

RAMBAN: WHY WAS PARSHAS NEDARIM GIVEN OVER SPECIFICALLY TO "ROSHEI HAMATOS?"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion: Tape # 108, Toiveling Dishes. Good Shabbos!

Ramban: Why was Parshas Nedarim given over specifically to "Roshei haMatos?"

The beginning of Parshas Matos contains the laws of Nedarim [vows]. The beginning of the parsha is unique in that it begins with the words "Speak to the heads of the tribes saying..." When Moshe Rabbenu relayed most of the Torah, he did so either directly to the children of Israel (Daber el bnei Yisroel) or to the Kohanim (Emor el haKohanim). This is the only parsha that was given over specifically to the Roshei haMatos [Heads of the Tribes]. Why was this parsha of Nedarim different?

The early commentaries themselves were bothered by this question. The Ramban, in his commentary on Chumash, suggests that Nedarim should not be said over to the masses. The concept of taking oaths and vows is very serious, and when people will hear that you can be "matir" [release] a neder or that a father or husband can be "mefir" [nullify] a neder, people will come to take the matter lightly. Consequently, according to Ramban, these laws were only given to the Roshei HaMatos, the leaders of the nation, who could be trusted to deal with these concepts with the level of sophistication and reverence that they deserved.

The Chasam Sofer, however, offers a different answer to this question. He suggests that the leaders of the nation had a special need to be aware of these laws. He quotes the story of Yiftach the Shofet [leader of Israel during the time of Judges (Shoftim Chapter 11)], who made a vow in haste to offer as a sacrifice to G-d the first thing that came to greet him when he returned victoriously from battle. The first thing that came to greet him was his own daughter!.

The Medrash in Bereishis Rabba asks why Yiftach didn't go to Pinchas [the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) at that time] and have his vow "permitted" through the vehicle of "Hataras Nedarim" [releasing a vow]? The Medrash answers that Pinchas was waiting for Yiftach to come to him (Pinchas being the leading scholar of the day) and Yiftach was waiting for Pinchas to come to him (he being the chief

political and military officer in the country). While each was trying to protect the honor of their own position, the daughter lived in solitude.

The Medrash says that both Yiftach and Pinchas were punished for this: Yiftach lost his life to a terrible disease where limbs started falling off one by one (as it says "he was buried in the cities (plural) of Gilead") and Pinchas lost his ability to receive Ruach HaKodesh [Divine Inspiration]. The Chasam Sofer says this could be why the Torah was particularly concerned that the leaders be extremely careful and well-versed in the laws of Nedarim.

Two observations are to be made on this teaching:

- 1.** We cannot project our own petty midos on people of the stature of Pinchas and Yiftach. Although the Medrash does say that in this situation they were punished for their actions, we must never confuse our own petty shortcomings with those of people who were Gedolei Olam [unimaginably great leaders (literally "greats of the world")].
- 2.** Many times people do things because their Kavod [honor] was slighted. They do these things even though doing so is clearly to the detriment of both them and their own families. It is not unheard of for a person to sacrifice his own welfare or the welfare of his children on the altar of his ego. When a person's Kavod is affected, he can literally let his own children die.

We as human beings have a passion for kavod. The older we get the more we have a tendency to be particular about our honor. A person needs an independent opinion to turn to -- be it his Rebbe (teacher), his Rav, his Rosh Yeshiva, or his good friend -- who can open his eyes to his own blindness regarding matters of Kavod. Only an independent opinion can help prevent a person from leading himself to self-destructive action or inaction.

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Transcribed by David Twersky; Seattle, Washington.

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Yerushalayim.