



Parshas Matos & Massei 2020, the value of discipline

The Parsha Perspective is dedicated in memory of Shlomo Ben Edward, may his soul be uplifted and his memory a blessing.

Our Parshas begins with Moshe teaching the leaders of each tribe many laws concerning oaths and promises. The Parsha recounts in detail the war against the country of Midian; this battle was in retaliation for the chaos they created amongst the Jewish nation.

Moshe gathered one thousand soldiers from each tribe and mounted an attack against Midian. They emerged victoriously and killed their kings and every fighting-age male, including Balaam, the non-Jewish prophet who tried to curse the Jewish people. When the soldiers returned from battle, they gave Moshe an exact total of the spoils of war and divided it equally amongst themselves.

The Parsha continues with the tribes of Reuven and Gad coming to Moshe with a strange request. They asked that their part of the land not be in Israel but on the other side of the Jordan River. They reasoned that there was an abundance of fields to feed their many flocks of sheep.

As expected, Moshe was upset with their request. He saw this petition as following the same footsteps of the spies who did not want to enter the land and discouraged the entire nation from doing so. The betrayal of the spies angered G-d immensely and had drastic consequences for the Jewish people. Nevertheless, Moshe took their wish into consideration.

Moshe returned to the tribes of Reuven and Gad with a compromise; they must fight along with the Jewish armies against the nations of Cana'an. Only after they are victorious and the ten tribes settle in the land of Israel can they go to their portion.

Moshe announced that they would sin before G-d if they did not accept this agreement. The tribes of Reuven and Gad took Moshe's compromise and later fought heroically with the rest of the Jewish armies. Moshe was attempting to keep the unity amongst the Jewish nation even if they were not in the geographic location.

However, a question comes to mind: The Parsha starts with Moshe telling the tribal leaders the laws of vows and promises. As the Pasuk writes (30:2-3) "*Moshe spoke to the leaders of the tribes saying, this is what G-d has commanded. If a man makes a vow to G-d or makes an oath to prohibit himself from something, he shall not violate his word; for whatever came out of his mouth, he shall do.*" But what prompted G-d to teach Moshe and the Jewish nation now the rules of vows and promises?

The Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the reason G-d gave the laws of vows now is that it was quoted in the ending Pasuk of last week's Parsha. As the Pasuk writes, (20:39), "*All of these (sacrifices) you shall give to G-d at the stated times. This is in addition to your vowed and freewill offerings, whether they are burnt offerings, meal offerings, or sacrifices of well-being.*" Since a vow sacrifice was mentioned, G-d taught the rest of the rules concerning oaths to Moshe Rabbeinu and the Jewish nation.

However, the Lubavitcher Rebbe gives a deeper and more profound explanation. He quotes an apparent contradiction with the concept of vows and promises in Judaism. The Mishnah in Pirkei Avos writes (3:13), "*Vows are a fence to abstinence*", denoting that vows and oaths are valuable tools to help a person refrain from physical indulgence and gratification.

But the Talmud Yerushalmi in Nedarim also cautions (9:A) that there is no reason to make more prohibitions in one's life, as the Torah already prohibited all that is forbidden to the Jewish people. This implies that Yerushalmi maintains that one should avoid vows and promises in their daily life.

The Rebbe answers this paradox by clarifying that the Yerushalmi and the Mishnah deal with two different people or even two separate stages in one's life. The Mishnah addresses people who cannot restrain themselves from physical indulgence, which interferes with their connection to G-d. Thus, the Mishnah's solution for this person is to make a vow on the permitted to help them regain their self-discipline.

But the Yerushalmi is talking to a person who can enjoy and utilize physical pleasures for a holy purpose. Such as preparing delicious foods and excellent wines for Shabbos meals to fulfill the vital Mitzvah of enjoying Shabbos. For this type of individual or stage in our lives, we must use this world's physicality to create a sanctuary and home for G-d in our midst.

This is why G-d gave the laws of vows at this time, for the Jewish nation was about to wage war with the people of Midian. A nation who made many people, including leaders, sin in a manner that angered G-d and brought death upon the Jewish people.

G-d is cautioning those who could not handle the temptation of Midian. Do not go to war with Midian; instead, stay back and work on regaining your self-discipline and control. But if you were one of the people who controlled their attraction to the Midianites, go to war and avenge your brothers and sisters. Fight to bring back the holiness and sanctity to the children of G-d.

In our daily life, it is imperative that we be able to take a good look at one's self and take stock of what needs to be worked on. Subsequently, apply the necessary effort to affect change in your life. Discipline is the bridge between achieving your goals and accomplishing your potential.

***“Discipline is choosing between what you want now
and what you want most.”***

-Abraham Lincoln

*Have a meaningful Shabbos,
Rabbi Sholom Yemini*