

TIMELESS ∞ TORAH

MATOT-MASEI - THE POWER OF WORDS

An Object Lesson in Commitment

While most of Parshat Matot deals with the war with Midian and the final preparations for entering Eretz Yisrael, the first passage details the technical halachot of vows: the importance of fulfilling what one has promised and, conversely, when and how a vow can be annulled. According to the Ibn Ezra, although this parshah is used as an introduction to the parshah, it actually belongs later in the parshah, after the narrative of the request of the tribes of Gad and Reuven.

In that episode, those two tribes approached Moshe after the conquest of the Midianite lands on the east bank of the Jordan and requested that they be given their inheritance there instead of in Eretz Yisrael proper. Moshe was initially upset by this request, and he expressed his concern that they would discourage the rest of the people from moving onward to conquer Eretz Yisrael. Only after Gad and Reuven made a firm and formal commitment to lead their brothers in battle before returning to settle the east bank did Moshe accede to their request.

Fascinatingly, as the Ibn Ezra points out, the same expression is used in both passages: Moshe exhorts Gad and Reuven that '*k'chol hayotze mipichem yaaseh*, all that exits your mouths you must fulfil' (32:23), and these are also the words of the basic mitzvah of keeping one's vows (see 30:3). The suggestion is that Moshe utilised the opportunity of the vow of the tribes of Gad and Reuven to teach every individual of the Jewish people what it means to be resolute in keeping one's word. These two tribes were leaders among the people, and when they made their national commitment to

the rest of the people, this was the perfect place to segue into the *parshah* of personal commitments and emphasise the crucial importance of dedication and trustworthiness whenever we make a pledge.

Words or Reality?

Moshe describes forcefully and at length to the tribes of Gad and Reuven his concern that their request would weaken the resolve of the Jewish people. Throughout his monologue, he strongly compares the idea of settling on the east bank of the Jordan to the episode of the Spies. Just as the ten spies dampened the inspiration of the people to enter Eretz Yisrael, so would these two tribes incite the rest of the nation to remain on the wrong side of the Jordan. This parallel to the episode of the Spies is seemingly another link to the power of words. The Spies, after all, did not bring back any concrete alarming evidence of Canaan's invincibility. Instead, they succeeded in painting a verbal image of national disaster. With their words, they created false scenes of defeat and sowed panic through the people. In this parshah, Moshe was apprehensive that Gad and Reuven's attitude would bring about similar consequences, and his concern was only allayed when the leaders of these two tribes gave him a firm commitment, projecting assurance, confidence and responsibility rather than weakness and anxiety.

In this vein, the Haktav Vehakabbala (Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg d.1865) notes a word that is used in three different contexts throughout the parshah. Moshe accused Gad and Reuven *lamah teni'un et lev ha'am*, why do you dishearten the people by suggesting that there is no need to fight against the Canaanites (32:7). He again uses this same word to describe the effects of the



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Spies on the determination of the people, comparing the two episodes (32:9). The third time this word is used is in the first passage of the parshah, which, as previously mentioned, details the halachot of vows. In this parshah, the Torah states that if a young girl makes a personal vow of which her father disapproves, the father may annul - *heini* - the vow (30:6). Both in the parshah of vows and in the narrative of the tribes of Gad and Reuven, Rashi explains that this word denotes removal or prevention. These two words seem synonymous, but the Haktav Vehakabbala contends that there is a difference between the two translations. Removal means that no trace of the original matter remains. This would be an appropriate way of translating the word *heini* in the parshah of vows, where the father entirely removes the vow. Regarding the Spies and the tribes of Gad and Reuven, however, the second translation would also be accurate. Even if the people were only slightly discouraged, their inspiration 'withheld' from facilitating their journey into Eretz Yisrael, that would be enough to cause disaster.

Either way, the clear message of the parshah is the intense impact that words can have, especially when used negatively. Particularly when we speak of matters of significance, we must be exceptionally careful to consider the effect that our words might have and not allow any damage to come about through reckless speech.

The Puzzle of Menashe

The settlement on the eastern bank of the Jordan is generally named after Gad and Reuven. They were the initiators of the request, and they were the ones who inherited that land. Fascinatingly, however, a

part of the tribe of Menashe were also given a portion there, even though we do not find that they ever requested it. Moreover, in Parshat Devarim (see 3:16), when the division of this land is described in detail, it seems that Menashe's portion was not an afterthought but actually an integral part of the arrangement.

The Netziv (d.1893), in his analysis of this episode, concludes that Menashe indeed did not request a portion with Gad and Reuven but, on the contrary, were instructed by Moshe to join those two tribes. While the people of Gad were mighty warriors and Reuven were prone to following the lead of others, Menashe excelled in Torah scholarship. It was crucial, taught Moshe, that this outlying part of the Jewish land should be inhabited by Torah scholars who would ensure the continued religiosity of their neighbours.

Chizkuni (13th century) suggests that the division of the tribe of Menashe here was in return for another division that their forefather, Menashe son of Yosef, had caused many years earlier. When Menashe planted and then discovered the silver goblet in the sack of Binyamin, the brothers tore their clothes in mourning. Now, this act was repaid with the division of the people of Menashe. In light of the Netziv's comments, however, this suggestion has a positive connotation. The first division, the tearing of the clothes, was a result of distress, but in this parshah, the tribe of Menashe was divided in order to provide Torah leadership and continuity throughout the entire nation.

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Rebuke, Reflection & Renewal**