

The Parshah in a Nutshell

Matos-Massei

Numbers 30:2--36:13

Moses conveys the laws governing the **annulment of vows** to the heads of the **tribes** of Israel. **War** is waged against **Midian** for their role in plotting the moral destruction of Israel, and the Torah gives a detailed account of the war spoils and how they were allocated amongst the **people**, the **warriors**, the **Levites** and the **High Priest**.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad (later joined by half of the tribe of Menasseh) ask for the lands **east of the Jordan** as their portion in the Promised Land, these being prime pastureland for their **cattle**. Moses is initially angered by the request, but subsequently agrees on the condition that they first join, and lead, in Israel's conquest of the lands **west of the Jordan**.

The forty-two **journeys** and **encampments** of Israel are listed, from the Exodus to their encampment on the plains of Moab across the river from the Land of Canaan. The **boundaries** of the Promised Land are given, and **cities of refuge** are designated as havens and places of exile for **inadvertent murderers**. The **daughters of Tzelafchad** marry within their own tribe of Menasseh, so that the **estate** which they inherit from their father should not pass to the province of another tribe.



(c) Sarah Kranz

Matos-Massei

Numbers 30:2--36:13

Summary & Commentary

This week's Torah reading concludes the book of Numbers and consists of two *parshiot*: Matot ("

tribes"--Numbers 30:2-32:42) and Massei ("journeys"--Numbers 33:1-36:13).

Matot opens with Moses' instruction to the heads of the tribes regarding the laws of vows:

*If a man vows a vow to G-d, or swears an oath to **bind his soul** with a bond; he shall not break his **word**; according to all that proceeds out of his mouth shall he do.*

A vow, however, can be annulled (as long as it does not involve an obligation towards another person). A father has the authority to annul the vows of his daughter and a

Commentary

journeys: *These are the journeys of the children of Israel...(33:1)*

The forty-two "stations" from Egypt to the Promised Land are replayed in the life of every individual Jew, as his soul journeys from its descent to earth at birth to its return to its Source.

(Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

bind his soul: *A man who shall vow a vow (30:3)*

Vows are a means to asceticism.

(Ethics of the Fathers 3:13)

Ascetism leads to purity, purity leads to holiness, holiness leads to humility, humility leads to fear of sin, fear of sin leads to saintliness, saintliness leads to the [possession of] the holy spirit, and the holy spirit leads to eternal life. (Talmud, Avodah Zarah 20b)

word: *According to all that proceeds out of his mouth shall he do (30:3)*

Better that you not vow, than that you should vow and not fulfill.

(Ecclesiastes 5:4)

husband the vows of his wife or betrothed, within 24 hours of the vow's declaration. (**Another** kind of annulment is that effected by a **Torah scholar** or a panel of three judges.)

The War on Midian

G-d instructs Moses to "Avenge **the vengeance of the children of Israel** upon the Midianites, after which you shall be gathered to your people."

Commentary

Another: *And Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes (30:2)*

This was the procedure with all the laws that Moses taught: first he would teach them to Aaron and the heads of the tribes, and then he would instruct the people, as described in Exodus 34:31-32.

Why are the tribal heads particularly mentioned by the laws of vows? To teach us that an expert Torah scholar has the ability to annul vows like a tribunal of three laymen. (Talmud; Rashi)

Torah scholar: *And Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel, saying: This is the thing which G-d has commanded (Numbers 30:2)*

This verse can also be interpreted as follows: Moses spoke to the children of Israel regarding the heads of the tribes, that they must follow their instructions as one follows the word of G-d.

(*El*, "to" can also mean "about"; *le* which in this context translates as "of", usually means "to"; thus *el rashei hamatot le'benei yisrael* ("to the heads of the tribes of the children of Israel") can also read, "[And Moses spoke] about the heads of the tribes to the children of Israel, [saying: This is the thing that G-d has commanded]...")

(Alshich)

the vengeance of the children of Israel: *And Moses spoke to the people: "Arm yourselves... to take G-d's vengeance on Midian" (31:3)*

G-d had said to Moses, "Avenge the vengeance of the children of Israel upon the Midianites"; yet Moses said: "To take G-d's vengeance on Midian!"

G-d said to Israel: It is you who have an account to settle with them, for they caused Me to harm you. But Moses said: Master of the worlds! If we had been uncircumcised, or idol-worshippers, or had denied the mitzvot, the Midianites would not have hated us. They only persecute us on account of the Torah and the precepts which

And Moses spoke to the people, saying: "Arm from yourselves men for an army, to go **against Midian** and to take G-d's vengeance on Midian...."

And there were delivered out of the thousands of Israel, a thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war.

And **Moses** sent them to the war, a thousand of every tribe, them and **Pinchas** the son of Elazar the priest, to the war,

Commentary

You have given us! Consequently the vengeance is Yours; and so I say: "To take G-d's vengeance on Midian." (Midrash Tanchuma)

against Midian: Avenge the vengeance (31:2)

The double terminology indicates that before the nation of Midian can be defeated, its supernal "minister", which embodies the spiritual essence of Midian, must be vanquished. (Keli Chemda)

The Hebrew word *midian* means "strife". Midian is the essence of divisiveness, which is the root of all evil.

Thus our Sages speak of "groundless hatred" as the greatest of evils. In truth *all* strife is groundless hatred: the so called "grounds" that people and nations have for hating and destroying each other are but the various façades of the divisive "I" of Midian -- the ego that belies the common source and goal of humanity and views the very existence of others as an encroachment upon the self.

On the cosmic level, G-d is the ultimate oneness, and everything G-dly in our world bears the stamp of His unity. All evil derives from the distortion of this oneness by the veil of divisiveness in which G-d shrouds His creation.

So before the people of Israel could conquer the "seven nations" that inhabited the Land of Canaan -- which represent the seven negative traits of the heart -- they first had to destroy Midian, which is their source and cause. This is also why the destruction of Midian could only be achieved under the leadership of Moses, who embodied the traits of utter self-abnegation, (and thus) harmony and truth. (Maamar Heichaltzu 5659)

Moses: And Moses sent them to the war... them and Pinchas the son of Elazar the priest (31:6)

G-d charged Moses with the mission, yet he sends others! But since Moses had grown up in the land of Midian, he thought: It is not right that I should punish one who has done good to me. The proverb says: "A well from which you drank, cast not a stone into it."

(Midrash Rabbah)

with the holy instruments, and the trumpets to blow in his hand.

And they **warred** against Midian, as G-d commanded Moses, and they slew all the males.

Also killed are the five kings of Midian (Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Hur and Reva) and the evil prophet **Balaam**. Not killed but captured were "all the women of Midian, and their little ones." Also taken is "the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods."

Upon their return,

Moses, and Elazar the priest, and all the princes of the congregation, went out to meet them outside the camp.

Commentary

Pinchas: And Moses sent... Pinchas the son of Elazar the priest (31:6)

Why did he send Pinchas? He said: "The one who began the mitzvah shall finish it." It was Pinchas who turned away G-d's wrath from Israel and smote the Midianite woman; let him finish the sacred task. (Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

warred: And they warred against Midian, as G-d commanded Moses (31:7)

When laying siege on a city to conquer it, we do not surround it from all four sides, but only from three sides, leaving a way to escape for anyone who wishes to flee for his life. As it is written: "And they warred against Midian, as G-d commanded Moses"; it has been handed down by tradition that this is what G-d had commanded him.

(Mishneh Torah, Laws of Kings and their Wars 6:7)

Balaam: Also Balaam the son of Beor they slew with the sword (31:8)

What was Balaam doing in Midian? Rabbi Jonathan said: He went to receive his reward for the twenty-four thousand Israelites whose destruction he had caused [by his advice to entice them with the daughters of Moab and Midian] ... This is what people say: "When the camel went to demand horns, they cut off the ears he had."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 106a)

And Moses was angry with the officers of the host... and said to them: "Have you saved all the women alive?"

"Behold, these caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to betray G-d in the matter of Pe'or, and there was a plague among the congregation of G-d. Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that has known man by lying with him. But all the women children, that have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourselves."

Moses also tells them to undergo the seven day purification process for one who comes in contact with the dead, while Elazar instructs them on the laws of *hagalah* ("koshering"--the cleansing of utensils of the non-kosher cooking absorbed in them), by which to cleanse the "gold, silver, copper, iron, tin and lead" utensils captured in the war:

Everything that passes through the fire, you shall make it go through the fire... and all that does not pass through the fire shall you make to go through water.

The Booty

A tally is made of the spoils taken in the war on Midian, which include: 675,000 sheep; 72,000 heads of cattle; 61,000 asses; and 32,000 human captives.

All this was divided into two equal parts: half was given to the soldiers who fought in the war, who in turn gave one five-hundredth of their share as a "tax" to the High Priest; the other half was divided among the people, who gave one fiftieth of their share to the Levites. (Thus the High Priest received 675 sheep, 72 cattle, 61 asses and 32 human captives; while the Levites received 6,750 sheep, 720 cattle, 610 asses and 320 human captives).

Everything else (i.e., utensils, jewelry and the like) was decreed to belong to the soldiers, to each what he had captured. However,

The officers who were over the thousands of the host, the captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, approached Moses.

*And they said to Moses: "Your servants have taken a count of the men of war who are under our charge, and **not one man of us is missing**."*

Commentary

not one man of us is missing: *A thousand of every tribe, twelve thousand armed for war (31:5)*

"We have therefore brought an offering for G-d, what every man has gotten, of jewels of gold, chains, and bracelets, rings, earrings, and girdles--to make atonement for our souls before G-d."

The donated gold totaled 16,750 shekels (approx. 837.5 pounds), which Moses placed in the Tent of Meeting as "a remembrance for the children of Israel before G-d."

The Eastern Territories

As related in the Parshah of Chukat (Numbers 21), the people of Israel had conquered the lands of Sichon and Og, which lay east of the Jordan River.

*And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle; and they saw the land of Yaazer and the land of Gilead, that, behold, the place was **a place for cattle**.*

And [they] came to Moses, and to Elazar the priest, and to the princes of the congregation, and they said: "... let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not take us across the Jordan."

Moses is extremely upset by their request. "Shall your brethren go to war," he demands, "and you sit here?"

"And why," continues Moses, "do you dishearten the children of Israel from going over into the land which G-d has given them?"

Commentary

Moses wanted to demonstrate to them that it is not the number of troops or their arms that determines victory or defeat, but their worthiness. For Zimri had caused the death of 24,000 without a single sword or armament; while they, numbering only 12,000, will defeat the far more numerous Midianites, "and not a single one of them was lost" (Numbers 31:49), even though in ordinary wars, there are casualties also on the victorious side. (Me'am Loez)

a place for cattle: *And Moses said to them... "Build cities for your young, and sheepfolds for your sheep" (32:24)*

They, on the other hand, had said, "We will build sheepfolds here for our sheep, and cities for our young" (v. 16) giving precedence to their cattle over their children. Said Moses to them: Not so! Make the primary thing primary, and the secondary thing secondary.

(Rashi)

Thus did your fathers, when I sent them from Kadesh-Barnea to see the land.

They went up to the wadi of Eshkol and saw the Land; and they disheartened the children of Israel, that they should not go into the land which G-d had given them.

*And G-d's anger burned at that time, and he swore, saying: "Surely none of the men that came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob..." G-d's anger burned against Israel, and he made them wander in the wilderness for forty years, until all the **generation**, that had done evil in the sight of G-d, was consumed.*

And, behold, you are risen up in place of your fathers, a brood of sinful men, to augment yet the fierce anger of G-d towards Israel. For if you turn away from after Him, He will yet again leave them in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people!

But the Reubenites and the Gadites persist "We will **build** sheepfolds

Commentary

generation: *And Moses gave the Gilead to Machir the son of Menasseh... And Yair the son of Menasseh went and conquered their villages... (32:40-41)*

We learned: Yair the son of Menasseh and Machir the son of Menasseh were born in the days of Jacob, and did not die before Israel entered the Land. (But does it not say, "And there was not left a man of [the generation of the desert], save Caleb the son of Yefuneh, and Joshua the son of Nun"? Said Rav Acha bar Yaakov: The decree was directed neither against those under twenty years of age, nor against those over sixty years of age.)

(Talmud, Bava Batra 121b)

build: *So did your fathers... (32:8)*

If Moses initially saw their request as the equivalent of the Spies' shunning of the Holy Land, why did he, at the end, agree to their proposal, and even expand on it, by adding half the tribe of Menasseh to the tribes of Reuben and Gad?

(The fact that they pledged to participate in other tribes' conquest of the Land only answered the first part of Moses' complaint to them -- "Shall your brethren go to war, and you sit here?" -- but not the other, seemingly more grave accusation, namely that they are

. here for our cattle, and cities for our little ones." But we have no intention to remain behind while the rest of the people fight for the conquest of the Land; indeed, we promised to march at the fore of the troops and fight in the front lines. "We will not return to our houses, until the children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance."

Commentary

repeating the sin of the Spies in spurning the Land, which had caused that entire generation to die out in the desert!

The explanation is to be found in the first words of the response given by the men of Reuben and Gad to Moses: "We will build sheepfolds here for our sheep, and cities for our young."

Chassidic teaching explains the sin of the Spies as resulting from a reluctance to assume the mission of "settling the Land". Though they knew that the very purpose of creation is to "Make for G-d a dwelling in the lowly (i.e., physical) world", they believed themselves incapable of carrying out this mission. "It is a land that consumes its settlers!" the Spies cried upon their return from their survey of the Land. How could they be sure that once they involved themselves with the land, they would not be overwhelmed by its corporeality? How could they know whether they would indeed exploit its lofty potential and not instead sink into the morass of material life?

When the people of Reuben and Gad came forward with their request, Moses thought that he was again meeting with a refusal by a group of "spiritualists" shunning the Divinely-ordained mission to develop the Land.

In truth, however, it was not the dread of the material that motivated these two tribes to remain east of the Jordan. On the contrary: they wanted to *settle* these lands, to build cities and ranches, to raise their sheep and cattle on its pastures. Their plea, "Do not take us across the Jordan" did not express a reluctance to seek out the potential for holiness contained in the Land, but an attraction to even more remote -- and thus even loftier -- "sparks of G-dliness."

After all, the land west of the Jordan, though material, was the "Holy Land" -- a land where even the most mundane pursuits are touched with a spiritual glow. Outside of the Holy Land, the physical world is *more* lowly, and thus contains sparks of Divinity that derive from an even higher source. The tribes of Reuben and Gad were convinced that their mission in life was to pursue, extract and elevate the "sparks" inherent in this more spiritually distant corner of creation.

When they said to Moses, "We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle and cities for our children," Moses understood that what they were seeking was not an escape from the Land, but the opportunity to "make a home for G-d" in an even lowlier domain -- in the territories that lie beyond the borders of the most sacred of lands as defined by Israel's present mandate from G-d.

(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

Moses agrees, on the **condition** that they fulfill their promise: "If you will do this thing, if you will go armed before G-d to war... Then afterwards you shall return, and be **guiltless** before G-d and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before G-d."

Half of the tribe of Menasseh joins the tribes of Reuben and Gad in settling the territories east of the Jordan.

Journeys and Encampments

Commentary

condition: *If the children of Gad and the children of Reuben will pass with you over the Jordan... (32:29)*

Rabbi Meir said: Every stipulation which is not like that of the children of Gad and the children of Reuben is not legally binding. For it is written: "And Moses said unto them: If the children of Gad and the children of Reuben will pass with you over the Jordan, [... you shall give them the land of Gilead for a possession]," and it is also written, "But if they will not pass over with you armed, then they shall have possessions among you in the Land of Canaan." (I.e., both sides of the condition have to be spelled out -- if the condition is fulfilled, then so-and-so will be the case, but if the stipulation is not fulfilled, then so-and so will be the case.)

(Talmud, Kiddushin 61a)

guiltless: *And you shall be guiltless towards G-d and towards Israel (32:22)*

The Sages taught: Always appoint at least two people together as trustees over public funds. Even Moses, who enjoyed the full trust of G-d--as it is written, "In all My house, he is trusted"--figured the accounts of the Sanctuary together with others, as it says: "By the hand of Itamar the son of Aaron" (Exodus 38:21).

Thus the Sages taught: the one who made the appropriation [of the monies donated to the Holy Temple] did not enter the chamber wearing either a hemmed cloak or shoes or sandals or *tefillin* or an amulet (i.e., nothing in which money can be hidden); lest if he became poor people might say that he became poor because of an iniquity committed in the chamber, or if he became rich people might say that he became rich from the monies in the chamber. For it is a man's duty to be free of **blame** before men as before G-d, as it is said: "And you shall be guiltless towards G-d and towards Israel." (Midrash Tanchuma; Mishnah, Shekalim 3:2)

Half: *And half the tribe of Menasseh (32:33)*

Because Menasseh caused the sons of Jacob to rend their clothes by hiding Joseph's goblet in Benjamin's sack (cf. Genesis 44:13), his tribe was rent in two, half receiving its portion in the lands east of the Jordan, and half on the west. (Midrash Rabbah)

"These are the journeys of the children of Israel going out of the land of Egypt with their hosts, under the hand of Moses and Aaron. And Moses wrote their **goings out** according to their journeys by the commandment of G-d; and these are their journeys according to their goings out."

Commentary

Journeys and Encampments: *And they journeyed from... and they camped at... (33:1-49)*

Our chapter opens, "These are the journeys of the children of Israel." However, it then proceeds to recount not the journeys but the forty-two encampments at which they *stopped* during their sojourn in the Sinai Desert!

Yet these encampments were not ends unto themselves--only way-stations and stepping stones to advance the nation of Israel in their goal of attaining the Promised Land. So the stops themselves are referred to as "journeys".

The same is true of the journey of life. Pauses, interruptions and setbacks are an inadvertent part of a person's sojourn on earth. But when everything a person does is toward the goal of attaining the "Holy Land" -- the sanctification of the material world -- these, too, are "journeys". Ultimately, they are shown to have been the true motors of progression, each an impetus to the realization of one's mission and purpose in life.

(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

goings out: *These are the journeys of the children of Israel going out of the land of Mitzrayim (Egypt)... (33:1)*

It would seem that there was only *one* journey which took the Jewish nation out of Egypt--their journey from Raamses to Sukkot. The other "journeys" listed in our Parshah were between points outside of the geographical borders of Egypt. Why, then, does the Torah speak of "the journeys" -- in the plural -- "of the children of Israel going out of the land of *Mitzrayim*"?

Mitzrayim, the Hebrew word for "Egypt," means "borders" and "narrows." On the spiritual level, the journey from Egypt is a journey from the boundaries that limit us--an Exodus from the narrow straits of habit, convention and ego to the "good broad land" of the infinite potential of our G-dly soul.

And the journey from *Mitzrayim* is a perpetual one: what is expansive and uninhibited by yesterdays standards, is narrow and confining in light of the added wisdom and new possibilities of today's station. Thus, each of life's "journeys" is an Exodus from the land of *Mitzrayim*: having transcended yesterdays limitations, we must again journey from the *Mitzrayim* that our present norm represents relative to our newly-uncovered potential.

(Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi)

The Torah goes on to **recount** the 42 stations from the Exodus from Egypt to the Promised Land:

- 1) "And they journeyed from Raamses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month; on the morrow after the Passover... and they camped in Sukkot";
- 2) "And they journeyed from Sukkot, and camped in Etam, which is in the edge of the wilderness";
- 3) "And they journeyed from Etam, and turned back to Pi-Hachiroth, which is before Baal-Tzefon; and they camped before Migdol";
- 4) "They passed through the midst of the sea into the desert, and went three days' journey in the wilderness of Etam and camped in Mara";
- 5) Elim ("in Elim were twelve fountains of water and seventy palm trees");
- 6) The Red Sea; 7) the Sin Desert; 8) Dofkah; 9) Alush; 10) **Rephidim** (where they thirsted for water, had **doubts** about G-d's presence, and fought Amalek);

Commentary

recount: *And Moses wrote down their goings out to their journeys, by the command of G-d (33:2)*

This is comparable to a king whose child was ill, and he took him to another place to heal him. On their return journey, the father recounted all their stations: "Here we slept," "Here we caught cold," "Here your head hurt." By the same token, G-d said to Moses: Recount for them all the places where it was that they had angered Me (Midrash Tanchuma)

Rephidim: "Here we slept" -- at Mount Sinai, when Moses had to wake them to come receive the Torah. "Here we caught cold" -- at Rephidim, where the Amalekites "cooled (your faith in G-d) on the road." "Here your head hurt" -- when they doubted the return of their head and leader, Moses, and made the Golden Calf.

(Rabbi Abraham Mordechai of Gur)

doubts: The journey from Egypt to the Holy Land was a one-way journey: the Israelites did not physically revisit their encampments in the desert. What, then, is the significance of the "return journey" made by the king and his child in the above-cited parable by the Midrash?

As the people of Israel traveled through the desert, they experienced their forty-two encampments as interruptions, even

Commentary

setbacks, in their progress towards the Promised Land. But on the eve of their entry into the Holy Land, they were able to "return", to look back upon these encampments and re-experience them in a different light: not as a people venturing from slavery toward an unknowable goal through a fearful wilderness, but as a people who, having attained their goal, could now appreciate how each way-station in their journey had forged a particular part of their identity and had contributed to what and where they were today.

The great desert we each must cross in the journey of life is the product of what the Kabbalists call the *tzimtzum* ("constriction"): G-d's creation of a so-called vacuum within His all-pervading immanence, a bubble of darkness within His infinite light that allows man the choice between good and evil. For in order that our acts of goodness should be meaningful, there must also be the choice of evil.

Three conditions are necessary to create the possibility of free choice in the heart of man:

a) There must be a withdrawal of the divine light and the creation of the "vacuum" that allows the existence of evil.

b) It is not enough that evil exist; it must also be equipped with the illusion of worthiness and desirability. If evil were readily perceived for what it is -- the suppression of light and life -- there would be no true choice.

c) On the other hand, an absolute vacuum would shut out all possibility for choosing life. Thus the *tzimtzum* must be mitigated with a glow, however faint, of the Divine light that empowers us to overcome darkness and death.

Therein lies the deeper significance of the three stations in the Midrashes metaphor -- "Here we slept," "Here we were cooled," "Here your head hurt."

"Here we slept" refers to the withdrawal of the Divine vitality in order to create the *tzimtzum*.

"Here we were cooled" refers to the mitigation of the *tzimtzum* with a faint glow of divine light.

And "Here your head hurt" is a reference to the many contortions that cloud our minds and confuse our priorities, leading to a distorted vision of reality and misguided decisions.

All these, however, serve a single purpose: to advance us along the journey of life and to imbue the journey with meaning and worth. Today we can only reiterate to ourselves our knowledge of this truth; on the "return journey," we shall revisit these stations and see and experience their true import.

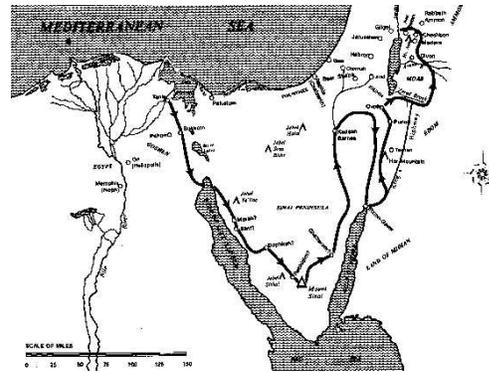
(From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

11) The Sinai Desert (where they camped for eleven months and twenty days, received the Torah and built the Sanctuary);

12) Kivrot Hattaavah ("Graves of Lust"); 13) Hazerot (where Miriam spoke against Moses); 14) Ritmah (the incident of the Spies); 15) Rimon Peretz; 16) Livnah; 17) Rissah; 18) Keheilatah; 19) Mount Shefer; 20) Charadah; 21) Makheilot; 22) Tachat; 23) Tarach; 24) Mitkah; 25) Chashmonah; 26) Moseirot; 27) Bnei Yaakan; 28) Chod Hagidgad; 29) Yotvatah; 30) Abronah; 31) Etzyon Gaver;

32) **Kadesh** (where Miriam died, and the incident of the "Waters of Strife" took place); 33) Hor HaHar (where Aaron died and the Israelites were attacked by the Canaanite king of Arad); 34) Tzalmonah; 35) Punon; 36) Ovot; 37) I'yei Haavarim ("Desolate Mounds") on the border of Moab; 38) Divon Gad; 39) Almon Divlatomah; 40) "the Avarim Mountains before Nebo";

41) "And they journeyed from the Avarim Mountains and camped in the plains of Moab by the Jordan River across from Jericho; they **camped** by the Jordan, from Bet-HaYeshimot to Avel-HaShittim in the plains of Moab."



The Journeys of the Children of Israel from the Exodus to the Promised Land (from *The Living Torah*, published by Moznim)

A Warning

"Speak to the children of Israel," says G-d to Moses, "and say to them:"

When you pass over the Jordan into the land of Canaan, you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you; and you shall destroy all their figured pavements, and destroy all their molten images, and devastate all their high places.

*And you shall **dispossess** the inhabitants of the land, and dwell in it; for I have given you the land to possess it...*

But if you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall come to pass, that those whom you allow to remain of them shall be as thorns in your eyes, and stings in your sides, and shall harass you in the land wherein you dwell.

Commentary

Kadesh: *And they journeyed from Etzyon-Gaver, and camped in the wilderness of Tzin, which is Kadesh (33:36)*

Hence "journeys" 1 through 11 were in the first year following the Exodus, journeys 32-42 in the fortieth year, meaning that there were nineteen journeys in the intervening thirty-eight years. According to the Midrash, 19 of these 38 years were spent in Kadesh, and the other 19 wandering through the desert.

camped: *And they camped by the Jordan, from Bet-HaYeshimot to Avel-HaShittim in the plains of Moab (33:49)*

(I.e., their camp extended from Bet-HaYeshimot to Avel-HaShittim in the plains of Moab.)

Rabbah bar Chana said: I have seen this place, it is three parasangs (approx. 12 miles) in extension.

(Talmud, Yoma 75b; Rashi)

Commentary

dispossess: *And you shall dispossess the inhabitants of the land, and dwell in it; for I have given you the land to possess it (33:53)*

The Torah should have begun with the verse "This month shall be to you the head of months..." (Exodus 12:2) which is the first mitzvah commanded to the Jewish people. Why does it begin with "In the beginning G-d created the heavens and the earth"?

So that if the nations of the world will say to the people of Israel, "You are thieves, for you have conquered the lands of seven nations," they will reply to them: "The entire world is G-d's; He created it and He gives it to whomever he desires. It was His desire to first give it to them, and by His desire it was taken from them and given to us." (Rashi, Genesis 1:10)

The Boundaries of the Land

This is the land that shall fall to you for an inheritance, the land of Canaan with its borders:

Your south border shall be the outmost coast of the Dead Sea eastward... to Ma'aleh-Akrabbim... to Kadesh-Barnea, and shall go on to Hazar-Addar, and pass on to Atzmon; the border shall turn about from Atzmon to the wadi of Egypt, and its limits shall be at the Sea.

And as for the western border, you shall have the Great Sea for a border; this shall be your west border.

And this shall be your north border: from the Great Sea you shall mark out your frontier at Hor HaHar... to the entrance of Hamat... to Zedad... to Zifron, and its limits shall be at Hatzar Einan...

And you shall point out your east border from Hatzar Eienan to Shefam... to Rivlah... and shall reach the eastward projection of the Sea of Kinneret... down to the Jordan, and its limits shall be at the Dead Sea.

This shall be your land with its borders round about.

The tribe of Levi, who will not be allotted a portion of the land, should be given 48 cities in which to dwell.

Cities of Refuge

Six cities--three on each side of the Jordan--should be set aside as havens for "**one who slays a soul unawares.**"

Commentary

Six cities: *Six cities of refuge shall they be for you (35:13)*

The Torah includes six hundred and thirteen mitzvot (commandments)... Of these, the mitzvot that can be observed today [following the destruction of the Holy Temple and our exile from the Holy Land] number, altogether, three hundred and thirty-nine. Among these are mitzvot for which a person becomes obligated only under certain circumstances, so that it is possible that never in his lifetime will these circumstances come about and he will never have the opportunity to do them--e.g., the mitzvah to pay an employee on time... The number of mitzvot that every Jew is obligated in is two hundred and seventy... Many of these, however, are binding only on certain days of the year or certain times of the day.

There are six mitzvot whose obligation is constant, and does not depart from the person for a single moment throughout his lifetime. These are: to believe in G-d, to avow His oneness, to renounce idolatry, to love G-d, to fear Him, and to avoid temptation to sin.

Anyone who causes the death of a fellow--intentionally or not--must **find his way** immediately to one of the Cities of Refuge, "so that the killer shall not die before he stand before the congregation in judgment." Only there is he safe from the "redeemer of the blood"--the relative of the slain person who comes to avenge the death. For if the avenging relative kills the killer outside of a city of refuge, "he shall not be guilty of blood."

Commentary

They are symbolized by the verse, "Six cities of refuge shall they be for you." (Sefer HaChinuch)

one who slays a soul unawares: *To flee there anyone who slays a soul unawares (35:15)*

Every transgression of the Divine will is a subtle form of "inadvertent murder": "Murder" because it disrupts the flow of vitality from the Source of Life to the soul of the transgressor; "inadvertent" because a sinful deed is always contrary to the true will of the transgressor, who has been misled by the distortions imposed by his animal self.

For the one who spiritually "slays a soul unawares" there have been set aside six spiritual "cities of refuge." These are (as per the Sefer HaChinuch cited above) the "six constant mitzvot" that apply to every Jew, at all times, and in all circumstances, so that they are readily accessible to one who seeks refuge from his faults and failings, whomever he might be and wherever the desire to rectify his life might strike him.

But a haven is of little use if it is inaccessible or its location is unknown. As is the case with the physical cities of refuge, it is the community's responsibility to "straighten the roads... to repair them and broaden them... remove all impediments and obstacles" and post signs at all crossroads and pointing the way to the haven of Torah. (From the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe)

find his way: *And you shall appoint for you cities, to be cities of refuge for you (35:11)*

The court is obligated to straighten the roads to the cities of refuge, to repair them and broaden them. They must remove all impediments and obstacles... bridges should be built [over all natural barriers] so as not to delay one who is fleeing to [the city of refuge]. The width of a road to a city of refuge should not be less than thirty-two cubits.

"Refuge", "Refuge", was written at all crossroads so that the murderers should recognize the way and turn there.

(Mishneh Torah, Laws Regarding Murder and the Preservation of Life, 8:5)

The killer is then brought before the court. If he is convicted of intentional murder, he is executed. "The redeemer of the blood himself shall slay the murderer; where he meets him, he shall slay him."

If he is found guilty only of causing a death through his negligence, but without intent to kill,

The congregation [of judges] shall save the slayer from the hand of the redeemer of the blood; and the congregation shall send him back to the city of his refuge... and he shall dwell in it until the death of the High Priest, who was anointed with the holy oil.

Commentary

of judges: And the congregation shall judge... and the congregation shall save... (35:24-25)

The Great Sanhedrin (which served as the supreme court of Torah law) consisted of seventy-one members; a Minor Sanhedrin (authorized to try capital crimes), of twenty-three... From where do we know that a Minor Sanhedrin is of twenty-three? It is written, "And the congregation shall judge... and the congregation shall save." One congregation condemns and the other congregation defends, hence we have twenty, as a "congregation" (*eidah*) consists of not less than ten... And from where do we derive the additional three? By the implications of the text (Exodus 23:2)... which says that to acquit, a majority of one suffices, whereas to convict, a majority of two is required. (Thus if ten judges vote to acquit, it would require a tribunal of 22 to convict). And since a court cannot be of an even number, we need twenty-three.

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 2a)

until the death of the High Priest: And he shall remain there until the death of the High Priest (35:25)

Therefore, mothers of high priests were wont to provide food and raiment for them, that they should not pray for their son's death.

Why is the High Priest to blame? --As they say here [in Babylon], "Toby did the jobbing and Ziggad got the slogging?" or as they say there [in the Land of Israel]: "Shechem got him a wife and Mabgai caught the knife?" Said a venerable old scholar: I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Raba, that they should have implored Divine grace for their generation, which they failed to do.

As was the case of that fellow who was devoured by a lion some three parasangs from the town where Rabbi Joshua ben Levi lived, and Elijah the Prophet would not commune with Rabbi Joshua on that account for three days. (Talmud, Makot 11a)

Again, only there does the law protect him from the vengeance of the slain man's relatives.

And these laws shall be for a statute of judgment to you throughout your generations in all your dwellings:

Whoever kills any person, the murderer shall be put to death by the testimony of [two] witnesses; but one witness shall not testify against any person to cause him to die.

You shall take no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death... For blood pollutes the land; and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.

And you shall not defile the land which you shall inhabit, in which I dwell; for I, G-d, dwell among the children of Israel.

Marriage Restrictions

Commentary

I, G-d: For blood pollutes the land... in which I dwell; for I, G-d, dwell among the children of Israel (35:33-34)

How were the Ten Commandments given? Five on one tablet and five on a second tablet. This means that "Do not murder" corresponds to "I am G-d your G-d." The Torah is telling us that one who sheds blood it is as if he has reduced the image of the King.

What is this analogous to? To a king of flesh and blood who entered a country and put up portraits of himself, and made statues of himself, and minted coins with his image. After a while, the people of the country overturned his portraits, broke his statues and invalidated his coins, thereby reducing the image of the kind. So, too, one who sheds blood reduces the image of the King, as it is written (Genesis 9:6): "One who spills a man's blood... for in the image of G-d He made man." (Mechilta)

Restrictions: *To one of the family of her father's tribe shall she be a wife (36:8)*

Said Rabbi Shimon ben Gamliel: "There never were in Israel greater days of joy than the fifteenth of Av and Yom Kippur.

I can understand Yom Kippur, because it is a day of forgiveness and pardon and on it the second Tablets of the Law were given; but what happened on the fifteenth of Av? Rav Judah said in the name of Shmuel: It is the day on which permission was granted to the tribes to intermarry. For it is written: "This is the thing which G-d has commanded concerning the daughters of Tzelafchad...."--meaning this ordinance shall remain in effect for this generation only.

(Talmud, Taanit 30b)

The five daughters of Tzelafchad, whose father had died without sons, had petitioned for a share in the Land (as recounted above in the Parshah of Pinchas). Now, the leaders of their tribe, Menasseh, approached Moses with a petition of their own. If any of these women will marry someone from another tribe, they argued, this would mean that their sons, who will inherit their land, will likewise be of another tribe. The result would be that, "their portion... and shall be added to the inheritance of the tribe to which they are joined, and the lot of our inheritance will be diminished."

The following law is therefore decreed by Moses, in the name of G-d:

Any daughter who possesses an inheritance in any tribe of the children of Israel, shall marry a man of the family of the tribe of her father... So that the inheritance shall not remove from one tribe to another tribe; but every one of the tribes of the children of Israel shall keep himself to his own inheritance.

"These are the commandments and the judgments," concludes the Parshah of Massei and the Book of Numbers, "which G-d commanded by the hand of Moses to the children of Israel, in the plains of Moab by the Jordan near Jericho."

Commentary

A Tale of Two Birds of Paradise

Many wonderful things were said in praise of the Jewish people by our own holy prophets and sages. Yet, every morning, we begin our prayers with the words of the evil prophet Balaam, a man who would have cursed the nation for gold and silver, had G-d only allowed. Some explanation is needed. And so, we have this story, which I heard from my teacher, Rabbi Elimelech Zwiebel:

In another dimension of time, in a world beyond ours, is a forest filled with magnificent creatures. Of all the creatures there, the birds are the most spectacular, and of all the birds, the tzidikel bird is more beautiful than them all. And of all the tzidikel birds, one stands out with dazzling beauty, beyond anything words can describe.

Every morning in this splendorous forest, the creatures gather before sunrise about the tree of the tzidikel bird. As the sun reaches the tops of the trees, its rays shine down through the canopy and the tzidikel opens its wings in full glory. A panorama of colors glisten and sparkle in its feathers, dancing in the sunlight like so many magical stars and fairies to entertain the bird's delighted audience. Each morning is a more glorious spectacle than the day before. Each morning all the creatures ahhh and ooh in wonder.

All this occurred every day within that dimension of time, until, one year, a new bird came to the forest. Soon enough, the creatures began to gather at the roost of this new bird each morning, leaving the tzidikel all but alone.

"Is she then more glorious than I?" demanded the tzidikel of her few remaining faithful. "How could this be? There are no colors left in the universe that I do not possess!"

"But she," her faithful muttered, their heads hanging from shame, "she has no colors. She is black."

The fury of the tzidikel knew no bounds. She was the perfection of the art of beauty, and if black was to be beautiful, then there was no beauty at all. In rage, she tore herself from her branch and flew to see her rival.

There stood the creatures of the forest in silent wonder. Perhaps it was the oils of the black bird's feathers that refracted the light of the sun as a prism into so many rainbows. Perhaps it was the mystery of her absolute blackness, or the contrast she held against the bright morning sky. All that could be said is that it was an intangible beauty, not of something that could be painted, or described or known in any way. It was beauty as indefinable as black is dark.

"Is she then more glorious than I?!" screamed the tzidikel from her perch above the crowd.

"We cannot tell," the animals explained, trembling. "For it is no longer dawn."

"Very well then," cried the tzidikel. "We will have a contest at dawn! But who will be the judge?"

No creature dared volunteer for such a task. And neither could the two birds themselves come to a consensus. So it was decided that the two would appear at dawn at a position known only to them and the first creature to appear would adjudicate their contest.

All night they prepared their feathers and rehearsed their movements, all night at their secret post in the forest. And as the sun began to rise, they ruffled their feathers and then with a dramatic swoosh spread them wide in the most glorious scene ever to come to the most glorious of forests. Yet there was no witness to that scene, none but the two birds themselves.

Until, from behind the bushes below, a sound was heard that almost toppled the tzidikel from her tree in horror. It was the grunt of a wild boar.

Covered in mud and smelling of its own excrement, the boar appeared, and yes, even he was delighted with the beauty that encountered him. And the two birds, surrendered to the fate of their contest, both spread their feathers and turned elegantly, displaying their pride to the pig below.

He grunted, he snorted, he coughed. He asked for a replay again and again. And after an hour or so, he finally set forth his verdict: The black bird was the most beautiful of them all.

"If so," cried the tzidikel, "my beauty is not beauty. There is no place left for me." And she flew away from the forest, never to be heard of again.

The tzidikel is the light G-d brings into His creation. Through miracles, through *tzaddikim*, through righteous acts that have no tint of personal motives. The black bird is the darkness. But when the darkness is turned to beauty, it is a beauty so great that light is dim and impotent before it.

As for the pig, it is this lowly world, the world of action, which the Creator Himself has declared the final judge of truth and beauty.

By Tzvi Freeman; [click here](#) for bio, info and more articles by this author. To order his book, "Bringing Heaven Down to Earth", [click here](#).