

PARSHAS MATOS

by Shlomo Katz

Parshas Matos

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Our parashah opens: "Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael, saying, 'Zeh ha'davar / This is the word that Hashem has commanded'." Rashi observes that many prophets (including Moshe) introduced their messages with the phrase "Ko amar Hashem / So said Hashem," but only Moshe introduced some of his messages with "Zeh ha'davar / This is the word."

R' Yaakov Kaminetsky z"l (rosh yeshiva of Torah Voda'ath in Brooklyn, N.Y.; died 1986) elaborates: Our Sages teach that all of the prophets saw their prophecies with an "unclear vision," while Moshe saw with a "clear vision." In other words, all prophets (besides Moshe) had to interpret the visions they saw, a process that could be affected by the prophets' own personalities and predilections. Moshe's prophecy was different; he understood exactly what G-d meant and transmitted it literally and perfectly. He could say, "This is the word that Hashem commanded."

Why is this message alluded to in our parashah? R' Kaminetsky explains: The first section of Parashat Matot presents the laws of vows and oaths. These laws demonstrate man's special status in that, through a vow or oath, a person can, in effect, create new mitzvah obligations. For example, if a person says, "I swear that I will eat this loaf of bread," it becomes a mitzvah for him to eat that loaf of bread. If a person says, "Apples are forbidden to me like a sacrifice," it becomes a mitzvah for him to refrain from having any benefit from apples. This ability of man to enact new laws might lead one to question the Divine origin of the Torah. Accordingly, the Torah chooses this context to inform us that Moshe's prophecy - indeed, the transmission of the entire Torah - was a literal transmission of Hashem's words. (Emet L'Yaakov)

"He shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth shall he do." (30:3)

R' Yehoshua Leib Diskin z"l (1817-1898; rabbi of Brisk, Poland; later in Yerushalayim) was once present at a hesped / eulogy for one his students. Following the hesped, a "Kail Malai" was recited,

and the assembled crowd dispersed.

R' Diskin then approached the gabbai and handed him a coin. He said, "I am giving this coin to charity in memory of the deceased on behalf of everyone who was present today." He explained: When the gabbai recites a Kail Malai, he often says the phrase, "in the merit that the entire congregation promises to give charity on behalf of the elevation of the soul (of the departed)." I, said R' Diskin, am afraid that people will forget to fulfill this vow that was made on their behalf, so I am acting as their representative. (Quoted in Ve'karata La'Shabbat Oneg)

"Elazar Hakohen said to the men of the army who came to the battle, 'This is the decree of the Torah, which Hashem commanded Moshe: Only the gold and the silver, the copper, the iron, the tin, and the lead--everything that comes into the fire--you shall pass through the fire; but it must be purified with the water of sprinkling; and everything that would not come in the fire, you shall pass through the water'." (31:21-23)

R' David Dov Meisels z"l (1814-1875; rabbi of Lask, Poland) quotes the Zohar which teaches that the taint to one's soul from committing a sin is proportional to the pleasure that one derived from the sin. Likewise, the depth of one's teshuvah must be proportional to the sin. This is derived from the above verses: "Everything that comes into the fire--you shall pass through the fire . . . and everything that would not come in the fire, you shall pass through the water." In the words of the Gemara (Pesachim 30b), "As it absorbs [non-kosher flavors] so it expels." [Thus, a vessel that was used for hot foods must be heated to be kashered, while a vessel that was used only for cold foods may be kashered without heating. Consult a qualified rabbi for precise instructions.]

R' Meisels continues, quoting his father, R' Aharon Meisels z"l (rabbi in several towns in Poland): In this light, we can understand why the laws of kashering dishes (above) were taught by Moshe's nephew, Elazar, rather than by Moshe himself. Rashi z"l writes: Because Moshe became angry, he erred, and these laws escaped him. When did Moshe become angry? A few verses earlier (31:14-16): "Moshe was angry with the commanders of the army, the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds, who came from the army of the battle. Moshe said to them, 'Did you let every female [of Midian] live? Behold! -- they caused Bnei Yisrael, by the word of Bil'am, to commit a betrayal against Hashem regarding the matter of Peor; and the plague occurred in the assembly of Hashem [see Bemidbar 25:1-9]."

Why did the soldiers let every female of Midian live? R' Meisels answers that this was their "proportional repentance." Rambam writes that perfect teshuvah requires not sinning when one is in exactly the same situation in which he previously sinned. Thus, in order for Bnei Yisrael to atone for the sin they had committed, they wanted to have the Midianite women in their midst. Moshe Rabbeinu did not realize that this was their motive, and therefore he became angry. (Haggadah Shel

Pesach: Rei'ach Dudaim p.10)

"You shall wash your garments on the seventh day and become purified; afterward you may enter the camp." (31:24)

R' Moshe Feinstein z"l comments: Ordinarily, when a verse speaks of washing clothes, the Torah means that the clothes should be immersed in a mikvah. In contrast, it is apparent from the Targum (Aramaic translation) and from Rashi (to Vayikra 13:58) that this verse is commanding the Jewish soldiers to launder their garments. Why?

R' Feinstein explains: The Torah did not need to teach us that returning soldiers must immerse their clothes. We already know that if clothes became impure from coming in contact with the dead that they must be immersed. Rather, the Torah is teaching us a new law. One who wishes to ascend to a higher level of kedushah / sanctity must wear clean clothes. Thus, when these soldiers returned from the battle field and wished to reenter the Camp of the Shechinah, they had to launder their garments.

This, adds R' Feinstein, is a source in the Torah for wearing finer clothes on Shabbat and Yom Tov. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach Arzei Ha'levanon Vol. I, p.75)

"The commanders of the thousands in the legions, the officers of the thousands and the officers of the hundreds, approached Moshe. They said to Moshe, 'Your servants took a census of the men of war under our command, and not a man of us is missing'." (31:48-49)

In his classic work on ethics and philosophy, Chovot Ha'levavot / Duties of the Hearts, Rabbeinu Bachya ibn Pakudah z"l (Saragossa, Spain; early 11th century) relates the story of a tzaddik who met victorious warriors returning from battle. He said to them, "It is premature to rejoice, for you have won the battle and collected booty only in the small war. The greatest battle, though, still lies ahead."

The soldiers asked him, "What battle is that?"

He answered, "The fight against the yetzer hara and its agents." [Until here from Chovot Ha'levavot, Sha'ar Yichud Ha'maaseh Ch.5]

R' Moshe Gruenwald z"l (rabbi and rosh yeshiva in Khust, Hungary; died 1911) explains the above teaching of the Chovot Ha'levavot in light of another story in that work. There it is recorded that a pious man said to his disciples, "If I believed that you were free of all sin, I would fear for your sake

for something that is worse than sin, namely, that you might believe yourselves to be tzaddikim." Similarly, why must a victorious warrior prepare for battle against the yetzer hara? Because the haughtiness he feels makes him particularly susceptible to sin.

R' Gruenwald continues: When the armies of Bnei Yisrael returned from the battle against Midian, as related in our verses, they knew that they had to prepare for the next battle, the one against the yetzer hara. And, they knew that this meant they had to subdue any feelings of haughtiness. But they did feel haughty. They "took a census" and felt as if "not a man was missing (i.e., lacking)." Therefore, the next verse (31:50) relates, "So we have brought an offering for Hashem - what any man found of gold vessels, anklet and bracelet, ring, earring, and clasp, to atone for our souls before Hashem." (Arugat Ha'bosem)

Pirkei Avot

"Moshe received the Torah from Sinai . . ." (1:1)

Why does the tractate dealing with ethics open with this statement? R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) answers that the mishnah wishes to inform us what type of ethics it will be teaching. He explains:

There are two types of ethics: "Mussar Eloki" / Divine ethics and "Mussar Enoshi" / human ethics. They are different and have different goals. In particular, Mussar Eloki is meant to elevate a person and purify him, whereas Mussar Enoshi is simply a tool that allows functioning societies to exist.

R' Kook adds: Because Mussar Enoshi is utilitarian, a means to an end, it is possible that someone can be harmed by it [i.e., that his needs or feelings can be sacrificed for the perceived greater good]. This is not the case with Mussar Eloki, which, by definition, is pure. (Quoted in Sicha Avot)

"Distance yourself from a bad neighbor; do not associate with a wicked person; and do not despair of retribution." (1:7)

R' Moshe Shlomo Zalman Zaturensky z"l (Russia; late 19th century) writes: The Gemara (Berachot 8a) states, "Whoever has a shul in his city and he does not enter there to pray is called a 'bad neighbor'." It is to this definition that our mishnah refers when it says, "Distance yourself [from being] a bad neighbor."

Nevertheless, the mishnah continues, "Do not associate with a wicked person." Even in shul, there are some people with whom you should not associate.

Alternatively, the mishnah could be saying the following: Prayer can cause a person's desires to be fulfilled even if he is not deserving. Thus, one might reason that as long as he prays in shul, it does not matter who his friends are because his prayers will be answered. Therefore the mishnah says, "Do not be a bad neighbor," i.e., pray in shul, but even so, "Do not associate with a wicked person." (Va'yadaber Moshe)

The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at [Torah.org](https://www.torah.org) start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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