**S.A.L.T. PARASHAOT MATOT-MASEI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**This week's SALT shiurim are dedicated in memory of my grandfather   
Rav Yehuda Leib Silverberg z"l, whose yahrzeit is  
22 Tamuz, July 16**.

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Refua sheleima to

Malka Sarel bat Batya

and

Yosef ben Gracia,

the 450th! kidney donor/recipient team

arranged by Matnat Chaim.

May they be an inspiration to us all!

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Masei introduces the *mitzva* of *arei miklat* – the designation of cities as places of refuge for inadvertent killers, to protect them from vengeful relatives of the victim. *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to set aside six such cities, three in *Eretz Yisrael* proper, and another three on the eastern bank of the Jordan River, which were settled by Reuven, Gad and Menashe. The Gemara in Masekhet Makkot (9b) tells that the two sets of cities were parallel to one other. Meaning, the three cities on either side of the Jordan River were aligned from north to south, parallel to the three cities on the opposite side of the river. In describing this alignment, the Gemara comments, “They were parallel to one another like two rows in a vineyard.”

We might wonder whether there is perhaps specific significance to the analogy to a vineyard. Why would the Gemara have found it appropriate to liken the two “rows” of *arei miklat* to parallel rows of a vineyard?

Yeshayahu, in one of his more famous prophecies (5:1-7), compares the ideal condition envisioned for *Benei Yisrael* to a vineyard. He speaks of God creating *Am Yisrael* like a person planting a vineyard, investing a great deal of effort to ensure that everything would be perfect, clearing the ground, planting, and even building a press to produce delicious wine from the grapes yielded by the vines. The prophet then proceeds to bemoan the fact that despite the farmer’s taking every precaution to ensure the vineyard’s success, the grapes were sour. This was God’s way of lamenting the sinfulness of the nation that He had tended to and cared for with such love and affection, anticipating their growth into a special people that would live in faithful devotion to His values and principles. His high hopes, so-to-speak, we shattered, as the nation He “planted” with such care ended up turning “sour,” as the people became sinful.

The image of a vineyard, then, is associated with the ideal condition towards which we ought to strive, our nation’s realizing its mission to serve as a model of Godliness to all mankind. A vineyard represents the goal that we, God’s chosen nation, must endeavor to achieve, the goal of producing spectacular “wine,” of becoming a nation that would bring joy, peace and righteousness to a difficult world.

With this in mind, we can perhaps suggest a possible explanation for the Gemara’s comparison between the “rows” of *arei miklat* and the rows of a vineyard. *Chazal* might be alluding to the fact that even under the ideal, pristine conditions represented by a vineyard, we must deal with unfortunate circumstances such as accidental murder. The ideal condition is not one in which there are no difficult problems, but rather one in which difficult problems are addressed in a responsible, serious and ethical manner. If we think of the “vineyard,” of the ideal Torah life, as a perfect reality where nothing ever goes wrong, where no challenges ever present themselves, then we run the risk of despairing and giving up on the whole enterprise once we realize that such a reality does not and will not exist. The “vineyard” that we are to plant, the ideal religious life towards which we are to strive, requires hard work and often presents difficult situations for us to confront using the timeless wisdom, values and principles of the Torah.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Matot the basic laws concerning the process of what is colloquially called “*kashering*,” whereby a utensil that had been used with non-kosher food is purged so it may then be considered permissible for use. These laws were presented following *Benei Yisrael*’s battle against Midyan, from which the soldiers returned with the Midyanites’ utensils, which needed to be “kashered” before they could be used. The Torah tells that upon the soldiers’ return, Elazar, the *kohen gadol*, addressed them and presented the basic guidelines for making these utensils permissible.

Rashi (31:21), citing the *Sifrei*, comments that these laws were presented by Elazar, and not by Moshe, because Moshe forgot them. Several verses earlier (31:14), we read that Moshe had become angry at the generals who led the battle against Midyan, for failing to adhere to God’s commands. Rashi writes that as a result of becoming angry, Moshe forgot the laws of “*kashering*,” and so they were taught to the soldiers by Elazar.

Surprisingly, *Chazal* elsewhere find fault in Elazar’s relaying this information in Moshe’s presence. In Masekhet Eiruvin (63a), the Gemara comments that a “*moreh halakha bi-fnei rabo*” – somebody who teaches *Halakha* in his rabbi’s presence – is punished, and it draws proof from Elazar. For teaching the *halakhot* of non-kosher utensils in Moshe’s presence, the Gemara comments, Elazar was “demoted,” as he was to have served as Yehoshua’s halakhic mentor, but in the end Yehoshua never needed to consult with him.

The question naturally arises as to whether these two rabbinic passages can be reconciled. If Elazar was needed to relay the information regarding “*kashering*” due to Moshe’s temporary lapse, could he be accused of usurping his rabbi’s role and of presumptuously teaching in his presence?

The Maharsha explains that Elazar acted improperly in that he should have waited for Moshe’s anger to subside, at which point he would have been able to present these *halakhot*. Although Moshe was temporarily incapable of teaching, Elazar acted too quickly by jumping in to teach in Moshe’s place.

It emerges, according to the Maharsha, that both Moshe and Elazar acted inappropriately in this story: Moshe was wrong for reacting angrily, and Elazar was wrong for not allowing Moshe the time he needed to overcome his anger. Just as we must try to avoid anger, we must also try to tolerate other people’s anger, to understand that people sometimes lose their grip on their emotions and need time to collect themselves. We learn from Moshe’s mistake of the need to avoid anger even when other people act wrongly, and we learn from Elazar’s mistake of the need for patience when people around us are angry, and to allow them the time they need to regain their composure.

Monday

We read in Parashat Matot of God’s command to Moshe to wage war against the nation of Midyan, a command which is followed by God’s pronouncement that Moshe would die: “Take the Israelites’ revenge from the Midyanites; afterward, you will be gathered unto your nation” (31:2).

Rashi (31:3), citing the *Sifrei*, understands this to mean that Moshe’s death depended on the successful waging of this war; meaning, Moshe was guaranteed that he would not leave this world before this battle of revenge was fought. As such, Moshe could have delayed his passing by delaying the fulfillment of this command, and waiting before dispatching soldiers to fight against Midyan. Nevertheless, Rashi observes, Moshe acted promptly to organize the military campaign, without any delay whatsoever, eager as he was to fulfill the Almighty’s wish – even at the cost of hastening his death.

We generally make our decisions in life based on considerations of personal gain. Whether it’s the major decisions we need to make, such as choosing a career, or smaller decisions like how to spend an hour of free time, we tend to base our choices on what suits our personal preferences and what would yield profitable gain and enjoyment. *Chazal* here teach us, in an especially dramatic way, that we must be prepared to sacrifice and compromise our own personal interests for the sake of doing the right thing and fulfilling the will of God. Of course, we are entitled and expected to care for our own basic necessities, and should not endanger our personal wellbeing or basic stability in life for lofty, idealistic causes. However, we must learn from *Chazal*’s depiction of Moshe that we must be prepared to undertake worthwhile and important tasks even when this does not serve our personal interests, even when this entails a degree of personal sacrifice. The question of how much we stand to gain by the endeavor should not be the sole factor that we take into account when considering whether or not to pursue it. At times we need to set aside our own interests and wishes for the sake of an important cause, and we must live our lives with a readiness to make these sacrifices when necessary in order to embark upon meaningful and worthwhile goals.

Tuesday

Parashat Masei begins with the listing of all the places where *Benei Yisrael* encamped over the course of their forty-year journey from Egypt until the banks of the Jordan River. Rashi, opening his commentary to this parasha, cites two different reasons for why the Torah found it necessary to present this list, the second of which is taken from the *Midrash Tanchuma* (33:3): “This is comparable to a king whose son was ill, and he brought him to a distant place to cure him. When they returned, his father began counting all the stations, saying, ‘Here we slept,’ ‘He we were cold,’ ‘Here your head hurt’…”

Rashi does not cite the next sentence in the *Midrash Tanchuma*, which explains this analogy: “So did the Almighty say to Moshe: Count for them all the places where they angered Me.” According to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, then, the purpose of this list is to serve as a reminder of *Benei Yisrael*’s sins in the desert, all the occasions where they complained, protested, rebelled and disobeyed.

It is clear from the analogy to the father and his ailing child that the objective of this account of the nation’s sins is not to condemn the people for their misdeeds, but to the contrary, to reflect upon the journey they had completed. This list, according to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, is God’s way of telling *Benei Yisrael*, “Look how far you have come.” Like the father and child celebrating the child’s health by reminiscing about the pain and hardships he had endured but are now just a memory, similarly, God reminisced about *Benei Yisrael*’s wrongdoing as a way of celebrating their progress and commending them for the process of growth they had successfully undergone.

This Midrashic passage is a powerful statement about the proper perspective we ought to have on our mistakes and failings. Certainly, we must not underestimate the gravity of wrongdoing, just as God severely punished *Benei Yisrael* for the sins they committed in the wilderness. At the same time, however, the *Midrash Tanchuma*’s analogy teaches us to look upon our failings as stations, as stages along the journey of life which, after the fact, help us reach our goals. We are to use our mistakes as catalysts for growth, such that in the future we can reflect upon them and see how they moved us forward and brought us closer to where we want to be. The Midrash teaches us to neither forget about our failures or wallow in guilt over them. We should instead use them as learning opportunities which help us grow and improve, and thus transform them into significant stations and turning points along our journey of life.

Wednesday

Parashat Masei tells of several commands that God issued in anticipation of *Benei Yisrael*’s entry into the Land of Israel, including the designation of special cities to serve as places of refuge for people who accidentally killed and may be targeted by the victim’s relatives (chapter 35). The Torah states (35:13-14) that six cities should be designated as *arei miklat* (cities of refuge), three on either side of the Jordan River. Earlier (35:6), we read that these six cities were among the forty-eight cities throughout the Land of Israel that were earmarked for the tribe of Levi.

Surprisingly, the Gemara in Masekhet Makkot (10a) comments that although the Torah appears to indicate that only six Levite cities functioned as *arei miklat*, in truth, this role was served by all forty-eight Levite cities. The difference between the six primary *arei miklat* and the other forty-two, the Gemara explains (citing Abayei), is that the six primary cities protected inadvertent killers even *she-lo mi-da’at* (“unknowingly”), meaning, even if the killer arrived at the city without the intention of seeking refuge. In the other forty-two cities, the killer was protected from vengeful relatives of the victim only if he went there intentionally for this purpose. Later (Makkot 13a), the Gemara adds another distinction, according to one view among the *Tanna’im*. The Mishna records a debate among the *Tanna’im* as to whether inadevertent killers seeking refuge in an *ir miklat* were required to pay rent to their Levite landlords. Rabbi Yehuda maintained that the refugees were indeed required to pay for their living quarters, whereas Rabbi Meir held that the Levite homeowners offered them living space free of charge. The Gemara clarifies that this debate refers only to the forty-two secondary *arei miklat*. In the six primary cities, however, even Rabbi Yehuda agrees that the refugees were entitled to reside there without pay. Thus, according to Rabbi Yehuda, the issue of rent marks a second point of distinction between these two groups of cities.

Two commentators to the Chumash – the *Or Ha-chayim* (35:6) and the *Panim Yafot* (35:14) – also note a third distinction. Namely, if no room was left for refugees in one of the six primary *arei miklat*, then the permanent Levite residents of the city would have to leave in order to make room to accommodate inadvertent killers seeking refuge. Since these cities served primarily as *arei miklat*, and served only secondarily as places of residence for the tribe of Levi, the Levite townspeople had to give way to accommodate inadvertent killers. The other forty-two Levite cities, however, served primarily as places of residence for the *Leviyim*, and thus when room ran out, inadvertent killers seeking refuge would have go to one of the other *arei miklat*.

Yet another difference between the two groups of *arei miklat* is noted by Rav Meir Simcha Ha-kohen, in his *Meshekh Chokhma* (35:13). He writes that the six primary *arei miklat* functioned in this capacity even if no *Leviyim* resided there, whereas the other forty-two served as cities of refuge only if they were inhabited by *Leviyim*. Rav Meir Simcha cites the Gemara’s comment towards the end of Masekhet Sota (48b) that after the destruction of the First Temple, there were no longer special cities designated for the *Leviyim*. Accordingly, Rav Meir Simcha asserts, during the Second Temple period, there were only six *arei miklat*. The status of the six primary cities was intrinsic, and did not depend upon the presence of *Leviyim*, whereas the status of the other forty-two cities was a function of their being Levite cities. Hence, once they no longer served as places of residence for *Leviyim*, they ceased functioning as cities of refuge, as well.

Thursday

The Torah in Parashat Masei discusses the law requiring one who accidentally kills to relocate in one of the *arei miklat* – the six cities especially designated as places of refuge for inadvertent killers. Amidst its discussion of this topic, the Torah describes the situation of accidental murder requiring relocation in an *ir miklat*, and it speaks of a case where the killer “does not despite him [the victim] and does seek his harm” (35:23).

The Gemara in Masekhet Sanhedrin (29a) interprets this verse as referring not only to the relationship between the killer and the victim, but also to the relationship between the judges presiding over the case and the killer. If it is known that a judge harbors feelings of personal animus towards the defendant, he must recuse himself from the case. Given the difficulty he would have maintaining objectivity, he is not permitted to preside over the case and honestly assess the defendant’s guilt or innocence.

In some sense, we are all “judges,” and form views and opinions about other people and their actions. This *halakha* reminds us of the difficulty we have in maintaining objectivity when we harbor predisposed negative feelings towards somebody. When somebody has wronged us in the past or has aspects of his character that we find displeasing, we are far more likely to judge that person’s actions unfavorably and less likely to give him or her the benefit of the doubt. We need to be attuned to our own biases and predispositions, and know when to “recuse” ourselves and avoid rendering judgment when we cannot honestly maintain strict impartiality.

Interestingly, we find just several verses later the precise opposite warning. The section of *arei miklat* concludes with the command not to accept a bribe from a killer seeking to exempt himself from relocating in a city of refuge, and the Torah then adds, “*Ve-lo tachanifu et ha-aretz*” (35:33). The *Sifrei* interprets this as a prohibition against *chanufa* – flattery, and the Ramban explains that just as a court may not accept a bribe to absolve a killer of accountability, similarly, a court may not absolve a killer due to his impressive achievements or noble stature. According to the *Sifrei*’s reading of this verse, the Torah warns against “flattering” distinguished or well-respected people in the sense of wrongly acquitting them. Even if we have good reason to like and respect a person, this does not absolve us of the responsibility to act when that individual conducts himself an immoral or dangerous manner.

The law of *chanufa* warns of how our positive disposition towards a person may cloud our judgment and cause us to justify wrongful conduct that warrants a strong response. Together with the aforementioned rule requiring a judge to recuse himself from a case involving a defendant he dislikes, these *halakhot* remind us of the need to separate our personal feelings towards people from our assessment of their conduct, to ensure that we do not condemn every action performed by somebody we dislike, or approve of every action performed by somebody whom we do like.

Friday

We read in Parashat Matot of the war that God commanded *Benei Yisrael* to wage against the nation of Midyan. The Torah writes that soldiers “were handed over” (“*va-yimaseru*”) from the nation for the purpose of waging this war (31:5), and Rashi, citing the *Sifrei*, detects from this formulation a degree of ambivalence on the soldiers’ part. They needed to be forced out to battle, Rashi explains, because they heard that Moshe, their beloved leader, would be passing on after this military campaign. Rashi writes:

This teaches you the praise of the shepherds of Israel, how beloved they are to Israel. Before they heard of his [imminent] passing, what does it say – “soon they will stone me!” (Shemot 17:4) – but once they heard that Moshe’s death was dependent upon the revenge against Midyan, they did not want to go until they were conscripted against their will.

*Chazal* here note the drastic transformation in *Benei Yisrael*’s attitude towards their leader. Forty years earlier, when they found themselves without water, they were hostile to Moshe, to the point where he felt they were prepared to kill him, whereas now they wanted to delay his passing as much as possible, and refused to wage a battle that they know needed to be fought before he died.

Many writers have noted Rashi’s seemingly peculiar remark that this “teaches you the praise of the shepherds of Israel.” In what way does this change in the people’s feelings towards Moshe reflect upon Moshe’s greatness? Why is it a source of praise for a leader when the people at first despise him but then love him?

The likely answer is that Moshe is praised for sticking with the people even after the hostility they displayed on that occasion in the desert. Moshe did not give up on *Benei Yisrael* after they acted in a manner which he perceived as threatening to his life. As difficult as that crisis was, he understood that his relationship to the people could still be repaired, that he could again earn their trust and their respect, which he did. Moshe was wise enough to look beyond the present and recognize the nation’s potential for change.

The *Sifrei*’s comment, then, serves as a valuable reminder to parents and educators that they must be prepared for the “long haul,” that the difficulties and challenges they currently face in the process of child-rearing and education can be overcome. Like Moshe, we need to have confidence in children’s and students’ potential for growth and change, and realize that their present hardships do not preclude the possibility of an outstanding future. Just as *Benei Yisrael* underwent a significant process of growth over the course of the years spent in the wilderness under the patient, dedicated leadership of Moshe Rabbenu, we must similarly trust in our youngsters’ ability to grow and develop, and show the kind of patience and devotion that Moshe, the faithful shepherd, gave to his beloved flocks.

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