

POWER OF SPEECH MORE POWERFUL THAN THE STICK / LEARN FROM OUR EXPERIENCES

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #996 – Tevilas Keilim - The Sticker That Wasn't Removed.

Note: The shiur will now pause for the summer break. The next shiur is planned for Parshas Shoftim. Good Shabbos!

Moshe Teaches the Roshei HaMatos A Lesson He Learned the Hard Way

I will be quoting two beautiful insights this week that I saw in the sefer Limudei Nissan by Rav Nissan Alpert.

Parshas Matos begins with *nedarim* [vows]. The parsha begins in an unusual manner. Most Torah sections dealing with halacha begin with the words "*Vayedaber Hashem el Moshe laymor*" [and Hashem spoke to Moshe saying...] However, this parsha begins with the words "*Vayedaber Moshe el roshei hamatos l'bnei Yisrael laymor...*" [Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of the Children of Israel saying...] [Bamidbar 30:2]. Certainly, Moshe heard these laws from the Master of the Universe, but the *pasuk* is written as if Moshe Rabbeinu himself was legislating these laws and passing them down to the leadership to teach the Children of Israel.

Secondly, the term "*roshei hamatos*" [heads of the tribes] is itself very unique. Usually the Torah refers to these individuals as "princes" [*Nesiim*]. Every tribe had its *Nasi*. Why does the Torah refer to the *Nesiim* here as the "*Roshei Hamatos*?"

To answer this question, Rav Nissan Alpert cites an issue raised by the Rashbam in Parshas Chukas. Parshas Chukas contains the incident of *Mei Meriva*, where following the death of Miriam, the people did not have water. They complained to Moshe Rabbeinu and Moshe, upon Divine direction, went to the rock. However, rather than speak to the rock, Moshe struck it. Because of that incident, Moshe and Aharon could not go into Eretz Yisrael.

The *pasuk* in Parshas Chukas says something strange in describing G-d's instructions to Moshe. It

says, "Take the staff and gather together the assembly, you and Aharon your brother, and you shall speak to the rock before their eyes and it shall give its waters." [Bamidbar 20:8]. Hashem told Moshe to take the staff and speak to the rock. Many of the commentaries, including the Rashbam, ask the question -- if the Almighty's intent all along was that Moshe speak to the rock, why does He begin his directive with the words "take the staff?" It is almost like the *Ribono shel Olam* is setting up Moshe Rabbeinu for failure!

The answer that Rav Nissan Alpert gives (which is not the answer the Rashbam gives) is that the Almighty was trying to give Moshe a message, which he did not recognize, until it was too late. After the sin of *Mei Meriva*, Moshe Rabbeinu retroactively understood what the Ribono shel Olam was trying to tell him and first realized the nature of his mistake.

The Ribono shel Olam was trying to teach Moshe Rabbeinu a lesson in how to deal with *Klal Yisrael*. It is possible to get people to do things by one of two ways: One way is to force, coerce, or beat them with a stick. The other way is to speak to and influence through the power of words. The Almighty was trying to teach Moshe that the second way is preferable. This is akin to the commonly heard expression "the pen is mightier than the sword." Yes, it is possible to get people to do things by the force of the sword, but the "pen" -- ideas that convey convincing arguments can be mightier than the sword.

What is true of the "pen" is also true of the spoken word. Speech too can be mightier than the sword. Via the spoken word, a person can have tremendous influence on people. So the Holy One Blessed be He told Moshe Rabbeinu "take the staff...and speak to the rock" to teach Moshe a lesson: Yes, take the stick, but I want you to do something that is more powerful than using a stick -- namely speak to the rock!

After the fact, Moshe Rabbeinu realized his mistake. The *Ribono shel Olam* was not trying to trick him. He was teaching him a lesson that every leader needs to know. Every Rebbi needs to know this. Every Rav needs to know this. The lesson is that the stick is not necessary. A person should "speak to the rock." The lesson that through speaking one can accomplish more that through physical force is a lesson Moshe Rabbeinu learned in a most painful way.

The parsha of *nedarim* is the Torah section that highlights the power of human speech. A glatt kosher corn beef sandwich can meet the finest standards of kashrus preparation, but if someone makes a *neder* forbidding it to himself and then eats it -- this is as big a transgression as eating pig. The Torah grants a person a tremendous power to effect halachic imperative through his speech. Likewise, if I take an oath that I **will** eat a corned beef sandwich tomorrow and I fail to eat it, I have transgressed a *lav* (a negative Torah prohibition, i.e. -- "Do not"). This is the power of speech.

That is why the parsha begins with the words "And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes". Who knew this lesson -- about the power of speech -- better than anyone else did? Unfortunately, Moshe Rabbeinu learned the lesson the hard way by not adequately considering the power of speech

(when he opted to strike the rock rather than speaking to it).

He spoke to the "*Roshei HaMatos*" -- why does it say "*Roshei HaMatos*" and not "*Nesiim*?" It is because *Matos* has a dual meaning. *Matos* can mean tribes and it can mean stick. Moshe Rabbeinu is telling these future leaders of the nation "I am about to die. You will lead these people in the next generation. You can lead them with the power of the rod or the power of the tongue." Moshe wants them to know that the power of speech is more effective than the power of the stick. Therefore, he addresses them as the "*Roshei HaMatos*" indicating to them that although they have the power of the stick (*mateh*) they should try to influence the people by the power of speech, which is even more powerful than that of the stick.

The Lesson That Life Is A Journey -- 42 Chapters

The second comment from [Limudei Nissan](#) comes from Parshas Massei.

The Torah lists the forty-two encampments that *Klal Yisrael* stopped at during their journey from Egypt into *Eretz Yisrael*. This information seems like irrelevant ancient history. It happened once and it is never going to happen again. Yet the Torah spends a considerable amount of *pesukim* telling us every stop, utilizing the formula "They traveled from A and they encamped at B; and they traveled from B and encamped at C; and so forth" cataloging 40 years and 42 stops of travels in the wilderness.

This seems superfluous, not needed, and irrelevant. This is of course impossible to say about *pesukim* in the Torah. No letter in the Torah is irrelevant. So what is the lesson of the 42 encampments that the Torah is teaching us?

Many of the names of these stops call to mind less than stellar moments in the history of the Jewish people. For instance, the *pasuk* writes, "And they traveled from *Refidim* and they encamped in the Wilderness of Sinai." [Bamidbar 33:15] Why was that location called *Refidim*? Chazal say, "*she'Rafu yedeihem min haTorah*" (they failed to learn properly) and as a result they were attacked by Amalek. This is not one of the more glorious moments in the history of *Klal Yisrael*.

"And they traveled from the Wilderness of Sinai and they encamped at *Kivros Ha'Taavah*" [Bamidbar 33:16]. *Kivros Ha'Taavah* means the burial place of those who lusted. They complained for food and they were punished. There are several other places with similarly negative associations.

How do people look back on the less than glorious moments in their life's history? The tendency of human beings is to forget it and to wipe the slate clean. "I do not want to remember all those incidents and places where I tripped up." The Torah says "No." It is important to remember our past even if that past includes incidents that do not make us proud.

The only way we will know how to be better in the future is to learn from our past. To paraphrase the American philosopher George Santayana "Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it." The reason the Torah catalogs the 42 encampments is to teach us: Yes, there were moments in your past in which you fell down, but you were able to bounce back from those moments. Yes, there were moments in your history in which you did not act properly, but you were able to pull yourselves out by your strength of character. Those are important lessons that a person has to know. A person is the sum total of his experiences -- good and bad. To have an attitude "I just want to forget about the past" is going to doom a person to failure again.

The Torah feels it is worthwhile to enumerate the 42 encampments to teach this lesson -- that life is a journey. The journey is sometimes not a straight line -- it has ups and downs, peaks and valleys. There are glorious moments and less than glorious moments. We should not erase any of them from our memory banks.

Whenever I read Parshas Massai and the enumeration of the 42 encampments, it reminds me on an incident that happened with me. Someone once asked me a *shaylah* [question seeking practical advice]. I do not know if I answered him properly, but based on Parshas Massai this is what my thoughts were:

I knew someone who had a child who had a very difficult time becoming engaged and married. This can be a very trying experience -- for the parents and certainly for the young adults themselves. In the course of the several years that it took this person to become engaged, the person's parents compiled a loose-leaf notebook of all the different suggestions for *shidduchim* that were proposed and considered over the years. The notebook was not as thick as a Chumash but it was quite a thick compendium. The person said to himself that when his child finally becomes engaged, "I am going to burn this notebook."

I do not know if they still do this today, but at one time there was such a thing as a "mortgage burning ceremony" when a long term mortgage was finally paid off. The borrower would be so thrilled to be finished with monthly payments on this 30-year mortgage that he would physically burn the mortgage document, celebrating the fact that he now fully owned his home. This is how the parent felt -- "When my child finally gets engaged, I'm going to burn this notebook!"

I told him that I was not sure that this was the correct Torah *hashkafa* [philosophy]. I told him that this experience was a journey in which there were ups and downs (probably mostly downs), but it was a journey that a person hopefully grew from. It is not something to destroy as if it never happened. This is the lesson of the 42 encampments. It would be much more efficient to say, "They left Egypt; they came to *Eretz Yisrael*; it took them 39 years, but they finally made it." However, the Torah does not record it that way. The Torah writes each of the stops and alludes to what happened at each of those stops. We recall the troubles they had at the various stops along the way, their defeats, and the way they behaved. All of this is important. These events made *Klal Yisrael* and a person's own

history makes him.

Therefore, I advised this parent that in spite of the fact that there were painful moments associated with this notebook, the chronicles of the trying period in which his child was trying to find their destined partner is nevertheless not something that should be burnt. They should be stored and be available so that from time to time it will be possible for both the child and the parent to say, "Look what I went through and look from where I have come."

Transcribed by David Twersky; Jerusalem DavidATwersky@gmail.com

Technical Assistance by Dovid Hoffman; Baltimore, MD dhoffman@torah.org

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissochar Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Series on the weekly Torah portion. A listing of the halachic portions for Parshas Mattos-Maasei is provided below:

- # 689 -Leaving Eretz Yisroel
- # 996 - Tevilas Keilim - The Sticker That Wasn't Removed and Other Tevila Issues

A complete catalogue can be ordered from the Yad Yechiel Institute, PO Box 511, Owings Mills MD 21117-0511. Call (410) 358-0416 or e-mail tapes@yadyechiel.org or visit <http://www.yadyechiel.org/> for further information.