

# NOT VERY PROMISING

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

## Friday Night:

**Mattos:** Not Very Promising

*Moshe spoke to the leaders of the tribes to tell the Children of Israel. "This is what G-d commanded. If a man makes a vow to G-d, or swears an oath to bind himself, he must not violate his word; he must do all that he said."* (Bamidbar 30:2-3)

Having discussed the sacrifices of the holidays and vows in last week's parshah, the Torah continues in this week's parshah with a discussion about nedarim (oaths), since many included promises to bring a sacrifice to G-d, which were often fulfilled on the holidays.

In the past, we have discussed various different aspects of this section, and for a good reason:

Rebi Elazar said: Do not let the section of nedarim be light in your eyes, for, it was through them that the [members of the] Great Sanhedrin (High Court) of Tzidkiyahu were killed ... (Eichah Rabbah 2:14)

The Midrash explains itself in detail. At the time of the First Temple, when Nebuchadnetzar had virtually reduced Israel to a vassal state, Tzidkiyahu, the king of Yehudah (the ten tribes had long ago been exiled to Assyria), paid an unexpected visit on Nebuchadnetzar, who was preparing to go to war against other nations. Apparently, part of the preparation included the gruesome ritual of eating flesh from a living animal (a rabbit), because somehow this made a warrior fearless.

Still, it was not something done in public, and Nebuchadnetzar had no intention of revealing his barbaric act to anyone. Thus, when Tzidkiyahu entered unexpectedly and caught Nebuchadnetzar in the act, the latter made him take an oath that he would not reveal his secret.

Tzidkiyahu did anyhow. Therefore, says the Midrash, Nebuchadnetzar,

"... sent for the Sanhedrin and said to them, "Explain Torah to me ..." They immediately read from parshah to parshah, and when they arrived at the section of, "If a man makes a vow ..." he said to them, "If one wants to cancel [his vow], may he?" they answered him, "He should go to a wise man and have him annul it."

Upon hearing this, Nebuchadnetzar informed them that he considered them to have annulled

Tzidkiyahu's vow, and promptly had them tortured to death. It is to this, concludes the Midrash, the Yirmiyahu refers in Eichah ... "The elders of the daughter of Tzion sit on the ground in silence; they have strew ashes on their heads, and wear sackcloth. The maidens of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground." (a good connection to the Three Weeks, which we now find ourselves in). (Eichah 2:10)

And all because of a vow, or at least, an annulled vow. Hence, Rebi Elazar's warning, and also why the rabbis teach:

The annulment of vows "hangs in the air." (Chagigah 10a)

"The annulment of vows of which the Chachamim say can be performed by a wise man, though hinted to in the Torah has very little support. Rather, it is a law that was handed down as part of the Oral Law." (Tosfos)

Which is probably why Nebuchadnetzar also held the leaders of the Sanhedrin responsible for Tzidkiyahu's breach of trust. All-in-all, one has to be very careful in the first place not to make promises. Certainly, if a promise is made, one should avoid annulling it unless halachah demands that they do, for, the Torah and the Talmud are very, very strict about one who does not stick to his word.

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## Shabbos Day:

*They [the Jewish people] waged war against Midian, as G-d had commanded Moshe, killing every [adult] male. With the other victims, they killed the five kings of Midian: Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Chur, and Reva-the five kings of Midian. They also killed Bilaam son of Peor with the sword ...* (Bamidbar 31:7)

So far, so good. After recovering themselves from the onslaught of the daughters of Midian (end of Parashas Balak), and after regaining their spiritual composure, the Jewish people mounted a surprise attack against the people of Midian in revenge for the havoc they caused. Well, at least we thought they had gained full composure:

... The Children of Israel took all the women of Midian captive with their children ...

And why not? Are they also not spoils of war? Perhaps, normally, but not when those women were the very source of the sin. Hence Moshe's expression of shock and anger:

... They brought the captives, prey, and the spoils to Moshe and Elazar the priest, and to the congregation of the Children of Israel, at the camp in the plains of Moav, by the Jordan, near Jericho. Moshe and Elazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation, went outside the camp to greet them. Moshe was angry with the leaders of the army, the officers over thousands, and the officers over hundreds, who were part of the army. "Have you allowed the women to survive?" demanded

Moshe. "These are exactly the ones who were involved with the Israelites at Bilaam's instigation, causing them to be unfaithful to G-d in the Peor incident, bringing a plague on the community!"

Just like Moshe's hitting the rock in Parashas Chukas represented a major historical turning point, so, too, did the bringing back of the Midianite women represent another historical turning point-for the worst. In fact, it revealed that Bilaam had not failed in his advice to Balak; it made clear the Jewish people's infection from a spiritual "virus" that has not been cured until this very day. It meant that the final redemption would have to be postponed, it seems now, until much closer to the year 6,000.

In fact, the Midrash states that when the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and Menashe asked to remain on the east side of the Jordan river, the Babylonian Exile began-even though the Jewish people would not be exiled into Babylonia for another 850 years! This is why the combination of Balak's and Bilaam's names yield two words: Amalek, the nemesis of the Jewish people, and Bavel, the place of the first exile (Zohar, Balak). It is as if to say that the combination of Balak and Bilaam served to intellectually confuse the Jewish people, which resulted in exile.

But what does this have to do with the daughters of Midian?

Bilaam was also a Midianite, and in many respects, a representative of his people. From the moment he was first approached by Balak's men, Bilaam struggled to both not anger G-d, yet, to also appear to others as if beyond G-d's control and authority. This is what gave Balak the confidence to contract Bilaam, in spite of warning signs that Bilaam was merely a "puppet" of Divine will.

It was a Midianite trait, passed on to the Jewish people through interaction with the daughters of Midian in Shittim. Hence, when the Jewish people come back with the "women of sin," it is as if they are making a statement: we are, and will be masters in our own homes. And, in spite of the fact that Moshe cuts them down for this attitude and their mistake, still, Reuven, Gad, and Menashe seek the same arrangement by choosing to remain outside of G-d's palace--Eretz Yisroel--and making it on their own.

Such an attitude, indicates the Zohar, is Amalekian in nature, and leads to exile. In exile, in a "land not our own," we are forced to be "guests" in someone else's home, so-to-speak. That is, until we yearn to be at home in the King's palace once again, willing to be "Makers-of-history" in G-d's master plan for creation, not our own, subjective version of it.

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## SEUDAH SHLISHI:

**Parashas Massey:** The Beginning and End of the Journey

*These are the journeys of the Children of Israel ...* (Bamidbar 33:1)

So begins the last parshah of the fourth book of the Torah.

"Why are these journeys recorded here? To make known the loving acts of the Omnipresent: although He decreed against them to make them move about and wander in the desert, don't think that they wandered from place to place the entire forty years and had no rest. Only forty-two journeys are mentioned here, and fourteen of them occurred in the first year before the decree ... Thus you find that for thirty-eight years they made only twenty journeys ..." (Rashi)

That may be true. However, there is a different meaning to the inclusion of these journeys, alluded to in the first four words of the parshah:

"These are the journeys of the Children of Israel ... This is an important introduction [telling us that,] had it not been for the sin of the golden calf, all four kingdoms (exiles) would have been incorporated into the Egyptian exile. This is alluded to by the words, "These are the journeys of the Children of Israel" [whose first letters are: aleph, mem, bais, yud, the same] first letters of "Edom," "Madai," "Bavel," and "Yavan." Hence, "This, Israel, is your god ..." (Shemos 32:4) caused all these journeys." (Asarah Ma'ameros)

These, of course, are the four exiles into which the Jewish people were prophesied to go. And, though we might have thought that the extra 38 years of wandering was the result of the sin of the spies, it turns out that they, and the subsequent exiles of the Jewish people throughout history to this very day, are, in the end, the result of the sin of the golden calf.

This is what the Talmud means when it says,

No punishment comes to Israel without a little payment for the sin of the golden calf. (Sanhedrin 102a)

As if to say, it is only because of the sin of the golden calf that the Jewish people ever find themselves in a predicament that results in any kind of suffering. Had it not been for that "original sin," the Jewish people would have happily received the first set of Tablets, achieved spiritual perfection, and would have ushered in the Days of Moshiach. (Therefore, it is no coincidence to hear from the Arizal that the sin of the golden calf was a repeat of the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.)

Perhaps this is also why there were exactly forty-two stops in the desert, which, the Pri Tzaddik says, correspond to the forty-two letter name of G-d. The Erev Rav (Mixed Multitude) enticed the Jewish people with the words, "This, Israel, is your god that took you out of Egypt." Each of the forty-two journeys and destinations, therefore, were a way to move away from that false line of thinking to reconnect to the real G-d and savior from Egypt servitude.

Likewise, each exile that followed over the millennia (including the exile of Edom, which we are presently living through), also comes to rectify the mistake of the golden calf, and the Erev Rav's impact on Jewish belief in one G-d, the G-d of the Egyptian Redemption, the G-d of Torah from Mt. Sinai. Each redemption from each exile has been, in a very real sense, the acquisition of another few

letters of G-d's forty-two letter Name, just as each of the stops in the desert were as well.

The Final Redemption, undoubtedly, will come precisely at the very moment we "acquire" the final letters of that Name--the one prophets used to meditate on in order to enter a state of prophecy.

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## Melave Malkah:

Usually, I spread out the writing of the four divrei Torah over the course of four days. However, I find on these half-day fasts that I have more difficulty concentrating on learning than on the full-length fast days, so, I am going to write this vort today instead. It is just as well, since I planned to write about the "Three Weeks" anyhow, and it is more meaningful to do so tired and hungry from the fast.

The number "three" in hashkofah is always significant, for a variety of reasons. However, the "root" reason is the three hours that Adam HaRishon did not wait before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. He was commanded not to eat from it in the ninth hour of Day Six, and ate anyhow in the Tenth Hour. Divine permission to eat from the tree would have been forthcoming on Shabbos itself.

This is one of the central reasons why we don't eat the fruit of a tree during its first three years, and why the fruit at that stage is called "orlah," a concept which became a reality because of the sin. It is also a reason behind the widely accepted tradition of not cutting a boy's hair for the first three years of his life.

So why three weeks? Shiva Esrai b'Tammuz is a day on which many terrible things in history occurred to the Jewish nation. Tisha B'Av is a day on which even worse things happened to the Jewish people throughout history. However, not every year that something went wrong on Shiva Esrai b'Tammuz did something terrible happen on Tisha B'Av, and vice-versa. So why the intrinsic connection?

The answer is that, Kabbalistically, going back to before physical history began, the roots of the Three Weeks were already planted. It is, until Moshiach comes, a period that is rooted in spiritual darkness and therefore, fraught with physical danger. But above all, it is a period of time that corresponds to the three hours that Adam did not wait before eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, which plunged the world into spiritual darkness and physical exile.

Awareness and appreciation of this idea is an important first step to utilizing this unusual period of mourning as a rectification of Adam's mistake, and all the sins that have followed since. In this merit, may we merit to witness the comfort of Tzion and Yerushalayim--the ultimate end of the journey, at least for this stage of history.

Chazak!

Have a great Shabbos,  
Pinchas Winston

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