

פרשת מטות

OVERVIEW

The final chapters of the book of Bamidbar deal initially with the laws concerning vows and contain special rules regarding vows made by a married woman. The text then continues with an account of Israel's victory over Midian whose daughters seduced so many young men. Midian deserved to be punished and Israel's hand lay heavily on her. The commanding officers of the Jewish army reported that not one soldier was missing at the roll-call. In appreciation the people set aside the entire booty of gold and jewels for the beautification of the Mishkan.

Following a request by the tribes of Reuben and Gad for more land to accommodate their large number of cattle, Moshe allocates to the tribes wide plains of Transjordan, but he obligates them to participate with their brother tribes in the conquest of Canaan.

COMMENTARY

The Vows

It is not the first time that the Torah stresses the importance of upholding a promise or a vow expressly pronounced. This may be in form of a "Neder", a vow that does not designate a defined object ("I obligate myself to offer a voluntary sacrifice" without specifying the animal to be used) or it may be a "Nedava", a vow that defines the object. "What your mouth pronounces, guard it as a precious treasure". A vow may serve as a valuable support to those who need

moral strength that is not given to them. In no case should one make a vow before weighing one's ability to live up to it. Never make a vow in anger.

If one is unable, for whatever reason, to fulfill the conditions of the vow, one must turn to a court of authorized men who will absolve him of the obligation provided they determine the validity of the case. A vow pronounced by a woman must be confirmed by her husband before it is legally binding. This is the only time when the status of the married woman appears to be inferior in the eyes of the law. Certain complications in married life could cause the woman to break into a vow in the heat of the argument, which may deeply upset the domestic peace.

A problem is posed when a person vows to obligate himself to adhere to a prohibition (literally, to abstain from a forbidden act). How can one vow not to perform an act that is an "Issur" already promulgated by the Torah? Yet there may be times in a person's life when it is opportune in the line of stricter self-discipline to restrain one's desires by formally abstaining from an act which one has always recognized and accepted as a prohibition but lacked the inner strength to resist the temptation.

Generally, vows address themselves to the actions and objects, not to persons. Our sages strongly recommend not to abuse the pronouncement of vows. "Better not to make a vow than make it and then not live up to it". A vow is only valid when

the person is fully aware of any possible consequences. Thus the Talmud cautions against the careless use of expressions or idioms which are commonly part of the language of vows, such as "I swear.....", or "I affirm that....".

The respect for the given word is one of the most basic precepts in Jewish life. Respect for the given word raises the hope for a better future, for G-d has given us His word that He will never allow us to fade from the earth's surface.

The avenging War against Midian

The purpose of the war against Midian was to put an end to this nation's evil influence on Israel. We rarely find in the Torah an explicit divine order to use force of such magnitude. There were indeed sound reasons for this move. As we have seen, Midian used its daughters to corrupt the morals of Israel's youth, leading to Pinchas' decisive intervention. It is the first time that Israel embarked on a purely punitive military expedition to combat the moral threat to the purity of the youth and its family life. For our moral integrity and our bond with G-d's law are the sole guarantee for our continued existence.

It is important to note that this military action did not bring Israel any material gain. The war was not waged for profit or conquest of territory; on the contrary, the entire booty was brought by the people to Moshe for the sanctuary. Also, unlike the usual procedure after a victorious war, Israel neither occupied nor annexed the country of Midian. Israel's respect for the law, clothes it with a dignity that shaped its conduct throughout its history.

After its victory over Midian, Israel brought back a large number of objects of various kinds. The Torah uses this occasion to lay down certain basic rules of Kashrut that we are to follow in our daily lives. Two general rules: every household utensil which, when used for preparing food, comes in direct contact with fire, must be cleansed through fire. For others purification by (spring) water is sufficient (Tevilah). Even now, utensils of non-Jewish origin, especially those made of metal, require Tevilah. (We also extend the practice to include utensils made of porcelain and glass but not of wood).

We find in this law an idea of great simplicity and great importance. Our manner of eating, the spirit in which we consume food, marks our true Jewish personality. We share the act of eating, the most physical activity of our human existence, with the animal world – it is the way in which we eat, its human-Jewish character, which sanctifies our lives and elevates us to become true servants of G-d. We bless G-d before and after the meal. We conduct ourselves with dignity during the meal, conscious of its importance as a source of physical vitality that is the indispensable prerequisite for our spiritual functions.

Transjordan

Ever since Moshe's agreement with the tribes of Reuben and Gad, the transjordanian soil is part of the national land. This territory was marked by extensive expanses of pasture, an ideal area for the Jewish herdsman. Thus Transjordan maintained its Jewish character during Israel's long history. (It

is only during the last half century that political treaties separated it from the Jewish land).

The promise by the two tribes to participate in the war of the conquest of Canaan offers the classic example of a gift tied to conditions. Thus the settlement of the women and children of the two tribes is merely provisional and only the men's active part in the war of conquest makes it permanent. From this example our tradition derives the basic rules which govern a contract that contains conditional clauses. We find five such rules in our text:

1. The condition must be both positive and negative (in our text "if the children of Gad and the children of Reuben will pass with you over the Jordan....", and then "but if they will not pass over.....").

2. The fulfillment of the condition must precede the realization of the contract (in our text: "every man that is armed in battle....", and only thereafter it states the resultant "you shall give them the land... for a possession").

3. The positive clause must precede the negative one.

4. Condition and contract must have different objectives. The condition must in no way be detrimental to the possibility of living up to the contract (conquest of Canaan, occupation of Transjordan).

5. A third person, authorized by one of the other party, must be put in a position where he can carry out both contract and condition (in our case: Moshe will not allot Transjordan after the conquest of Canaan but will delegate Joshua to formalize the act).

© 1945 Marc Breuer. First publication in the French Language during WWII in Occupied France as "La Tohra Commentée". Based on the teachings of Rav Samson Raphael Hirsch זצ"ל. New Publication in English by Elie Winsbacher. To receive electronically or to sponsor an issue, Please email: e.w@att.net. Proceeds from sponsorships will be pooled with the intention to publish in book form at the end of the yearly cycle.

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