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

**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  
Thursday 22 Tamuz, July 25**.

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Matot tells of the war waged by *Benei Yisrael* against Midyan, and the large collection of spoils which the soldiers brought back with them. God commanded Moshe how the spoils were to be distributed, and after this distribution process was completed, the generals who led the war effort approached Moshe. They reported to him that they counted all the men under their charge, and found that “*lo nifkad mimenu ish*” – not a single soldier was missing (31:49). They then said that they wished to donate the gold jewelry which they had collected during the war, “to atone for our souls before the Lord” (31:50). Moshe took the gold and placed it inside the *Mishkan*.

The question arises as to whether there is any direct connection between the generals’ two statements to Moshe – that no soldiers were killed in battle, and that they wished to donate the gold. Are these two separate statements, or is the officers’ donation linked to the fact that no soldiers fell during the war? At first glance, we might assume that this donation was made to give thanks to God for this great miracle – of a successful war without a single casualty. However, the generals explicitly stated that they brought the donation “to atone for our souls.” This gesture was made to seek atonement, not to express gratitude. Perhaps, then, these should be read as separate proclamations, with no direct connection between them.

This appears to be Seforno’s approach. He writes (31:50) that the donation was made to atone for the sin of *Ba’al Pe’or*, when the people of Midyan and Moav conspired to lure *Benei Yisrael* to forbidden relationships and idolatry. The generals, who held leadership positions, were expected to have intervened to stop the sinful conduct. In an effort to atone for this failure in leadership, the generals offered their gold as a donation. This certainly does not appear to have anything to do with the generals’ first statement to Moshe, that none of the soldiers fell in battle.

This is also the view of Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, where he writes that the generals told Moshe that already earlier, before they counted the troops to see if anyone was missing, they had consecrated the gold jewelry which they seized.

However, the Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (64a) presents a different, Midrashic reading of these verses, explaining that when the generals reported that no soldiers “were missing” (“*lo nifkad*”), they meant that nobody went “missing” in a spiritual sense. Meaning, no soldiers engaged in intimate relationships with the women of Midyan. This war was waged in response to the tragedy of *Ba’al Pe’or*, and so the generals reported to Moshe that as part of the efforts to rectify that tragic episode, not a single soldier committed a sinful act during the war. However, the Gemara explains, the men were not innocent of illicit thoughts, or of looking inappropriately at the women, and for this they were donating the gold they collected in order to atone for these improprieties.

A much different explanation is given by the Rashbam (mentioned also by Chizkuni), who associates the generals’ donation with the *machatzit ha-shekel* – the mandatory half-shekel donation which was given whenever a census was taken. In Sefer Shemot (30:11-16), God commands that when the nation is counted, each member must give the *machatzit ha-shekel* donation as “ransom for his soul,” to avoid a “plague” that might otherwise befall the nation. In this vein, the Rashbam explains, the soldiers who were counted after the war made a special donation for atonement, in order to avoid the harsh consequences that God had threatened to bring upon the people if they are counted without making a donation. They sought to atone not for any particular sin, but rather in a general sense, just as it always required when people are counted.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted several different approaches that were taken to explain a pair of verses in Parashat Matot (31:49-50) which tell of the generals’ report to Moshe after the successful battle they led against the nation of Midyan. The generals first informed Moshe that they counted all their men and discovered that not a single soldier fell in battle. Then, they expressed their wish to donate the gold jewelry which they had seized from the Midyanites. It is unclear from the text whether these are two separate, unrelated statements made by the generals, or if they are somehow connected.

An especially creative explanation of these verses is offered by Rav Shlomo Kluger, in his *Imrei Shefer*. He suggests that the generals expressed to Moshe how they invested great effort to look after the troops under their charge, to ensure that the battle was conducted properly and without casualties. The generals’ constant, careful attention paid to the soldiers resulted in a degree of neglect of their own characters, their own growth and their own conduct. And so they felt it appropriate to make a donation to the *Mishkan*, to “atone” for the period of time during which they may have failed to pay as close attention to their characters and their souls as they should have, due to their preoccupation with their obligations towards their men.

Rav Shlomo Kluger’s insight was likely intended less as an actual interpretation of the verses than as an observation into the challenge entailed in caring for our own spiritual wellbeing while intensively caring for the needs and concerns of others. This message was perhaps directed towards rabbis and other leaders who devotedly tend to their flocks, working to assist, guide and uplift their communities, over the course of which they are prone to overlook their own process of growth. But more generally, this applies as well to those tending to children or working for important causes. When we focus a great deal of attention and devote a great deal of time looking after the needs of others, we can easily lose sight of our own, personal religious responsibilities. Rav Kluger alerts us to the need to try, as much as possible, not to neglect our own spiritual needs even while we care for the needs of others, to remember that we must always strive to advance ourselves even as we work to help other people advance.

Monday

We read in Parashat Matot that after *Benei Yisrael*’s soldiers returned from the successful battle waged against Midyan, bringing with them vast amounts of spoils, they were instructed as to how to prepare the Midyanites’ utensils so they may be used with food. Specifically, they were told that utensils that were directly exposed to fire with non-kosher food (such as a roasting spit) needed to purged by fire, and utensils used in hot water with non-kosher food (such as pots used for boiling food) needed to be immersed in hot water (31:23). These verses establish the basic rules of what is commonly called “kashering” – the process whereby utensils used with non-kosher food can be made permissible for use with kosher food. As Rashi explains based on the Gemara (Masekhet Avoda Zara 75b), this process is necessary in order to purge the utensil of the taste of the forbidden food with which had been used. If the taste was absorbed through fire, then it must be expunged through fire, and if the taste was absorbed through the medium of boiling water, it is expunged through boiling water.

The *Chiddushei Ha-Rim* is cited as offering a symbolic explanation of this halakhic principle, that kosher food may not be eaten if the taste of non-kosher food was imparted into it. He suggests that this *halakha* reflects the notion that even an inherently acceptable action is tainted if it is accompanied by inappropriate thoughts and intentions. If a person performs a perfectly legitimate action but with an improper mindset, the mindset can disqualify the action – just as the taste of forbidden food imparted into permissible food makes the permissible food forbidden. The underlying concept of this *halakha* is that we must ensure not only to act the right way, but to also think the right way, to conduct ourselves and chart our course in life with sincere intentions and pure motives.

Rav Baruch Yitzchak Yissachar Leventhal, in his *Birkat Yitzchak*, adds that this might expain why this section in Parashat Matot begins with the introduction, “*Zot chukat ha-Torah*” (“This is the statute of the Torah” – 31:21). This phrase is used also earlier in Sefer Bamidbar – in the beginning of Parashat Chukat, introducing the law of *para aduma* (19:2). Rashi (19:22) famously cites from Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan that the law of *para aduma* serves to atone for the sin of the golden calf, when *Benei Yisrael* worshiped a graven image. Rav Leventhal thus suggests that the two “*chukot ha-Torah*” – the two most basic obligations we have – are to refine our actions as well as our thoughts and characters. The *para aduma* represents the process of correcting wrongful behavior, whereas the laws of kashering represent the process of eliminating improper intentions and attitudes. We are to work to ensure not only that we do the right thing, but that we have the right priorities, ambitions and aspirations, that our minds and hearts are in the right place. And thus the two “statutes of the Torah” – our most fundamental religious responsibilities – are the *para aduma* and kashering, striving to perfect our conduct and our minds, so that our actions are minds are in sync and are both fully devoted to the service of God.

Tuesday

The opening section of Parashat Matot discusses the laws of *nedarim* – vows, whereby a person voluntarily decides to forbid upon himself something which the Torah permits. The Torah strictly requires one to abide by his self-imposed prohibition, though the oral tradition provides the mechanism of *hatarat nedarim* – the annulment of vows, which can be achieved by standing before a court and proclaiming one’s remorse for taking the vow.

The Gemara in Masekhet Nedarim (22a) makes a strong statement condemning the practice of taking vows, warning that one who takes a *neder* (vow) is comparable to one who constructs a *bama* – a private altar. Once the *Beit Ha-mikdash* was built, it became forbidden to offer sacrifices anywhere other than in the *Mikdash*, and thus private, personal altars are strictly forbidden. The Gemara compares taking a *neder* to constructing a *bama*, and it then continues that one who fulfills the vow – as opposed to seeking its annulment – is comparable to one who offers a sacrifice on a *bama*.

*Keli Yakar*, in his opening comments to Parashat Matot, explains this comparison as referring to arrogance. Taking upon oneself voluntary restrictions, beyond those which are imposed by the Torah, bespeaks a degree of condescension, as the individual chooses to create his own set of laws rather than simply follow the laws required of all *Benei Yisrael*. In this sense, taking *nedarim* truly resembles a *bama*, a personal site of sacrificing which one builds in place of the *Beit Ha-mikdash*, where the rest of the nation brings their sacrifices.

However, *Keli Yakar* notes, there are times when one takes a vow not for the sake of condescendingly withdrawing from the rest of the nation, but simply out of anger. A person who becomes angry at his fellow might impulsively vow not to derive any benefit from that other person, or declare a vow proclaiming his possessions forbidden to his fellow. *Keli Yakar* writes that the nature of a person’s true motivation in pronouncing his vow can be determined by whether he later utilizes the solution of *hatarat nedarim*. If, after recomposing himself, he chooses to annul the vow, this demonstrates that he pronounced the vow in a moment of tension, during an outburst of raw emotion, and did not truly mean to arrogantly take on new restrictions. But if even after regaining his equanimity, the individual insists on abiding by his self-imposed restrictions, then this shows that he made a rational decision to create new rules for himself, arrogantly separating himself from the rest of the nation. And thus taking a vow is comparable to building a *bama* – a measure which can potentially lead to condescending withdrawal from one’s fellow Jews – but it is only when one makes the willed decision to adhere to the vow, rather than seek its annulment, that he is considered as having sacrificed on a *bama*, making a conscious, resolute choice to practice religion differently than everybody else.

*Keli Yakar* explains along these same lines a different statement made by the Gemara there in Masekhet Nedarim, that one who takes a vow is called a “*rasha*” (wicked person), even if he fulfills his vow. The Gemara makes the assertion based on a textual association between the verse in Sefer Devarim (23:22), “If you desist from vows, you will not bear iniquity,” and the verse in Sefer Iyov (3:17), “There [after death] the wicked desist from their rage” (“*Sham resha’im chadelu rogez*”). These verses both include variations of the root *ch.d.l.* (“desist”), suggesting a link between them, and thus the Gemara establishes that one who takes vows is regarded as “wicked.” *Keli Yakar* notes the significance of the fact that this connection is inferred from the description of the wicked “desisting from rage.” What this means, he writes, is that a vow reflects “wickedness” if it is taken and maintained even after the “rage” has passed, when one has returned to his senses, and is no longer overcome by fierce emotion. If the person insists on keeping his vow, this shows that it was not a mistake, a byproduct of a rush of emotion, but rather a calculated decision to arrogantly take on additional laws and restrictions.

The Gemara there in Masekhet Nedarim speaks also of the severity of anger, making the famous, startling statement, “*Kol ha-ko’eis kol minei gehinnom sholtim bo*” – that anger renders one liable to the harshest punishments in the afterlife. However, as important as it is to strive to avoid anger, we are all prone to becoming angry on occasion. *Keli Yakar*’s insight perhaps teaches us to try, as much as possible, to repair the damage caused by our anger once it subsides. If it happens that we make inappropriate or hurtful remarks in a moment of tension and aggravation, we should strive to “annul” those remarks, to eliminate their negative effects, in order to contain whatever harm they may have caused. We are strongly urged not to become angry, but as frail human beings, it is all but inevitable that we will from time to time. *Keli Yakar* teaches us that when this happens, we are bidden to correct whatever mistakes we may have made in our rage, to rebuild the bridges that we may have burned – or at least damaged – by our anger, and to do everything we can to “annul” the negative effects of our temporary loss of composure.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted *Keli Yakar*’s analysis (beginning of Parashat Matot) of the concept of *nedarim* (vows) and the possibility of having them annulled (*hatarat nedarim*). Citing the Gemara’s sharp condemnation of those who take vows (Masekhet Nedarim 22a), *Keli Yakar* explained that ordinarily, vows bespeak a degree of arrogance and condescension, as one seeks to create his own mode of religious practice and set himself apart from everybody else. However, vows are occasionally made in a fit of anger, and not as a reasoned, calculated decision to withdraw and distinguish oneself from his community and his nation, and so the option of *hatarat nedarim* serves as a kind of test determining whether one’s vow results from deep-seated arrogance, or a temporary emotional eruption, in which case the individual will seek to annul his vow upon regaining his composure.

We suggested, in light of *Keli Yakar*’s comments, that the institution of *hatarat nedarim* perhaps signifies the need to repair the harm inflicted by anger. One who takes a vow in a fit of rage is urged to seek its annulment – signifying the importance of seeking to contain the damage we may have caused through inappropriate words spoken in moments of tension and frustration.

We might add that the institution of *hatarat nedarim* conveys a vitally important message not only to the person who uttered the “vow,” who made hurtful remarks in a condition of anger, but also for those around him.

One view in the Gemara (Chagiga 10a) finds a Biblical allusion to the notion of *hatarat nedarim* in the command in Parashat Matot (30:3) that if one utters a vow, “*lo yacheil devaro*” – “he shall not defile his word.” The Gemara cites Shmuel as interpreting this to mean, “He may not defile, but others may defile for him.” The Torah requires the individual to abide by his vow taken impulsively in a state of anger, in order to discourage making rash commitments, but it empowers others to annul the vow, to declare that as it was taken without a sound, rational consideration of all its implications, it is void. This perhaps teaches that when a person speaks improperly in a fleeting moment of rage, the people around him are called upon to accord less importance to the inappropriate words than the individual himself. Very often, the precise opposite occurs – the individual dismisses his remarks as the unfortunate result of his temporarily compromised emotional condition, whereas others take the comments very seriously, remember them for years to come, and are forever aggrieved by what the person said. The person insists, “I didn’t mean it,” but the others refuse to forgive, keeping the wrongful remarks alive in their memories where it continually festers fuels harsh feelings of resentment. But the Torah instructs us to respond in a precise opposite manner. The person who spoke improperly in a fit of anger must assume responsibility for his remarks, acknowledge the harm they caused, and seek to repair the damage to whatever extent possible. And the others, for their part, are to facilitate the “annulment” of the person’s words by not according them great importance, by understanding the context, by recognizing human weaknesses, and by being prepared to forget and forgive hurtful words spoken in moments of tension.

Underlying the halakhic mechanism of “*hatarat nedarim*” is the concept of “*acheirim meichalin lo*” – “others may defile for him,” which may be read as an imperative – that others should “defile” the person’s inappropriate words. While he must himself take responsibility for his rash remarks, others should be forgiving and understanding, recognizing that words spoken in a moment of stress and tension can and should be overlooked, and should not be turned into a permanent stain on the individual’s record.

Thursday

Parashat Matot begins by telling that Moshe related to the “*rashei ha-matot*” – the nation’s leaders – the various commands relevant to the vows which one accepts upon himself.

Various explanations have been suggested for why these commands were specifically presented to the nation’s leaders. Rashi comments that in truth, all the Torah’s laws were first presented to the leadership before they were then conveyed to the rest of *Benei Yisrael*. This point is mentioned specifically in the context of *nedarim* (vows), Rashi writes, as an allusion to the special status of scholars with regard to this area of *Halakha*, as a scholar has the authority to annul a vow on his own – something which otherwise requires a tribunal of three people. By making mention of the “*rashei ha-matot*” in this context, the Torah indicates that the scholarly elite play a special role in regard to *nedarim*, as a lone scholar has the authority of a court when it comes to the annulment of vows. (Rashi’s comment is sourced in the Gemara, Masekhet Nedarim 78a.)

Ibn Ezra boldly suggests that this section appears out of chronological sequence, as Moshe relayed these commands to the leaders after the promise made by the tribes of Reuven and Gad to join the other tribes in the war to capture the Land of Israel. As we read later in Parashat Matot, these tribes requested permission to permanently settle the land east of the Jordan River, rather than settle with the other tribes across the river. Moshe agreed on condition that the men and of Reuven and Gad would fight alongside the other tribes in the war to capture *Eretz Yisrael*. He instructed Elazar (the *kohen gadol*), Yehoshua (his successor) and “*rashei avot ha-matot*” (the leaders of the tribes) to ensure that Reuven and Gad uphold their commitment, and join the war effort, as a condition for their right to permanently settle the land east of the Jordan (32:28). Ibn Ezra thus suggests that once Moshe was instructing the leaders to ensure Reuven and Gad met their commitment, he spoke to them in general about the requirement to fulfill pledges.

Ramban suggests – in contrast to Rashi – that Moshe presented these laws specifically to the leaders, and not to the rest of the nation. This section elaborates on the authority given to a father to annul vows taken by his daughter, and to a husband to annul vows taken by his daughter. The Ramban speculates that Moshe did not want this information presented to the masses (at least not at this point), lest it lead them to treat vows lightly, seeing how easily a daughter or wife’s vows can be dismissed.

Netziv, in *Ha’ameik Davar*, explains that it was especially common for people to take vows during times of crisis, and then renege on their pledges after the crisis passed. And so Moshe spoke to the leaders, who were responsible for enforcing the Torah’s laws, to pay special attention to this phenomenon and to do what they can to ensure the people’s compliance with their *nedarim*.

*Ba’al Ha-turim* similarly notes that it was the leaders’ responsibility to ensure the people’s fulfillment of their vows, though he adds also a different explanation – that it was customary in times of war for leaders to make pledges to God. A famous example is the vow taken by the general Yiftach before he went out to war against Amon, promising that if he returned home victorious, he would sacrifice the first creature that greeted him (Shoftim 11:30-31). *Ba’al Ha-turim* notes also the example of the generals who returned from the war against Midyan and brought a special offering to the *Mishkan*, as we read later in Parashat Matot (31:48). Apparently, *Ba’al Ha-turim* understood that the leaders of the war effort vowed to bring a donation if the campaign was successful, and their gift to the *Mishkan* marked the fulfillment of this pledge, serving as another example of how leaders would make pledges before warfare. For this reason, according to *Ba’al Ha-turim*, Moshe presented the laws of *nedarim* specifically to the leaders, as they were the ones who commonly made vows.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the question addressed by several commentators regarding the opening verse in Parashat Matot, which tells that Moshe presented the laws of *nedarim* (vows) specifically to the “*rashei ha-matot*” – the leadership of *Benei Yisrael*. These laws, of course, apply to all members of the nation, and the question thus arises as to why they were given specifically to the leaders.

*Chatam Sofer* suggests that particular emphasis is placed on the responsibilities of leaders in this regard because the consequences of a leader’s broken promise is especially grave. An example, as *Chatam Sofer* references, is the story told in Sefer Yehoshua (9) of the *Givonim*, a tribe that was among the Canaanite peoples against whom *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to wage war, but that managed to deceive *Benei Yisrael*’s leaders into making a truce. They posed as foreign nomads, and persuaded *Benei Yisrael* to enter into a truce whereby the two sides vowed peaceful relations. The Gemara in Masekhet Gittin (46a) comments that although *Benei Yisrael*’s leaders vowed peace on the basis of false claims, which technically rendered the vow null and void, they nevertheless upheld their oath, and treated the *Givonim* peacefully, to avoid a *chilul Hashem* (defamation of God). When a prominent leader makes a solemn oath which he then breaks, the consequences for the reputation of the Jewish People are especially grave, and so *Benei Yisrael* honored their commitment to the *Givonim* even though it was not legally binding.

Accordingly, *Chatam Sofer* writes, we might perhaps understand why the obligation to obey one’s vows is presented especially to the nation’s leaders. This was done to emphasize the particular importance of honesty and integrity on the part of leaders, to the point where even vows which may be ignored in the case of an ordinary citizen must be fulfilled when they are made by leaders. A leader’s violation of commitments reflects badly upon the entire nation, and upon our faith, and thus people in positions of leadership bear an especially strict obligation to fulfill their pledges and follow through on their promises.

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