthy leader.

4. Realizing One's Good Fortune

The Torah identifies the 42 locations in which Jewish people had camped during their 40-year trek in the desert. What is the value of identifying 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. 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 in which the Jewish people had camped, they would have never known about the miracles and wonders from which they had benefited.

The greatest level of love and interest that one has is in himself. If one were selfless one would adhere to the Torah and its mitzvos only because G'd had commanded them. This is considered *l'shmah* (for its own sake). However even if one adheres to the Torah for his own self-interest (*shelo l'shmah*), the Torah tells us that G'd will protect the Jew. As it states, “**I (G'd) did not for a moment leave you unattended.**” Regardless of the history of anti-Semitism against the Jewish people, we have always been protected by G'd only because of the Torah. One should not mistakenly think that the Torah and its Laws were necessary for the development of the Jewish people from a historical perspective but are no longer relevant (G'd forbid) and archaic. The Torah is the only protection that the Jew has – and it is through its adherence regardless of one's motivation that will illicit G'd's assistance and protection. One needs to be cognizant of the fact that it is only through the Torah and its mitzvos that the Jewish people will not only survive but also succeed and thrive. The essence of a Jew is his spirituality, which is nurtured through Torah and its mitzvos. The Torah is the only way a Jew can nurture his most basic need, which is his spirituality.

One, who has not been a beneficiary of miracles and believes in G'd, has a different understanding and perspective of Him then one who had personally benefited from and witnessed 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 His concern for His people knowing what He had done for the Jewish people in the past. Although the Jewish people continuously experienced miracles during their 40-year trek in the desert and were beneficiaries of

them; nevertheless, G'd commanded Moshe to record all of their travels 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 G'd 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 of time, G'd would not have had a setting in which to show His concern/kindness for them through the performance of miracles. After the Jewish people entered into the Land, 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 explains at the beginning of the Portion of Shelach. The Torah states **“Send for yourself spies...”** It was decreed by G'd that Moshe should not enter into the Promised Land. Thus, when the Jews would enter he would have to pass away. G'd alluded to Moshe that the value of the sending of the spies was for himself – meaning if the Jews would fail and believe the reports of the spies, his life would be extended an additional 39 years. Thereby Moshe was able to extend his life and the Jewish people would be the beneficiaries of his special influence. Being exposed to Moshe for an additional 39 years, even within the context of tragedy/punishment, was a period of spiritual growth that impacted upon the Jewish people until the end of time.

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

King David writes in Tehillim (Psalms), “The nations of the world will praise G'd... 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 G'd's kindness on behalf of the Jewish people. The Jewish people themselves are not able to praise G'd for this kindness because they are unaware of the evil machinations of the world. Therefore, it is only the nations of the world who understand to what degree G'd's kindness overwhelms the Jewish people.

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

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 G'd performs for us. We need to reflect on this fact and be beholden that despite our lengthy exile, we survive and continue as a Jewish people only

because of the Chesed of Hashem.

5. *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 holy, 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 more severe.

Before Rosh Hashanah there is a tradition that one nullifies 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 does 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 G’d, 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), not only does he violate 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 utilizes his expression of speech (which is a spiritual faculty) in the context of studying Torah, which is the ultimate source of all 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 process 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 remorse is 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 atoned through *vidui*.