

WHAT I WANT, OR WHAT OTHERS WANT?

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

If a man makes a vow to God or makes an oath to prohibit himself, he shall not violate his word . . .
(Bamidbar 30:3)

Since it is a leap year, we are able to deal with Parashas Mattos on its own, and not together with Parashas Massey as is usually the case in a non-leap year.

The parshah deals with three major topics: the laws of vows, war of retribution against Midian for the Balak-Bilaam affair, and the request of the tribes of Reuven, Gad, and the half-tribe of Menashe to take up residence on the east side of the Jordan river. Seemingly they have little to do with each other, but in the world of Torah thought, that is never the case. Personally, I find it easiest to crack the code of connection by simply discussing each topic in some detail. Then the connection just seems to "float" to the top on its own.

The first topic is that of vows, which basically means promising to do something while invoking the Name of God. One of the Ten Commandments is to not take the Name of God in vain, the only sin, the Talmud explains, for which punishment is immediate. For the rest of the sins a person usually receives some grace time to consider what he has done and make amends for it. Anyone who takes such punishment seriously will take his oath seriously as well.

A neder, the Hebrew for "vow," has the power to make what otherwise might be permissible forbidden, albeit indirectly. In general you cannot use speech to make meat that is clearly kosher into something treif, unless one makes a vow not to eat it. For all intents-and-purposes, it becomes treif for the person who vowed since eating the meat would cause the Name of God to be used in vain.

If you analyze it, the entire strength of a neder is one's fear of God. To the extent that one is afraid to use God's Name in vain is the extent to which he will take his vow seriously. People who lack sufficient fear of God routinely use His Name in ways that might bear a heavy cost in life, and later on after death as well. For a neder to be real the heaviness of the reality of God has to be real to the person making the vow.

The question is why does a person have to make a vow in the first place? The Talmud says that someone who makes a vow is like one who has built an illicit altar to God. When the person fulfills his vow it is as if he has offered a sacrifice on it, making the sin even worse. As the Talmud points out in a few places, the Jewish nation having said "We will do and we will understand" upon receiving

the Torah should have been enough of a vow to keep us on the straight path.

The war against Midian was the Divine response to the drawing of the Jewish people towards illicit behavior and idol worship. It wasn't as if the Jewish people had been looking for either. It was the diabolical scheme of Bilaam took advantage of some vulnerabilities in the Jewish people that spiraled out of control until the entire affair became an unmitigated disaster.

The disaster did not end there. Even after surviving the first catastrophe, it spilled into a second one. After successfully defeating the Midianites in battle including the killing of Bilaam, the Jewish army made a critical error. They were supposed to have killed all of the Midianites, including, and perhaps especially, the women with whom the sin occurred in the first place.

Instead, they brought back the woman, to the shock of Moshe Rabbeinu:

Moshe, Elazar the kohen, and all princes of the community went out to meet them, outside the camp. Moshe became angry with the officers of the army, the commanders of thousands and the commanders of hundreds, who had returned from the campaign of war. Moshe said to them, "Did you allow all the females to live? They were the same ones who were involved with the Children of Israel on Bilaam's advice to betray God over the incident of Peor, resulting in a plague among the congregation of God." (Bamidbar 31:13-16)

In the final section of this week's parshah, there is the incredible episode involving the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and the half of the tribe of Menashe. Blessed with a lot of livestock they opted out of their inheritance in Eretz Yisroel in order to remain on the east side of the Jordan river. They chose the Diaspora over the holy and promised land.

Considering that the nation had wandered for 39 extra years in the desert because their ancestors had done similarly, Moshe became angry with them as well:

Moshe said to the descendants of Gad and the descendants of Reuven, "Shall your brothers go to war while you stay here? Why do you discourage the Children of Israel from crossing over to the land which God has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to explore the Land." (Bamidbar 32:6-8)

In the end, they got what they requested, albeit on condition that they fight along side the rest of the Jewish people in conquering the land. However, as the Midrash says, living on the east side of the Jordan river meant that they were the first to be exiled when the Assyrians later attacked the Jewish people. Kabbalah explains that in having their request fulfilled they postponed the Final Redemption for the entire Jewish people until this day.

As the Vilna Gaon explains, it takes 600,000 Jews (males between the ages of 20 and 60) to settle the land at one time to neutralize the Sitra Achra, a.k.a. the Accusing Angel, and bring the Final

Redemption. The one time in history it was really possible to do that was at that time in history. It was an opportunity that was squandered when these two-and-a-half tribes put their personal preferences ahead of the needs of the rest of the nation and history.

That is probably the best way to tie all three sections of the parshah together with a common theme. It is nice when what we want for ourselves is also the best thing for the rest of the nation as well, but sometimes it does not work out that way. In fact, very often it does not work out that way, forcing the person to make a decision that will either sacrifice himself or the nation.

On occasion the sacrifice is minimal in either case. Other times it is major, and when the sacrifice made is the wrong one it damages everyone, including history itself. The news is filled with stories of people who pursued the fulfillment of selfish dreams and as a result met with fatal endings, at great cost to themselves and others around them.

When I began writing this article I did not have the following example in mind. It came to me in the middle of writing this, and fit in perfectly with the message I was trying to communicate.

Anyone who has been to the Middle East, especially in the Arab sections, has probably seen men sitting around what looks like a large genie's bottle with rubber tentacles emanating out of it all around. At the other end of these "tentacles" is something that is put in the mouth for smoking purposes, something that, in English, is called "Huka."

Over the years, unfortunately, many Israeli youth have taken to Huka as well, and it is not unusual to find them sitting side-by-side with Arab customers in an Arab restaurant or store partaking of the Arab custom. Many have even bought their own Huka in order to do it at home as well.

In the best of times it is not a good practice, for security reasons as well as for health reasons. It is certainly a terrible practice when a war is going on against the Arabs, and kidnappings of Jews by Arabs are becoming more prevalent. Even if everyone in the room smoking Huka is recognizable, it takes but one stranger, looking for innocent and unsuspecting Jews who can be taken in a moment and without a trace, to greatly increase the risk factor.

Yet, they still go. And the ones who do not eat kosher still go to their restaurants, not considering how their deaths or just their disappearances would change the entire country, especially their families. Throwing caution to the wind rarely only affects the person taking the risk, and a person has to consider that before they take it, not matter how much the yetzer hara pushes them to do it.

This rule about social and national responsibility applies on many levels. For example, a person may not have any desire to live in Eretz Yisroel today, especially if he is satisfying his own personal goals in the Diaspora. Nevertheless, he has to ask himself how much his personal pursuits are costing the nation, especially in terms of the Final Redemption. We might as well ask the question now because they're going to ask us about it later, on our final day of judgment.

This is the flip side of war. We can all see how war unifies the nation, at least many parts of it. If we

look closer we can see that it does this because of something else it does: it forces individuals to put the needs of the nation before their own. United we stand, divided we fall, and no time is this clearer than during wartime.

But who wants war? If it takes war to make us put the needs of the many ahead of the needs of the few then that is what we're going to get. It's inevitable, for two important reasons, one human and one Divine. Selfish people create selfish societies which creates a selfish world and results in selfish wars. That's the human reason.

From the Divine point of view man was made in the image of God to act Godly, which, by definition, means to put the needs of the many before the needs of the individual. When we do that, God smiles down on mankind. When we don't, then He creates situations that force us to act more Godly, like war, for example.

The world is filled with war and promises to become even more chaotic. The best way to mitigate the situation is to at least start considering where we are letting our own personal goals interfere with those of the nation, and more importantly, with those of God. That is the vision, the outlook a person needs to develop.

Text

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