

CERTIFIED KOSHER

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes regarding the Children of Israel, saying, "This is the word which G-d commanded: When a man will make a vow ..." (Bamidbar 30:2)

A neder is a vow, and it is the opening topic of this week's parsha. It follows from last week's parsha, since last week's parsha ended off with the sacrifices due on the holidays, a time also for the fulfillment of vows (promises to bring sacrifices to the Temple for some reason or another).

That is pshat. On a deeper level, the concept behind nedarim act as a bridge between the concept of Jewish continuity in last week's parsha, and the war about to be waged against Midian in this week's parsha--especially since a neder was a verbalized promise that invoked the Name of G-d made to strengthen one's commitment to perform a positive deed.

As mentioned before, the word "midbar" can mean either "desert" or "speech" (same letters, different vowels) The theme of the book "Bamidbar" has been to prepare the Jewish people for life in Eretz Yisroel, which means learning to live above nature. This means using spiritual means to physically impact the world, and there is no better means to do this than through speech itself (as we learned from Moshe's hitting of the rock instead of speaking to it; see Parashas Chukas). Hence, every parsha in this fourth book has something to do with speech.

Furthermore, it is speech, not action that is the best indication of the present mix of body and soul of an individual. Actions can appear spiritual, but can be driven by physical motivations(e.g., giving charity for honor as opposed to for humanitarian reasons), something only G-d can ascertain. We can fool many people a lot of the time by the way we act, and even ourselves some of the time, which is why actions can be so hard for humans to judge.

However, what a person speaks about, when he speaks about it, and how usually betrays his current spiritual level. The more bodily drives have a say in one's course of life, the more one's priorities will reflect this, especially in speech. Simply put, godly people talk about godly things most the time (if not all the time). Even when such people talk about mundane matters, their words seem to be imbued with spirituality.

Into this discussion enters the idea of the "Nun Sharei Binah," the "Fifty Gates of Understanding."

Every idea starts off as being abstract, mere words that may ring neither true nor false. It is only after trying to comprehend an idea that we can, hopefully, begin to discern whether the idea is true or false, and its relevance to our lives. In a conceptual sense, the Fifty Gates of Understanding act as kind of a threshold for abstract ideas to pass over on the way to becoming understandable, usable information. This takes place on the level of our soul called "Neshamah" and it is speech that often indicates where we stand with particular ideas.

Even the word "Neshamah" indicates this, for it is made up of two parts, the letter "nun" and the word "shamah." The letter "nun" represents the number "fifty" in gematria, and the word "shamah" means "there," as if to say: there, on the level of the Neshamah resides fifty, the Fifty Gates of Understanding.

We can do the same thing with the word "neder," which can be broken up into two parts as well: "nun" and "der," which is the word for "to live." It is as if the concept of "neder" allows us to access the "place" where "nun" resides, that is, the Fifty Gates of Understanding. Or, more accurately, a neder is a "vehicle" to allow one to be more in touch with his Neshamah, which automatically provides access to the Fifty Gates of Understanding, which, it turns out, the people of Midian came to shut tight.

According to the Pri Tzaddik, the spiritual quality of Midian was to hunger for physical, sensual gratification. Theirs was an immoral and extremely corrupt society bent on obliterating true spirituality, hedonism at its worst. Even the name "Midian" in Aramaic means "knot," something which alludes to their ability to "block" the spiritual channel between man and G-d, to make a break in Jewish continuity.

They weren't so unsuccessful. After waging war successfully against Midian, the avenged Jewish nation still stumbled by returning with female Midianite captives. Moshe was incredulous and asked: *"... Have you kept all the females alive? These were [the source of the sin] to the Jewish people through the word of Bilaam, to cause a treachery against G-d ..." (Bamidbar 31:15)*

It was so obvious! How could they not see it?! The answer to this question is: Midian, and the power of lust to dampen the impact of the soul.

When a person made a vow, it was a way of strengthening oneself against the negative and spiritually damaging drives of the body. Really, a spiritually-inclined person should be able to do the right thing without invoking the holy Name of G-d in a vow. However, for the person who lacked such a high level of fear of G-d, a neder was a way to compensate for this, taking advantage of the person's existing level of fear of G-d to springboard him to an even higher level. A neder was a way of putting a person in touch with his Neshamah and the intellectual clarity that comes with being so.

Shabbos Day:

Moshe, Elazar the kohen, and all the princes of the Assembly went outside the camp to meet them [the army]. Moshe became angry with those appointed over the troops ... (Bamidbar 31:13)

Elazar the kohen said to the men of the host who went to war ... (Bamidbar 31:21)

Since Moshe became angry, he erred, and the laws of kashering non-Jewish utensils became hidden from him. (Rashi)

In last week's parsha, and the parsha before that, laws meant to be taught by Moshe had been taught by others instead (see Rashi on 25:7 and 27:4). However, in each case this had not been due to any failing of Moshe, but rather, to the merit of Pinchas, and later, the daughters of Tzelofchad to teach the laws relevant to their situations.

However, as Rashi points out in this section dealing with the laws of kashrus, it had been Moshe's anger that shifted the opportunity to teach these all-important laws from Moshe to Elazar the kohen, his nephew. But why? Had Moshe not been angry for all the right reasons? Why didn't Moshe's anger constitute an act of zealousness like Pinchas' did, of whom G-d declared:

"Pinchas, the son of Elazar, the son of Aharon the kohen stayed My anger from the Children of Israel ... " (Bamidbar 25:10)

Perhaps the Talmud has the answer to this question:

Moshe became angry with those appointed over the troops ... (Bamidbar 31:13);

Rav Nachman said in the name of Rabbah bar Avuha:

Moshe said to them,

"Perhaps you repeated your original transgression?"

They answered him, "We never strayed from the Jewish way!"

He asked them, "If so, for what do you need to atone?!"

They explained, "Not for having committed a transgression, but for the thought of doing so."
(Shabbos 64a)

It seems as if Moshe had done more than simply get angry; he had also misjudged those who had fought against Midian. And though it is true that they provided the perfect "stumbling block" for Moshe to make such a faulty assumption by bringing back Midianite women, still, the Talmud states:

Anyone who falsely judges a person will suffer bodily punishment. (Shabbos 97a)

Elsewhere, the Talmud warns:

One must always judge to the side of merit. (Shabbos 128a)

In fact, the word to describe Moshe's anger is "vayiktzof," which can also mean "jumped," perhaps indicating that Moshe "jumped" to the wrong conclusion about righteous people. And if Moshe could make such a mistake, then how much more so can the average person make a similar mistake. How often do we find that people have good and acceptable reasons for what we call "offenses" against us?

If so, then how appropriate it is that the laws of kashrus were withheld from Moshe as a result of his anger. For, in Hebrew, Moshe's act is called, "choshed b'k'sherim," suspecting "kosher" people. Thus, for trying to "extract" an admission of non-kosher actions from kosher people, Moshe was denied the opportunity to teach those same people how to extract non-kosher food from non-kosher utensils.

Furthermore, anger is an emotion that is associated with heat. There are times to get "heated up" about causes, as Pinchas had done when he killed Zimri in last week's parsha, and as Moshe had done when striking down the Egyptian in Egypt. Kashering utensils to extract non-kosher food remains also requires heat, and perhaps this too was part of Moshe's lesson: for your misuse of emotional "heat," you have forfeited the right to explain the proper use of physical heat when kashering utensils.

This message is not usually one of the principle lessons that one gains from a study of the laws of kashrus. However, perhaps it should be, for as they say, one should be just as careful (if not more so) about what comes out of his mouth as what goes into his mouth. Not only does this allow us to leave "kosher" people as such, but it also serves to certify our own level of spiritual kashrus as well. And at a time when we mourn the loss of the Temples, the most recent one having been destroyed because of wanton hatred, it is a good time to think about just how deep this particular lesson runs.

Parshas Masei - The Journey Goes On

Seudos Shlishi:

G-d spoke to Moshe in the Plains of Moav, by the Jordan near Jericho, saying, "Speak to the Children of Israel and tell them, 'When you pass over the Jordan into the Land of Canaan you must dispossess all the inhabitants of the land before you ... But if you will not dispossess the inhabitants of the land before you, then it will happen that those whom you leave behind will be pricks in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and shall trouble you in the land in which you live. Furthermore, it will happen that I will do to you

what I intended to do to them.' " (Bamidbar 33:50-56)

And so it happened. The Jews went in, they fought the war as commanded by G-d, but did not finish the job and instead left behind Canaanites. A "prick in our eyes"? A "thorn in our sides"? Oh, how many countless millions of Jews have died since because we left over a few Canaanites?!

Granted, of all the mitzvos incumbent upon Jews, killing human beings is not an easy one. Picture walking into a Canaanite tent and finding, to your surprise, a Canaanite mother innocently playing with her children on the floor of the tent. How does one strike them down in cold blood, and go on to the next tent to do the same thing? Killing warriors is one thing, but killing women and children is something altogether different ...

Even if they are the mothers of the most immoral and illicit society on the face of the earth? Even if they are the mothers of children who will have absolutely no problem doing to your wives and children what you would never do to theirs.

It was not unlike what happened to Pinchas. Zimri had taken a non-Jewish princess and had broken the Torah, causing a massive plague that wiped out 24,000 of his own tribe, and no one cared to step in and do something about. And even when Pinchas finally arose and risked his life to save the day, he received something far less than a hero's welcome: the tribe of Shimon wanted to kill him! "How dare you kill a prince of the tribe of Shimon," they protested! It seems they had missed the point, as if they had mistaken priorities ... Perhaps they just didn't want to deal with the reality of what had happened around them.

Prime Minister Chamberlain made a similar mistake. Claiming that "Herr Hitler is a reasonable man who wants peace" after their meeting in Munich in 1938, Neville Chamberlain gave Czechoslovakia to Hitler on a silver platter, and then turned his back on the Nazi threat. He had not been alone either; collectively, the Western world of that time ignored reality and hoped that "things" would just take care of themselves. In the end they did, but not as the Free World had dreamed, and the war they had hoped to avoid was far worse than anyone could have ever imagined.

Misplaced mercy? Blind faith? Perhaps, but does it really make a difference in the end? There are two ways to spell "peace": p-e-a-c-e or, p-i-e-c-e. The former is the one we dream of achieving, but oftentimes we delude ourselves into thinking that we must go the route of the latter to achieve it. That had been Chamberlain's plan. However, as history has recorded, not only do we not achieve "peace" that way, but we end up fueling the fires of even bigger wars and untold suffering.

What it comes down to is the difference between being a "visionary," and an "illusionary." Tragically, too many important people seem to confuse the latter for the former. That's the way it appears to have been with many Jews in the days of Yehoshua, and woefully and all too often, that's the way it seems to be in our day-and-age as well.

Melave Malkah:

These are the commandments and the judgments which G-d commanded by the hand of Moshe to the Children of Israel in the plains by Moav by the Jordan near Jericho. (Bamidbar 36:13)

Thus the book of Bamidbar comes to its close. On this simple and obvious statement, the Ohr HaChaim HaKodesh has a question: Why did the Torah change from its normal format of introducing a mitzvah with the above statement and instead concluded with this statement?

He answers that the Torah wanted to make known that, even though the daughters of Tzelofchad were treated somewhat uniquely inasmuch as they had been permitted to marry any man they wished, this too had only been because G-d had granted them special permission. In other words, all that preceded this final statement was by the command of G-d, and not Moshe's own doing.

This, perhaps, is the most important piece of information necessary for survival as a Jewish nation, especially in Eretz Yisroel. The Torah is testifying here that only the laws that have come via Moshe constitute true Torah; it is the role and obligation of all successive generations to maintain that status quo, not to upset it. In other words, unlike other ways of life historically, Judaism does not evolve, it involves (otherwise, G-d forbid, it dissolves, but not before G-d steps in ...).

It is one thing to apply Torah, and to re-apply it in every generation, especially as technology provides new innovations that must be scrutinized under the auspices of Torah. Maybe G-d told Moshe about light bulbs and telephones, maybe He didn't. It doesn't matter; what matters is knowing how Torah addresses these issues to safeguard the principles of Torah from being violated, principles that are forever immutable.

Thus it is the responsibility of the leading halachic authorities of every generation to apply the principles of Torah as they see fit in every generation, not to cancel them out to facilitate the transition of the Jew into a non-Jewish culture. The starting point is knowing and accepting that all of Torah that has come from Moshe is true and eternal; the questions to be asked are, "Now, does Torah accept this novel idea, or reject it? Does this invention uphold Torah, or interfere with its godly mandate?"

It seems that there are basically two Jewish approaches to life these days. There is, "What does Torah say about life in Modern-Day Society?" and, "What does Modern-Day Society say about Torah-life?" The latter approach, we have witnessed, tends to abolish Torah from the national agenda. However, the former approach allows the Jewish people to bridge the gap that spans from the beginning of time, past our period of time, and into Eternity.

Now that's a journey; now that's continuity!

Chazak!

Have a meaningful Shabbos,
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