

Parshas Matos and Masei

This week's joint parshas conclude the fourth book, Bamidbar. Matos (tribes) begins with oaths that a person takes on and continues the topic of the battles with Midian- as a punishment for their involvement in the Bilam inspired Bal Peor sin with Zimri and the general debauchery perpetrated by Bilam as a way of getting the Jews to be cursed. We learn some koshering laws with regards to utensils- which is appropriately connected to the passages relating to spoils of war. Some of the spoils could be utensils for which there is value, as a person can "kasher" them. Reuven and Gad who were overflowing with livestock requested from Moshe about a certain parcel of land, which Moshe rejected and then there was a negotiation which Moshe agreed to on condition that they fight with the rest of the Jews in battle. Parshas Masei (lit. journeys) highlights the travels of the Jews in the desert from leaving Egypt up until where they were. Perek 34 talks about the boundaries of the Land of Israel, the cities of Refuge (and why a person goes to the city of refuge i.e., unintentional murder). In 31:3, the Jews are armed for war, (HeiChaltzu) on which the Rebbe Rashab has a famous Mamer as a response to seeing two Jews (unintentional) action of not showing Ahvas Yisroel to one another. In the Mamer- the Rebbe Rashab explain that the war against Midian (meaning strife) was a war of baseless hatred (Midian had no part in warring against the Jews, they jumped on the Moav bandwagon). Us Jews must arm ourselves against baseless hatred to one another (one can say that this mamer is a seminal work on loving a fellow Jew).

One of the most interesting reflections of human psychology (to me) is evident from this week's parsha. In 35:25, the unintentional murderer is freed from the city of refuge when the Kohen Gadol passes away. Rashi explains a few reasons for the connection between the unintentional murderer's freedom and the Kohen Gadol's death. The first reason is the Kohen brings spirituality into this world whereas the negligent murderer removes spirituality from this world, the second explanation is that the Kohen Gadol should have prayed that this "misfortune should not have occurred to the Jews during his lifetime". Then Rashi explains the "anoointed" portion drawing from the Gemara in Makkos, to explain that the Kohen Gadol who is anoointed at the time of sentencing, not the murder taking place.

The psychology element, sourced in the Mishna in Makkos and cited in the Gemara daf 11a is that the mothers of the Kohen Gadol would provide meals to the murderers in the city of refuge to make them comfortable- to sway them not to pray for the premature death of their sons, so that they may be free. What the Rabbis are highlighting here, I believe is that humans will act out of self-interest when disconnected from the situation regardless of whether the person is wrong or right. Meaning, in the case of the city of refuge the unintentional murderer was in a situation of negligence resulting in death, and yet, to free himself he could pray for the death of the Kohen Gadol (another "unintentional death") for their own gain- i.e., just so they may be released from the city of refuge, without the consideration of the Kohen's value to the rest of the community.

Meaning the Torah doesn't hide the fact that humans have self-interests, that ought to be negated by the community leader's (i.e., in this case the Kohen Gadol's) prayers for the safety and security of the community. The gemara in Makkos doesn't explicitly resolve the issue, rather it brings aggadic explanations about the power of words, including the elder's response to Rabbi Yehuda who had heard in a lecture by Rava that even the prayers of the murderers are not baseless curses because the Kohen Gadol should have prayed on behalf of the community. This is fascinating. If the unintentional murder occurred, then the Kohen Gadol didn't pray enough, which means the prayers of the exiled murderer can come to fruition as another 'unintentional death', i.e., consequence of his lacking communal prayer. Which is why the gemara explains the Yerushalmi and Babylonian perspective on Toviya and Zigud, and Shechem and Mavgai- this is where someone did something wrong, but another person/community was punished. The Kohen Gadol's lack of prayer (or inappropriate prayer perhaps) opened 'pandora's box' for *unintentionally* bad things to befall the community, and therefore they are *unintentionally* at a disbenefit for it. One person's action or inaction is far more profound than one may think, and therefore one ought to think about the community (where possible). Furthermore, as is evident from the Rebbe Rashab's Mamer-that not thinking about one another (Ahvas Yisroel) can lead to community breakdown- especially if it is baseless hatred. The subtext of the reference to the prayers of the murderer and the mothers of the Kohen is such that even on a singular solo level, one must be careful about their selfishness, and wanton disregard for community issues.

Why is this important? We need leaders who daven on behalf of the community, but in a selfless method to help prevent negative things befalling the community. (I do not subscribe to the idea that this is causality, rather correlated, meaning it is an additional benefit of a leader of a community for their constituents is their prayer- there is a reference to a type of attitude). What can we do when there is no clear leader, or in our times where there is no agreed upon "Kohen Gadol" whose role it is to lead the community writ large, on an individualized basis we can adopt communal based prayers into our own, realizing that our own personal prayers ought not be purely selfish (at a cost to others), rather for the benefit of greater good. For example, I ought not pray that I make money at a direct cost to someone/something else.

This idea is largely stems from the idea of mutual exclusivity in religious practice (and other areas of life for that matter). Meaning, people may assume their success, and existence is an "only" when compared to a larger community of people. That is (I will elucidate) my wealth development can only come at a cost to someone else, or my religious practice is the correct way, in relation to others, and no other can possibly exist (this ties into the care of Ahvas Yisroel one must have). This is a false premise which the Torah and the Gemara realizes about people. Davening for your success, or desired outcome ought not come at the expense of others, and this ought to be contemplated in one's preparation for how they act. When the leaders are wayward- how much more so the constituents will feel it is correct to act this way. All of this is unintentional, and part of human psychology, which the Torah and Halacha

provides guidance to.^{1,2} The Mechilta explains, that the way the Luchos were written, “do not murder” lines up with “I am Hashem your G-d”, because murder (in any form) lowers the stature of Hashem. Therefore, prayer and guidance by the Kohen Gadol (especially against unintentional death) is paramount to communal affairs being on the righteous path and straight and narrow.

33:53 we are told to conquer the land, and the word used is “V’Horashtem”, which shares the root for inherit. Meaning, our right to the land isn’t by conquering, and therefore subject to dispute, it is because as Rashi in Bereishis 1:1 states, because Hashem created the world and promised this land to us, even if temporarily it is lived in by others. This means, and further substantiates the idea that is known, but

¹ An interesting anecdote- which may be apophenic (i.e. trying to show meaningful connection where there is none), is that right before the sugya of gemara discussing the Kohen Gadol’s responsibility for unintentional negative things befalling the Jews, there is a connection made between Torah and Tefillin (in regards to the parchment, and the sinews to sew the Tefillin, meaning the comparison is of Halachik status as most of what we know about Tefillin is Halacha L’Moshe M’Sinai). The Gemara compares Torah to Tefillin- and explains just as Tefillin is Halacha L’Moshe M’sinai for how to properly sew it with sinews and parchment, so too, how we prepare a Torah scroll is the same. (It also comes as part of a discussion of Yehoshua and the last 8 pesukim of the Torah, and Yehoshua possibly having done something incorrectly, which was not setting up cities of refuge once the Jews entered the land of Israel. The sugyas are connected, but this anecdote in the gemara is stuck in the middle of it.) The Mamer Isa B’Medrish Tehillim learned and sometimes said by Lubavitcher Bar Mitzvah aged boys explains according to Chassidus the connection of how (learning) Torah and Tefillin are equated (that is Hashem said to the Jews to put on Tefillin as a replacement for learning Torah- day and night,

ought to be imbued in us, that Hashem created the world and everything in it, and gave the Torah as the moral guidance for how to live, and therefore in order to remain on the right path we must daven and learn- a task not easily achieved- even if all we are doing is replacing learning with “putting on tefillin” (as I reference in the foot note).

The Haftarah this week, continues with the sections we read during the ‘3 weeks’, and is read from Yirmiyahu 2:4-28, 4:1-2 (with some communities adding from 3:4). The opening verses recount the early faith the Jews had to wander in the wilderness with a deep rooted connection to Hashem, which if followed back (in the time of Yirmiyahu) would prevent the prophecies from being fulfilled- even if Hashem loves us. The remaining pesukim reference replacing

because we don’t have time, i.e., we are involved in mundane activities such as working and cannot learn Torah day and night as required. The point I am trying to make here, is that even when we are involved in mundane activities, we need to surround ourselves with Torah and use the Torah as our guide. To me this means, even if we are physically leaderless in the current Golus (and I don’t mean there aren’t great Rabbinic authorities, there are disparate leaders who attract some people and not others, there is no singular consensus), we can remain guided by Torah and the Torah itself gives us options for how to surround ourselves in it and with it, even if in our day to day lives we don’t have ample time to commit to learning all day- such as putting on Tefillin as a replacement for learning Torah day and night (meaning some amount of time less than this).

² In the beginning of Matos Rashi on 30:2 explains that Moshe spoke directly with the heads of the tribes to explain that an ‘expert’ who is a Torah scholar can annul vows like a tribunal of 3 people. This ideally means on a spiritual level as well, just as a Tzaddik can annul a vow in the world, so too the Tzaddik can annul negative vows from Heaven.

Hashem with idolatrous ways (which is allegorically compared to adultery- between the Jews and other idols, as being unfaithful to Hashem). The rebuke against the Jews is further, that the replacement of Hashem was false and vain, where even the nations who served idols remained faithful to those deities, (it is a double chutzpa 1) the Jews stopped serving Hashem, but 2) they were unfaithful and replaced Hashem with another (false) deity.).

But the Haftora concludes 4:1 it is not too late to repent and Yirmiyahu begs the Jews to take an oath back to serving Hashem. The connection to the Parsha (in addition to being appropriate for the 3 weeks as a call for Jews to come back to Hashem³) would relate to 4:2 about taking oaths as the Parsha Matos opens. That means there are oaths to be taken which are positive and for positive outcomes- such as Yirmiyahu beseeching of the people. While on an outward community level there is a need to cleave to Hashem, there is the private oaths people ought to take to connect us back to Hashem. Just as the Torah morally calls out our desire to pray for our selfish needs at the expense of others⁴, but tells us the antidote, so too, must we try and pray for communal goodness to befall us, and surround ourselves with Torah- so that ultimately, we welcome Mashiach speedily in our days. This is a direct antidote to the primary reasons in the end why the Temples were destroyed. Through walking away from Hashem-we had baseless hatred toward one another (Sanhedrin), and that cascaded into the destruction. Meaning the

prophecies and wayward actions of the Jews, and baseless hatred for one another are all interconnected, as we see in the Parsha.

Good Shabbos.

³ Just as the prophecies of Yirmiyahu ended up coming to fruition (unfortunately) so too, we can logically conclude that the positive prophecies can and will also take place. The prophecies that give us hope, and guidance to bring Mashiach.

⁴ With the Kohen Gadol being irresponsible in prayer, and therefore responsible for the devolution of society, and that the Mothers had to bribe the murderers, who can pray for other negative things.