

PORTION	DATE	HEB DATE	TORAH	NEVIIM	RENEWED
Mattot / Massei	14 July 2018	2 Av 5778	Num. 30:1-36:13	Jer. 2:4-28; 3:4	Luke 13:1-9; Mark 11:12-23

In Mattot, the parshah begins with vows. In Hebrew, it is *ne•der* (נדֵר) that has been translated as “vow.” But the word “*ne•der*” is actually a lot more than English “vow” as in “*neder*”, rather it is a “promise” of not to do for something that is permitted and it is something that is beneficial to you.

In Ecclesiastes 5:4 says, “When you vow a vow to Elohim, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools: pay that which you have vowed.” Hashem is telling us being very careful to make vows and not to break them. If they do, the breaking of vows will eventually transgress oath. Taking an oath involves swearing in the Name of Hashem. When they break an oath, they are considered to have denied Hashem, and there is no forgiveness as said in Exodus 20:7, “You shall not bring (swear) in the Name of YHWH your Elohim in vain emptiness; for YHWH will not hold him guiltless that brings His Name to vain emptiness.” Even in truth, you are not permitted to swear.

If a person does not plan on fulfilling his vow, then he is forbidden to make it. For he transgresses a negative commandment and a positive commandment. If he violates the terms of his *neder* or postpones its fulfillment, he transgresses the commandment of not to desecrate and the commandment of not to delay.¹

Now, a person can vow to fulfill a mitzvah as said by King David in Psalms 119:106, “I have sworn, and I will perform it, that I will keep Your *tzadik mishpatim* (righteous ordinances).” Baal Shem Tov teaches that every mitzvah we perform fixes all the aspects of “souls”. These five levels allude to the four letters of Tetragrammaton. The *nefesh* corresponds to the final *hei*, the *ruach* to the *vav*, the *neshama* to the first *hei*, the *chaya* to the *yud*, and the *yechida* to the small point at the top left of the *yud*.

When a person thinks about performing mitzvah, he still has no fear of the Accuser or Satan as the thoughts have no “shells” or *kelipot* for the thoughts have no attachment to it. The *kelipot* are forces of impurity and evil that opposes the performance of mitzvah, by claiming that a person is not worthy to do it. However, when he verbalizes his intention to do a mitzvah, then there are evil forces to hinder the mitzvah, for the “shells” draw sustenance from the place of speech.²

Each mitzvah is divided into three categories: speech, voice, and thought. When the mitzvah is performed with speech, such as prayer or Torah study, then that is the lowest level. The two higher levels would then be voice and thought.

In Numbers 31, Hashem commands Moshe to “avenge the children of Yisrael against Midianites.” Hashem did not say “revenge” for the death of 24,000 Yisraelites. He said, “Avenge”. We can learn from this that Hashem hates promiscuity and idol worshippers. If we examine the Torah closely, the complaints of Yisraelites always brought negative consequences. In a way, when we complaint, we are bringing the Accuser closer to us. The disciple, R’ Shimon bar Yochai who studied³ in the cave for 13 years, saw a man, and he exclaimed, “Urgh. An ugly man!” The man turned around and said, “Why don’t you go to the designer of this face and complain to Him?” Immediately, he realized he made a mistake. He thought what rights did he has to accuse Hashem’s creation? The word we utter can bring peace or war. Realizing his

¹ BT, Nedarim 3b

² Baal Shem Tov, Matos, p. 112-116

³ The Kabbalah teaches in Tikkunei Zohar that it was Eliyahu who taught R’ Yochai.

mistake, he chases the man around the town to ask for forgiveness. The lesson is as we get closer to Hashem, our actions have greater consequences whether it is positive or negative.

Also, complaining shows you your level of *emunah* (faith) in Hashem. Learn to say thank you to Hashem. Because Satan is always pointing a gun (accuse) at you and he is waiting for Hashem's command to shoot (judgment) you. What prevents it? Gratitude. Thanking Hashem for everything that we do, see, and hear. Third is a desire. There are seven things Hashem hates: (1) abomination, (2) a proud look, (3) a lying tongue, (4) hands that shed innocent blood, (5) a heart that plans wicked imaginations, (6) feet that swift in running to mischief, (7) he that sows discord among brothers. (Prov. 6:16-19) These can be summed up as Hashem hates ungrateful and proudful. Hashem says, "No Ammonite or Moabite or any of their descendants may enter the assembly of YHWH, not even in the tenth generation." (Deut. 23:3) Why? They were descendants of Lot who received *lechem* (bread) from Abraham. But, they refused to help Yisrael who were descendants of Abraham. Because of their ungratefulness, Ammonites or Moabites will never "enter the assembly of YHWH."

When Hashem says to "Avenge the children of Yisraelites," Moshe jumps up and he gathers the people to go to war immediately. Moshe picks Pinchas as a battle commander and sends them off to war. They return with victory bringing women and children, livestock, jewelries, etc. A question rises. We have just discussed mitzvah. We know that Moshe carried out Hashem's commands immediately without hesitation. He did not hesitate to act as a judge when the Yisraelites sinned with the Golden Calf. He did not hesitate to come to defend the Yisraelites. So, we know that Moshe was not a coward. But here, Moshe sent warriors instead of going with them. Why did he do that?

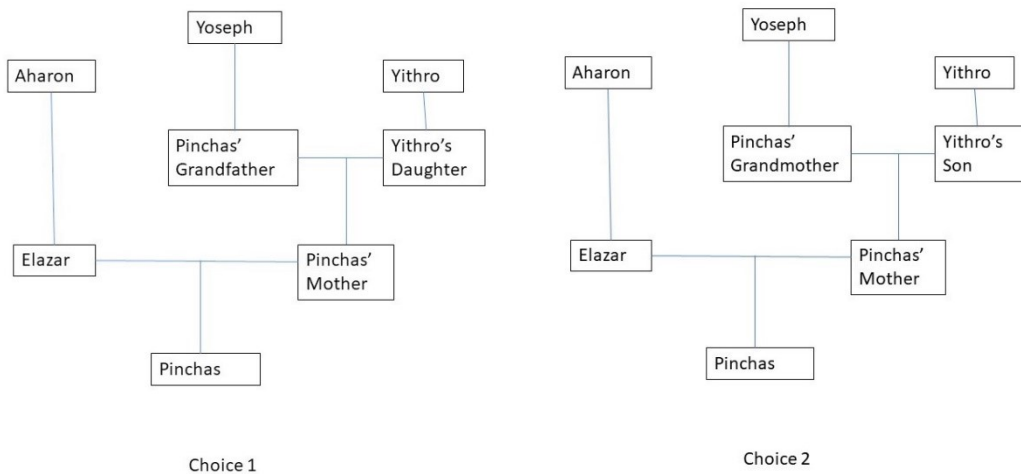
The answer is gratitude. When Moshe fled Mitzrayim after killing an Egyptian, it was the Midianites who accepted him. Therefore, he was showing gratitude toward the Midianites by not personally attending the war. There is an idiom, "You don't bite the fingers that feed you." Also, Moshe was mimicking Hashem by showing gratitude to them. We see many examples of gratitude during the Ten Plagues in the Book of Exodus. As an example, it was Aharon who struck the Nile river. It was Aharon who also struck the sand to turn it into fleas. Even the animals were sanctified. The firstborn of a donkey had to be redeemed for carrying heavy loads during the exodus. And the dogs, because they remained silent, were permitted to eat scraps from the table. Therefore, it would be unseemly of Moshe to personally attack the Midianites. Thus, he sent Pinchas as a priest anointed for battle. (Deut. 20:2)

Moshe sends the people to battle against Midian for their misdeeds. The sages explain that the Tribal leaders did not want to go to war for they knew that after the battle with Midian, Moshe would no longer be with them as said in 31:1, "Afterward shall you be gathered to your people." Therefore, Moshe had to force the leaders to choose a thousand from their respective tribe.

The war on the Midianites was to exact Hashem's vengeance upon them for ensnaring Yisraelites in sin. (31:2, 6) Thus, this war was a war of *mitzvah* as it was commanded by Hashem. We just learned from above why Moshe did not personally participate in the war against the Midianites. But, why did he send Pinchas instead of Elazar who was a high priest? Why did Pinchas not say anything about bringing Midianite women after the battle? Why was Moshe upset with the generals of the Tribes instead of Pinchas? The Talmud⁴ answers these questions through the ancestry of Pinchas.

⁴ BT, Sotah 43a

Last week, in parashat Pinchas, we learned that the princes of Yisraelites wanted to kill Pinchas for killing one of their prince, namely Zimri of Shimeonite. They ridiculed Pinchas that he was a son of Puti.⁵ Puti is a short form of Putiel which is a compound word: Puti (fattened), and “el” means “elohim,” in this case the false god of idolatry. It describes a person who fattens beasts for sacrifice to idols. As we have learned that Yitro experimented with all religions known to man and served as priest in a temple of idolatry before acknowledging Hashem as the true Elohim. For this reason, Hashem says, “Pinchas, the son of El-Azar, the son of Aharon the kohen.” (Num. 25:11) The Torah firmly established Pinchas was a descendant of Elazar son of Aharon.



The Talmud explains that Moshe sent Pinchas because he (Pinchas) was a descendant of Yoseph and Yitro. Therefore, Pinchas had a personal vendetta against Midianites for selling Yoseph as a slave to Mitzrayim. The Talmud continues to

establish genealogy of Pinchas in two ways. Pinchas, despite his personal feelings, he could not tell generals what to do. Moshe understood that and he showed anger toward with the generals.

In parashat Massei, it records journeys the Yisraelites took during their forty years. “These are the journeys of the children of Yisrael... led by Moshe and Aharon.” (Num. 33:1) “And Moshe wrote their goings out according to the journeys by the command of Hashem.” (Num. 33:2)

Every journey has a starting point and the end. The starting point can also be called “origin.” So, what is “origins” and the “journeys” referring to in this chapter? On pashat level, the Torah is revealing to us the 42 journeys the Yisraelites taken from Mitzrayim (origin) until they reached the Promised Land (end).

In Kabbalah and Chassidut states that these journeys actually reflect the entire lifespan of a person. The instant a child is born, he/she will encounter difficulties until one’s last day in this world. We are always on a journey, going through journeys and adventures in our life. That is the Torah’s teaching in chapter 33. That it, chapter 33 summed up all our life here. My life, my journeys are all in these 42 journeys.

For clarity, instead of saying, “These are the journeys...” in verse 1, I will be replacing “journeys” with “origins.” As with everything in life, everything has a beginning and the end. So, what does “the origins of their journeys” mean? Also, why does the verse change the order? First it says, “Moses wrote the origins of their journeys by Hashem’s commandment,” And then it says, “And these are their journeys from their origins.”

⁵ Rashi, Numbers, Parashas Pinchas

The Chassidut teaches that every soul, every person is, “an actual part of Hashem above.” It means every soul has a soul-root above in Hashem. And the soul root of each and every one of us is called our “origin.” That is where we come from. An origin is the source.

The journey refers to the soul descending into the body. Like Abraham, the goal of life is to publicize that Hashem is one. That is the role of every one. But as we perform our duty, we experience myriad stories, like fairy tale difficulties and hardships that occur in our life, are part of our journey in this world.

In verse 2, it says, “Moshe wrote.” To write is an action. It is an action that draws down light for each soul. Hashem writes for each of us the origins and journeys. So that we can draw down from the origin, from the soul-root from Above. From this origin, we draw down the power that this soul-root has so that the soul-root illuminate within the soul as enclothed within the body as the soul experiences all the hardships of life’s journeys. This is the meaning of, “Moses wrote the origins of their journeys by Hashem’s commandment.”

But after that it says, “And these are their journeys to their origins.” (v. 2) What does this mean? This verse is saying that the entire purpose as I go through my life’s journeys, all 42 journeys, I need to contemplate that each journey actually takes me back to my origin, “These are their journeys to their origins.” While we think each stop is an end to a journey, in Hashem’s eyes it is only one journey.

As I travel onward, I am ascending and getting closer to my soul-root. And not only am I returning to my source, I am also returning with greater vigor. As we know that every reflected light returns to its very origin. When light is reflected, from below to above, “And these are their journeys to their origins.” It also returns to a higher place within the origin higher than where the original emanation came from, higher than where the soul was in its root before it descended into the body. Otherwise, what’s the point? For, the purpose of all descent is ascent. So, you descend from your origin in order to journey. You reach the essence of your origin, even higher than the original point of departure. This is the meaning of, “These are their journeys to their origins.” Now, the verse begins with the word meaning, “And Moses wrote.” He did not only speak, or tell us these journey, he actually wrote them down.

To write refers to the Written Torah, also commonly called the Torah of Moses. Moses gave us the Written Torah. The Written Torah is Hashem speaking and Moses writing. But after that when it says, “And these are their journeys to their origins,” this refers to the Oral Torah. The Oral Torah, whose motion is from below to above. The Written Torah is given to us by Hashem, from above to below. That is called drawing down.

So, the Oral Torah is what we create, it is our life. We all have a biography of our life and our journeys, “These are their journeys to their origins.” The Torah describes how Moshe in his life had dilemmas and faced with questions and troubles. But still, he kept at it, and completed his mission and he returned to his origin, reaching higher level than the level the soul was at before it descended to enclothe in the body. And this itself, my life, your life, the life of every Yisrael, this is the Oral Torah. “These are their journeys to their origins.”

So, “Moses wrote the origins of their journeys.” Rather, (insert your name) “wrote the origins of my journeys” which is the Written Torah (action). And the goal is “These are my journeys” to fulfill the purpose of the Torah. And this is the Oral Torah (conclusion), “These are my journeys to my origins.”