

TIMELESS TORAH

MATOT-MASEI: WORDS, WANDERINGS, AND THE WAY FORWARD

Responsible Leadership

In today's world, trust is one of the most important qualities of leadership. Whether in politics, business, or diplomacy, a leader's words carry weight, and breaking commitments can damage the reputation of the entire institution they represent. Parshat Matot opens with a pointed message in this regard concerning those who are in positions of authority. Almost uniquely, this passage, which deals with the laws of vows, is addressed specifically to the *roshei haMattot*, the leaders of the Tribes. The Chatam Sofer (d.1839) suggests that a lesson here is indeed directed towards national leaders, not only on a personal level but also a diplomatic one. When negotiating with foreign powers, it can be tempting to make certain offers, only later to retract them under the pressure of domestic politics or for other reasons. Here, it is emphasised that leaders must be especially careful to act with integrity. Unlike in the case of an individual, this is a matter of national honour. Regarding the Jewish people in particular, this is also a critical part of bringing about a *kiddush Hashem*.

A parallel to this idea can be found at the beginning of Parshat Masei. There, the parshah begins with a list of the forty-two journeys that the Jewish people made in the Wilderness, and the Torah introduces this by stating that this list was recorded by Moshe himself (33:2). The repetitive wording of this verse begs explanation: 'And Moshe wrote their departures for their journeys (*motza'eihem lamseihem*) as dictated by Hashem, and these are their journeys from where they departed (*maseihem l'motza'eihem*)'.

According to the Ohr HaChaim (d.1743), this means that Moshe recorded each journey as it was made in his own personal journal. Now, looking back at the entire period of the

Wilderness, he wrote them again as part of the Torah. The significance of this, in light of the Chatam Sofer's observation, is that Moshe was demonstrating his fundamental responsibility towards his people. When they left Egypt, he promised the nation that they would be led to the Land of Israel, and, however long this took, he was meticulous in recording the details of every step of the way. Now that the Promised Land had been reached, he was able to show the people that he had kept his word.

Refuge for Contemplation

The laws of the *arei miklat* – the forty-two cities designated as a refuge for an unwitting murderer – contain a perplexing verse. Although designating the cities of refuge is a mitzvah applicable only in Eretz Yisrael, the verse (35:29) declares that 'this is a statute for you for all generations (*l'doroteichem*) and in all your dwelling places (*b'chol mosh-voteichem*)'. While Rashi writes that this verse is to be applied to a different mitzvah, Rav Shlomo Kluger (Brody, d.1869) understands it to be teaching how the underlying concept of the cities of refuge is relevant even in Exile.

Firstly, it is important to note that most of the *arei miklat* were built not only for refuge; they were principally the dwelling places of the Levites, who were not given a consolidated area of land. Their designation as *arei miklat* as a secondary purpose meant that they acted as places to which an unwitting murderer had to be exiled, and they would also serve as a refuge for such a person from possible revenge of the relatives of the victim. Thus, if a person's negligence in their care for other people caused loss of life, they were sent to exile. But at the same time, they were provided with security and, more importantly, spiritually focused neighbours – the Levites – from whom they could learn.



Contemporary Perspectives on the Weekly Parsha with Rabbi Dr Yoni Birnbaum

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Fascinatingly, these unique cities number forty-two, the identical number of the Jewish encampments in the Wilderness that are listed at the beginning of the Parshah. Rav Kluger writes that the significance of this is that designating these centres of 'spiritual rehabilitation' is, in a way, repaying Hashem for the kindness that he bestowed throughout our journey from Egypt. For every encampment He provided us with, we were commanded to designate a place of our own dedicated to spiritual growth.

In this way, the message of the *arei miklat* is indeed '*l'doroteichem* – relevant for all generations'. The details of these halachot may no longer be applicable, but they remain a model for eternity. Individuals, or even the entire Jewish people, may be exiled and wander from place to place. Yet our duty is to ensure that wherever we find ourselves, we provide for ourselves and others places to contemplate on our Divine responsibilities.

Refuge for Contemplation

This dual function of the *arei miklat* is underscored by the Steipler Gaon (Rav Yisrael Yaakov Kanievsky, d.1985), who emphasises the fact that the *arei miklat* were both a place of refuge and a place of confinement. Perhaps, this lends itself to yet another comparison to our experience in Galut. The Jewish people, over the past two millennia have wandered to almost every corner of the globe, in some places terribly persecuted and in others very comfortable. What is critical for us to continually assess, however, is the depth of the dichotomy of the Galut experience. The *arei miklat* could often have been a pleasant place to live and, as we have learned, there were certainly spiritual advantages in being there. Nevertheless, the person who was exiled to one of these cities was compelled to stay there; for them it was

a prison. Despite any superficial comforts, a person exiled to an *ir miklat* must be particularly careful to bear in mind the primary reason they were there. So too, however much we may be tempted to feel that our current country of residence is our permanent home, we must always remember why we are living there and not in our ancestral land.

The Kotzker Rebbe (d.1859) echoes this idea with an incisive remark on an episode elsewhere in the parshah. When the Jewish army returned victorious from battle with the Midianites, they were told that before they could use the spoil of war, they had to first purge (*kasher*) the kitchen utensils from any non-kosher food taste that the utensils would have absorbed. With this lesson, they were taught for the first time about the principle of *taam k'ikar*, that absorbed taste is viewed as seriously as forbidden food itself.

Interestingly, the verse calls these soldiers 'those who were coming **to** war' (31:21), even though the phrase 'coming **from** war' would have been more appropriate. The Kotzker Rebbe commented that these soldiers, having vanquished their physical enemies, were actually only beginning the real personal battle against the *yetzer hara*, the negative inclination. Learning about the significance of the absorbed taste in their utensils was a reminder to think about the spiritual direction of their hearts that can sometimes be even more significant than actions themselves. This message remains deeply relevant today, particularly within the Diaspora. Even after overcoming major challenges, our task is to remain aware of the subtle influences that shape our values and character. True growth requires not only controlling our actions but carefully considering what we allow into our hearts and minds.

NEXT WEEK - DEVARIM: From Memory to Mission: The Power of Constructive Criticism