



Parshas Matos & Massei 2021, not just words

This week's Parsha Perspective is in loving memory of Shlomo Ben Edward, Edward Ben Efraim & in honor of the Refuah Shlema of Shaul Ben Berta, Sasson Bezalel Ben Batia & Yirachmiel Daniel Ben Tova Basha.

Our Parshas begin 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 Canaan. 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: Our Parsha begins with Moshe teaching the laws of vows and promises to the tribal leaders. As the Pasuk writes, "*Moshe spoke to the heads of each tribe saying: This is what G-d has commanded: If a man makes a vow to G-d or takes an oath on himself, he shall not break his pledge.*"

But why does Moshe specifically address the leaders of each tribe rather than the nation as a whole? We do not see in other Torah portions that Moshe specially addressed the leaders of each tribe. What do these particular laws have to do with the tribal leaders?!

The Rabbienu Bachya (*Rav Bachya Ben Asher, a Spanish commentary*) answers this question by looking at the end of last week's Torah portion. The Parsha concludes with the many extra sacrifices that can be offered on a communal level. Since the leader of the tribe is the person who would initiate the offering of the collective sacrifice, Moshe spoke individually to them.

We see this earlier in the book of Bamidbar during Parshas Nasso, the longest Torah portion. It has one hundred and seventy-six Pasukim because it details the sacrifices given by each tribal leader. Since they represented their tribe, the Torah reiterated each sacrifice to show that all tribes are equal and of the same importance to G-d.

However, the Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh, Rav Chaim Ibn Attar, a Moroccan commentary and Kabbalist, gives a deeper and more profound explanation.

He quotes the Talmud in Chagigah (10a) *“according to Shmuel, even if one does not verbalize a promise but keeps it in their mind, they still obligated to fulfill it or have nullified.”* Similarly, Rabbi Yehushua writes (**Chagigah 10a**), *“a promise made out of anger must be annulled or fulfilled.”*

The Ohr Hachaim explains that Moshe spoke specifically with the tribal leaders to teach the nation about the power of speech. Moshe wanted the head of each tribe to talk individually with their tribe about the strength of their words. Even if words are said by mistake or in anger, they still can force an obligation on a person. The promise remains and holds until they are revoked by a Jewish court.

The Ohr Hachaim continues that the Torah bestows immense force and strength to the spoken word. As we see the punishment of speaking badly about another person in Parshas Tazria and Metzora. They are punished with Tzara’as-leprosy, a spiritual ailment that manifests itself in a physical form. And to return back to their communities, they must undergo a rigorous process of purification.

Moshe wanted the leader of each tribe to convey to his people the significance and consequences of the spoken word.

In our daily life, it is imperative that we understand our words do not only influence other people’s actions but also our destiny. Studies show that people who use positive language tend to be more happy and prosperous and even recover from illness quicker. We must use positive words even when faced with dire situations, not only because it will keep our spirits alive but help us achieve the best possible results.

“Be careful with your words. Once they are said, they can only be forgiven, not forgotten.”

*Have a meaningful Shabbos,
Rabbi Sholom Yemini*