Kol Rina

An Independent Minyan

Parashat Matot-Masei

August 3, 2024 *** 28 Tamuz, 5784

Matot-Masei in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2244/jewish/Matot-Masei-in-a-Nutshell.htm

The name of the Parshah, "Matot," means "Tribes," and it is found in Numbers 30:2. The name of the Parshah, "Masei," means "Journeys," and it is found in Numbers 33:1.

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 Manasseh) 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 Manasseh, so that the estate which they inherit from their father should not pass to the province of another tribe.

Haftarah in a Nutshell: Jeremiah 2:4-28; 4:1-2

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895320/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm

This week's haftorah is the second of a series of three "haftarot of affliction." These three haftarot are read during the Three Weeks of mourning for Jerusalem, between the fasts of 17 Tammuz and 9 Av.

The prophet Jeremiah transmits G-d's message to the Jewish people, in strong tones chastising all the sectors of the people, including the leadership, for their abandonment of G-d. "What wrong did your forefathers find in Me, that they distanced themselves from Me, and they went after futility and themselves became futile?" He reminds them of the kindness G-d did for them, taking them out of Egypt and leading them through the desert and settling them in the Promised Land, yet they repaid kindness with disloyalty. "For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the spring of living waters, [and furthermore, this was in order] to dig for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that do not hold water."

G-d asks them to view the actions of their neighboring nations, the Kittites and Kedarites, "and see whether there was any such thing, whether a nation exchanged a god, although they are not gods. Yet My nation exchanged their glory for what does not avail."

Jeremiah then goes on to foretell the suffering the Jewish people will suffer at the hands of their enemies, and also their erstwhile allies: "Your evil will chastise you, and you will be rebuked for your backslidings; and you shall know and see that your forsaking the L-rd your G-d is evil and bitter."

The haftorah ends on an encouraging note, assuring the people that if they return to G-d with sincerity, they will be restored to their full glory.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Natural or Supernatural by Rabbi Jonanthan Sacks z"l 5771

https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/matot/natural-or-supernatural/

The book of Bamidbar draws to a close with an account of the cities of refuge, the six cities – three on each side of the Jordan – set apart as places to which people found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, were temporarily exiled.

In early societies, especially non-urban ones that lacked an extensive police

force, there was a concern that people would take the law into their own hands, in particular when a member of their family or tribe had been killed. Thus would begin a cycle of vengeance and retaliation that had no natural end, one revenge-killing leading to another and another, until the community had been decimated. This is a phenomenon familiar to us from literature, from the Montagues and Capulets of Romeo and Juliet, to the Sharks and Jets of West Side Story, to the Corleones and Tattaglias of The Godfather.

The only viable solution is the effective and impartial rule of law. There is, though, one persisting danger. If Reuben killed Shimon and is deemed innocent of murder by the court – it was an accident, there was no malice aforethought, the victim and perpetrator were not enemies – then there is still the danger that the family of the victim may feel that justice has not been done. Their close relative lies dead and no one has been punished.

It was to prevent such situations of "blood vengeance" that the cities of refuge were established. Those who had committed manslaughter were sent there, and so long as they were within the city limits, they were protected by law. There they had to stay until – according to our parsha – "the death of the High Priest" (Num. 35:25).

The obvious question is, what does the death of the High Priest have to do with it? There seems no connection whatsoever between manslaughter, blood vengeance, and the High Priest, let alone his death.

Let us look at two quite different interpretations. They are interesting in their own right, but more generally they show us the range of thought that exists within Judaism. The first is given by the Babylonian Talmud:
A venerable old scholar said, 'I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Rava, that the High Priest should have prayed to God for mercy for his generation, which he failed to do.' (Makkot 11a)

According to this, the High Priest had a share, however small, in the guilt for the fact that someone died, albeit by accident. Murder is not something that could have been averted by the High Priest's prayer. The murderer was guilty of the crime, having chosen to do what he did, and no one else can be blamed. But manslaughter, precisely because it happens without anyone intending that it should, is the kind of

event that might have been averted by the prayers of the High Priest. Therefore it is not fully atoned for until the High Priest dies. Only then can the manslaughterer go free.

Maimonides offers a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed: A person who killed another person unknowingly must go into exile because the anger of "the avenger of the blood" cools down while the cause of the mischief is out of sight. The chance of returning from the exile depends on the death of the High Priest, the most honoured of men, and the friend of all Israel. By his death the relative of the slain person becomes reconciled (ibid. ver. 25); for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one has befallen another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest. (The Guide for the Perplexed III:40)

According to Maimonides, the death of the High Priest has nothing to do with guilt or atonement, but simply with the fact that it causes a collective grief so great that it causes people to forget their own misfortunes in the face of a larger national loss. That is when people let go of their individual sense of injustice and desire for revenge. It then becomes safe for the person found guilty of manslaughter to return home.

What is at stake between these two profoundly different interpretations of the law? The first has to do with whether exile to a city of refuge is a kind of punishment or not. According to the Babylonian Talmud it seems as if it was. There may have been no intent. No one was legally to blame. But a tragedy has happened at the hands of X, the person guilty of manslaughter, and even the High Priest shared, if only negatively and passively, in the guilt. Only when both have undergone some suffering, one by way of exile, the other by way of (natural, not judicial) death, has the moral balance been restored. The family of the victim feel that some sort of justice has been done.

Maimonides however does not understand the law of the cities of refuge in terms of guilt or punishment whatsoever. The only relevant consideration is safety. The person guilty of manslaughter goes into exile, not because it is a form of expiation, but simply because it is safer for him to be a long way from those who might be seeking vengeance. He stays there until the death of the High Priest because only

after national tragedy can you assume that people have given up thoughts of taking revenge for their own dead family member. This is a fundamental difference in the way we conceptualise the cities of refuge.

However, there is a more fundamental difference between them. The Babylonian Talmud assumes a certain level of supernatural reality. It takes it as self-understood that had the High Priest prayed hard and devotedly enough, there would have been no accidental deaths. Maimonides' explanation is non-supernatural. It belongs broadly to what we would call social psychology. People are more able to come to terms with the past when they are not reminded daily of it by seeing the person who, perhaps, was driving the car that killed their son as he was crossing the road on a dark night, in heavy rainfall, on a sharp bend in the road.

There are deaths – like those of Princess Diana and of the Queen Mother in Britain – that evoke widespread and deep national grief. There are times – after 9/11, for example, or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 – when our personal grievances seem simply too small to worry about. This, as Maimonides says, is "a natural phenomenon."

This fundamental difference between a natural and supernatural understanding of Judaism runs through many eras of Jewish history: Sages as against Priests, philosophers as against mystics, Rabbi Ishmael as against Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides in contradistinction to Judah Halevi, and so on to today.

It is important to realise that not every approach to religious faith in Judaism presupposes supernatural events – events, that is to say, that cannot be explained within the parameters of science, broadly conceived. God is beyond the universe, but His actions within the universe may nonetheless be in accordance with natural law and causation.[1]

On this view, prayer changes the world because it changes us. Torah has the power to transform society, not by way of miracles, but by effects that are fully explicable in terms of political theory and social science. This is not the only approach to Judaism, but it is Maimonides', and it remains one of the two great ways of understanding our faith.

[1] For a further study of the contrasting approaches to events as either natural or supernatural, please refer to the essay Rabbi Sacks wrote on parshat Beshallach, re-shared earlier this year: https://rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/beshallach/the-power-of-ruach/

Together Toward Redemption: Matot-Masei and the Nine Days by Emily Bell
https://truah.org/resources/emily-bell-matot-masei-moraltorah_2024_/

This week, the combination of Shabbat Matot-Masei and Shabbat Mevarchim Chodesh Av (announcing the new month of Av) gives us two different visions of exile and redemption, one focused on individual action and the other focused on collective efforts. Our parshah describes the Cities of Refuge: six cities set aside to shelter individuals who commit involuntary manslaughter and are subsequently exiled from their homes. The haftarah from Jeremiah addresses the national exile that we commemorate during the month of Av, and in doing so, gives us a way to see redemption arriving only through collective struggle.

The parshah's resonance with the Nine Days (leading up to Tisha B'Av) and Tisha B'Av itself is striking. Throughout later rabbinic sources, the accidental killer's stay in the City of Refuge is referred to as his galut — his exile — the same language that we use to refer to the Jewish people's exile from the Land of Israel. In the version of exile illustrated by the Cities of Refuge, the sins of accidental killers are atoned for by a singular event — the death of the high priest. As the parshah states: "For he must dwell in his City of Refuge until the death of the high priest, and after the death of the high priest, the killer may return to his own land" (Numbers 35:28).

The Gemara describes in various places how the death of the high priest atones for the blood debt of accidental killers. How this works is not exactly clear. In tractate Moed Katan, for instance, the rabbis discuss how the death of a righteous person brings atonement for the land and people, much like a sacrifice.

On the other hand, Maimonides in his "Guide for the Perplexed" (Part 3 40:7) offers a more rationalist take, suggesting that the death of the high priest would simply be so tragic that it would cause the blood redeemer, the relative of the slain person seeking revenge on the accidental killer, to forget his desire for vengeance. Regardless of how exactly this mechanism works, we see that the fate of those accidental killers exiled from their homes to the Cities of Refuge is entirely dependent upon what happens to a single person.

In contrast, our prophetic tradition provides us with the language to see teshuva and redemption as a collective project of transforming society. In this week's haftarah, the prophet Jeremiah's rebuke of the Jewish people describes how the destruction and exile were caused by individuals at every level of society abrogating their responsibilities to the collective. The haftarah states: "The priests did not ask 'Where is God?' and the experts in Torah did not acknowledge Me and the rulers transgressed against Me and the prophets prophesied by Baal and followed false gods" (Jeremiah 2:8).

When everyone is following their own individualist mandates without concern for the collective, societal collapse on the scale documented by Jeremiah is inevitable. A later verse in the haftarah (2:27) underscores this link, saying: "They said to a tree: 'You are my father,' and to the stone 'You birthed me'…But in the hour of their distress they cried, 'Rise up and save us!'" The original Hebrew uses singular verbs while describing the selfish transgressions of the idolaters, then switches to the collective plural when describing their ensuing distress.

With this grammatical shift, and in the very nature of Jeremiah's rebuke to the Jewish people as a collective, the haftarah emphasizes that the necessary work of teshuva cannot be completed by one individual alone in the manner of the accidental killer's redemption. Rather, our mandate to uphold God's name "in truth, in justice and in righteousness" (Jeremiah 4:2) can only be achieved through collective action.

For organizers and activists, reading this week's parshah alongside Jeremiah's powerful rebuke can provide a helpful toolkit for how we approach this work. When our world feels so broken, and living as we do in a culture that privileges individual actions at the expense of collective solidarity, it's tempting to search for a magical solution that would atone for our sins and lead us back to the promised land. In our more self-absorbed moments, we might even imagine ourselves in the role of the high priest, nobly sacrificing ourselves for the good of humanity.

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks z"l makes the point that Numbers as a whole is very focused on individuals — Pinchas, Korach, the high priest — but ultimately affirms the role of the tribes in organizing and sustaining Israelite society, as the book begins with a census and ends by describing the movements of the Israelite camp

through the wilderness. He notes, "Society is not built on individuals alone. As the book of Judges points out, individualism is another name for chaos: 'In those days there was no king in Israel, everyone did what was right in their own eyes.'"

In our ongoing struggle for justice, we cannot count on individualized solutions like the death of the high priest. Rather, let us draw strength from the vision of the prophets and move forward together towards redemption.

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Vengeance: Matot-Masei by Bex Stern Rosenblatt

God gives Moses one final act: vengeance. We read in Numbers 31, "Avenge the Israelite people on the Midianites; then you shall be gathered to your kin." Before you die, completely wipe out this people, who led you into life-denying idolatry. It is a reminder of God's as yet unfulfilled words from Numbers 25, where God said, "Be foes to the Midianites and strike them. For they have been foes to you…"

Moses has it done, after a fashion. He takes God's words and tells them to the people, with a twist: "Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign, and let them fall upon Midian to wreck the Lord's vengeance on Midian." The Israelites listen, and lead a campaign against the Midianites, killing the men and taking the women and children as captives. This is not good enough for Moses. He does not see it as completing the vengeance because it is those very women who led Israel astray. Moses commands the deaths of everyone except for young girls. Moses goes above and beyond God's command. God told him of the vengeance of the Israelites. Moses speaks of the vengeance of God. He fills in the details of total destruction, takes God's commandment and turns it into specific actions.

Vengeance, or נקמה, is difficult. Vengeance comes from having been hurt, having been attacked, having had the order of the world, of our lives, ripped apart. To some degree, vengeance is the attempt to both restore the order of the world and ensure the world never gets ripped again.

The idea of vengeance emerges first in the story of Cain. After Cain has already killed his brother, God uproots him from both his home and from God. Cain is scared that this wandering will invite others to kill him. God tells him otherwise - anyone who kills Cain will have sevenfold vengeance taken on him. The way vengeance is used here makes it unclear who exactly will make it happen. Is it God? Cain? The laws of nature? Some court system? Whoever is to do it, it is clear that Cain's status - someone who has spilled blood on the ground and been sent to wander by God - is a protected status. To kill those wandering is forbidden. To kill those wandering will lead to you being killed.

The next time we find the word for vengeance is in the report of a slave who had been struck with a rod and died immediately. This person must be avenged. Like Cain, this person is powerless and homeless. Perhaps, like Cain, they have also done something wrong, leading to them being struck. But to strike a killing blow is wrong. It breaks the world and only vengeance can repair it.

In our parashah, the Israelites are in an uneasy position, similar to both that of Cain and the slave. They too are homeless and vulnerable. They too are prone to being attacked. But they have more than just the sign of God upon them, they have God with them. When other nations look at the Israelites and try to kill these wandering people, it is God who will avenge them.

God's vengeance protects us. God's vengeance keeps the world spinning. As God explains in Ha'azinu, "Mine is vengeance." God promised vengeance against our enemies and against us as well, should we fail to keep the covenant. God details, just before telling us that we should love our fellow as ourselves, that we should not take vengeance against members of our own people. This idea is connected to the idea of cities of refuge that we find at the end of our parashah. There are safe places for accidental killers to live, to avoid a cycle of cash.

Yet in our parashah, we do take vengeance. Here, Moses translates God's words for us, telling us that God's vengeance happens through our actions. In order to transform from the model of Cain, the model of the slave, into the model of the citizen who can afford to rely on God, we have a moment of taking vengeance. Our actions become God's vengeance. It is a transcendent and terrifying state. It is a state that impurifies. After this final moment of vengeance, this moment of acting

for God, perhaps Moses has to die, just as the high priest seemingly has to die in the case of the accidental killer in our parashah. Moses has enacted something godly and the price is his life. The gain is our entry into the land, our becoming a nation in our own homeland. *(Bex Stern Rosenblatt is the Conservative Yeshiva's Faculty-in-Residence for the Mid-Atlantic Region of the United States, teaching Tanach, using the techniques of close-reading, theater, feminist readings, and traditional commentators. Bex also directs the CY's recruitment efforts in North America.)*

Marriage (and) Vows by Ilana Kurshan
https://www.exploringjudaism.org/torah/sefer-bamidbar-book-of-numbers/parashat-matot/parashat-matot-dvar-torah/marriage-and-vows/

Our parashah begins with the laws governing oaths and vows.

Who can make a vow? And How?

Then Torah teaches that both men and women may make vows, but whereas a man's vows remain binding, a woman's vows may be annulled by her husband or father (Numbers 30).

Indeed, the majority of the verses in this chapter refer to the details of how and when a husband may annul his wife's vows, a subject discussed at length throughout Seder Nashim, the section of the Talmud dealing with marriage, divorce, adultery, and other aspects of the relationship between husband and wife.

The discussion of vows both in our parashah and in the Talmud suggests that vows played an important role in the marital dynamic, offering a window into the risks and rewards of intimate, committed partnership.

Types of Vows

Our parashah, in discussing the laws of vowing, refers to "vows and sworn obligations of self-denial" (Bamidbar 30:14), and indeed the majority of the vows discussed in the Talmud in the context of husband-wife relationships refers to vows of prohibition, in which a person declares that something will be forbidden to him or her. For instance, an individual may swear not to eat certain fruits, or not to bathe, or not to derive any benefit from another person.

At times such vows were taken in an attempt to draw closer to God by means of self-denial, like the case of the Nazirite, who vows to abstain from wine and from hair-cutting and from contact with the dead for thirty days. Anyone who has ever committed to a diet recognizes that self-denial seems at times worthwhile in service of a higher end. If I do not eat chocolate cake for a month, I will be able to wear my

favorite dress to my sister's wedding. And if I swear in the name of God that I will not drink wine for a month, then my self-denial will bear witness to my devotion to God, bringing me to a higher spiritual level.

The Talmud recognizes that such vows of self-denial, while perhaps spiritually efficacious for the individual, could be quite harmful in the context of intimate partnership.

After all, who would want to sleep in the same bed as a person who has vowed not to bathe for a month, no matter how pious his or her intentions?

Limitations on Vows

The rabbis, in light of this difficulty, imposed limitations on the vows and oaths taken by husbands and wives. These limitations may seem foreign to our modern sensibilities, given their inherent gender imbalances; but in biblical times, they served as a means of negotiating spousal relationships.

Basing themselves on verses from our parashah, the rabbis teach, according to one opinion, that a husband is authorized to annul any vow that his wife takes that involves her self-affliction, or that pertains to matters between him and her (Nedarim 79b). For instance, if a woman vows not to wear make-up, or not to engage in sexual relations, her husband may annul that vow. Indeed, should he not annul such a vow, it would be tantamount to saying that he is not interested in continuing their relationship.

The Talmud states that when a husband fails to annul such a vow by his wife, it is as if "he puts his finger between her teeth" (Ketubot 71a) – meaning that he is asking for it, and it is his own fault if he is negatively impacted by her behavior. As such, a wife's vows may be understood as a passive-aggressive test of her husband's devotion: If you love me, surely you will annul my vow.

Conversely, the Talmud (Ketubot chapter 7) also restricts the ways a husband can restrict his wife's behavior by means of a vow. Although a wife may not annul her husband's vows, she is also not required to remain in a marriage in which her husband's vows restrict her behavior in certain ways. For instance, if a husband takes a vow with the implication that his wife may not attend weddings or pay shiva visits, then she is entitled to a divorce immediately, because a husband may not deprive his wife of social connection.

And if he takes a vow with the implication that she may not spend the holidays in her

father's home, he may do so only for one holiday but no more, suggesting once again that he is limited in the degree to which he may restrict her autonomy.

These laws reflect an awareness that a husband may, in an effort to assert control and dominion, impose restrictions on his wife that we would refer to in modern parlance as domestic abuse; in such situations, a woman has legal right to be released from the marriage and to receive the payment due to her by her marriage contract.

The Emotional and Intimate Aspects of the Vows of Marriage

The Talmudic discussion of vows made by husbands and wives offers insight into the emotional and intimate aspects of marriage.

As Dov Berkovitz writes in an essay about Tractate Ketubot (HaDaf HaKiyumi, untranslated), a vow made by a wife and annulled by her husband, or a vow made by a husband restricting his wife, is a window into the inner workings of their hearts – is the husband trying to get space from his wife? Is he trying to control her? Is the wife testing her husband's devotion? Does she feel sufficiently confident in his love?

The Talmud, in imposing restrictions on such vows, acknowledges that marriage is a very sensitive human dynamic, best handled with great care.

Marriage, like any committed long-term partnership, forges a deep connection in which both individuals expose their most vulnerable aspects to one another.

The reward for such vulnerability and exposure is the potential for mutual understanding, trust, dedication, and love.

By getting to know another person in the deepest possible way, we learn how to give that person what they most need, when they most need it. We learn how to draw out what is best in the other person, and how to speak honestly and openly about what we wish were otherwise.

Ideally we do so without causing too much pain, because, as the Talmud recognizes, two people who love one another may also know how to hurt one another the most.

We hope that with time, we will learn to trust and not to test; to heal and not to hurt; to love and not to lose the person we hold most dear.

(Ilana Kurshan teaches Talmud at the CY. She is the author of If All the Seas Were Ink (St. Martin's Press, 2017) and Why is This Night Different From All Other Nights (Schocken, 2005). She has a degree in History of Science from Harvard and in English literature from Cambridge, and has worked in literary publishing both in New York and in Jerusalem – as a translator, a foreign rights agent, and as the Books Editor of Lilith Magazine. Since October 2020, Ilana has been a regular contributor to Torah Sparks, FJC's weekly parashat hashavuah blog.)

Yahrtzeits

Steve Sklar remembers his brother Joseph Sklar on Saturday August 3rd