



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Mattot (מטות, "Tribes")**
- **Chapters: Numbers 30:1-32:42**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לַעֲסוֹק בְּדִבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Pinchas) ended with the description of the central sacrifice required at the Tabernacle, namely, the daily sacrifice of a defect-free male lamb with unleavened bread and wine (i.e., *korban tamid*). In addition to this special daily offering, various sacrifices for Shabbat and the other festivals of the Jewish year were also specified.

This week's Torah reading (Mattot) begins with Moses instructing the heads of the tribes of Israel regarding the laws of making vows (*nedarim*). A vow (either to do something or to abstain from doing something) was regarded as binding before the LORD, though it could be annulled in certain limited circumstances. For example, a father had the authority to annul the vow of his daughter and a husband the vow of his wife if he does so within 24 hours of hearing the vow's declaration.

The LORD then commanded Moses to take vengeance upon the Midianites for their role in plotting the moral destruction of Israel (through the evil counsel of Balaam of Beor). Led by Pinchas, 12,000 Israelite warriors (1,000 from each tribe) attacked and killed every male Midianite - including the archenemy Balaam and the five kings of Midian. When the victorious Israelites returned to the camp, they took Midianite women, children, cattle and other possessions as spoils of war. Moses was not happy about this and reprimanded the officers for keeping the women alive, since they were the cause of the plague on the Jews in the first place. Moses therefore ordered that all the Midianite prisoners of war were to be executed, except for 16,000 virgin girls.

The warriors, unclean by contact with the dead, were then required to stay outside the camp for seven days to undergo ritual purification. The spoils of war were then divided equally between the warriors on the one hand, and entire congregation on the other hand. The soldiers - grateful for their miraculous victory (not a single Jew was killed) - contributed 1/50th of their spoils to the Levites and made an additional freewill offering at the Mishkan.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad (and half of the tribe of Manasseh) then asked permission to settle in the pasture land of Gilead (on the east of the Jordan), since they had large herds of cattle. At first Moses hotly disapproved of their request, since he feared that the other tribes would lose heart if these tribes stayed behind during the conquest of Canaan. However, when the tribal leaders made a vow to join the fight while their families remained in Gilead, Moses finally agreed.



Parashah Questions



1. What does the word *mattot* mean? ¹
2. To whom did Moses give the laws of vows (*nedarim*)? ²
3. What is the difference between a “vow” and an “oath”? ³
4. If someone makes a vow to the LORD, what is required of him or her? ⁴
5. Why is it important to “keep your word”? ⁵
6. Can an unmarried woman make a vow while living in her father’s house? ⁶
7. Can a married woman make a vow? ⁷
8. Can a husband consent to his wife’s vow, but afterward choose nullify it? ⁸
9. What does the phrase “bli neder” mean? ⁹
10. What is the “Kol Nidrei” service of Yom Kippur about? ¹⁰

¹ The word *mattot* means “tribes,” the plural of the word for “staff” (i.e., *matteh*: מַטֵּה).

² Moses gave the laws of vows to the leaders of the tribes (Num. 30:1). According to the Mishnah, 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 (Exod. 34:31-32).

³ A vow (*neder*) is a promise to do something (or to refrain from doing something), whereas an oath (*sheva*) is a sworn testimony that something is true (or false). The laws of vows concern promises made “to the LORD” (Num. 30:2). A vow or an oath is considered a “bond” or a binding obligation upon the soul (lit., “a bond on his soul,” אֶפְסָר עַל-נַפְשׁוֹ).

⁴ When someone makes a vow “to the LORD,” he or she is *bound* to fulfill the vow. That is, he or she must keep his word and perform the conditions of the vow (Num. 30:2).

⁵ To fail to keep your word (break a vow) is to *desecrate* God’s Name. The word translated “break” comes from the root *chalal* (חָלַל) which means to profane or make unholy. This is the same root used in the phrase *chillul Hashem* which means to desecrate the Name of the LORD.

⁶ An unmarried young woman is permitted to make a vow to the LORD, though her father has the right to nullify the vow if he opposes it on the day he first hears of it (Num. 30:3-5).

⁷ A married woman is permitted to make a vow to the LORD, though her husband has the right to nullify the vow if he opposes it on the day he hears of it (Num. 30:6-12). Note that a widow or divorced woman is obligated to perform her vow, just as a man (30:9).

⁸ If a husband causes his wife to break her vow, he will pay the penalty (Num. 30:14-15).

⁹ “Without [making] a vow,” often said postpositively to avoid the risk of making a vow.

¹⁰ The Kol Nidrei service is a “legal” statement sung just before erev Yom Kippur that is intended to absolve liability for failing to keep personal vows. The Aramaic phrase *kol nidrei* (כָּל נִדְרֵי) means “all vows.” In Judaism, Kol Nidrei is used to refer to the entire Yom Kippur evening service.



11. Did Yeshua (or the Apostles) recommend making vows to the LORD? ¹¹
12. Why did God command Israel to take vengeance upon Midian? ¹²
13. What did God say would happen to Moses *after* the war with the Midianites? ¹³
14. Why didn't God command Israel to take vengeance upon Moab? ¹⁴
15. How many men from each tribe went to war against the Midianites? ¹⁵
16. Who led the army of Israel during the battle against Midian? ¹⁶
17. Did Moses fight in the battle against Midian? ¹⁷
18. Why did Moses send Pinchas instead of Joshua in the battle? ¹⁸
19. What weapons did Pinchas take with him in the battle? ¹⁹
20. Why was Balaam present during the war between Israel and the Midianites? ²⁰
21. How many Jews died in the Midianite war? ²¹
22. After Israel defeated the Midianites, why was Moses angry at the officers? ²²
23. Why did Moses call for the execution of all the Midianite women? ²³



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- ¹¹ Yeshua said that our word alone should be enough (Matt. 5:33-37; 23:22). James warns that we are never to utter a vow in order to avoid falling under judgment (James 5:12).
 - ¹² God commanded Israel to take vengeance upon Midian because of the incident of Baal Peor, when Balaam brought Midianite women to the edge of the camp of Israel to entice and seduce the men into disobedience. Whoever stands against Israel, stands against God (Rashi).
 - ¹³ God told Moses that after the war against Midian he would die (Num. 31:2).
 - ¹⁴ God did not command Israel to take vengeance upon the Moabites because King David's great-grandmother (Ruth) was to descend from this nation. In addition, the Moabites got involved because they feared Israel (Num. 22:2-6); but the Midianites entered a fight that was not theirs.
 - ¹⁵ 1,000 men from each tribe (including Levi), for a total army of 12,000 men (Num. 31:4-5).
 - ¹⁶ Pinchas, the son of Eleazar the priest led the battle against the Midianites.
 - ¹⁷ Moses did not fight against the Midianites because of the 40 years he spent there as a sojourner before the Exodus. In addition, his father-in-law Jethro and his wife were Midianites.
 - ¹⁸ Because "the one who began the *mitzvah* shall finish it." It was Pinchas who turned away God's wrath from Israel and first smote the Midianites, and Moses wanted him to finish the task.
 - ¹⁹ The vessels of the sanctuary (i.e., the Ark of the Covenant) and the silver trumpets.
 - ²⁰ He was there to collect his reward for "cursing Israel" through the sin of Baal Peor.
 - ²¹ During the war against Midian, not a single Jew was killed (Num. 31:49).
 - ²² Moses was angry at the officers of the army because they kept the Midianite women and children as prisoners of war instead of executing them as God commanded (Num. 31:9-15).
 - ²³ Moses called for the execution of all the Midianite women because they were "tools" used by Balaam at the incident of Baal Peor, which resulted in a plague that killed 24,000 Israelite men.



24. Who were the sole survivors of the Midianites? ²⁴
25. Does the Torah justify genocide? ²⁵
26. What was required of the soldiers after they returned from battle? ²⁶
27. What was done with the spoils of war? ²⁷
28. Which tribes asked to remain east of the Jordan? ²⁸
29. What was Moses' response to the tribal leaders who wanted to live in Gilead? ²⁹
30. Who were the first tribes that were exiled from the Promised Land? ³⁰
31. Who are the "Ten Lost Tribes" of Israel? ³¹
32. Who said, "be sure your sin will find you out" – and to whom was it said? ³²
33. Provide some examples of vows found in the Bible. ³³



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- ²⁴ Moses commanded that all the survivors of the Midianites were to be killed, including baby boys and their mothers. Only 16,000 virgin girls were allowed to live (Num. 31:17, 40).
- ²⁵ The Torah justifies genocide only in cases of judgment decreed from heaven or as a "safety measure" against assimilation with the Canaanite nations who were steeped in the occult (Deut. 7:1-6; 16; 20:16-18). The first nation identified for annihilation was Amalek, who attacked the weakest among the Israelites as they fled from Egypt (Exod. 17:14; Deut. 25:19; Num. 24:20; 1 Sam. 15:3). However, the Talmud states that after the Assyrian exile the identity of the Biblical nations had been lost (Berakhot 28a), thereby nullifying the commandment.
- ²⁶ They were required to stay outside the camp for seven days to undergo ritual purification (i.e., by being sprinkled with the "waters of separation" made with the ashes of the Red Heifer).
- ²⁷ The spoils of war were first "kashered" (i.e., boiled in water or put through fire) and then divided equally between the warriors on the one hand, and entire congregation on the other hand (Num. 31:23). The soldiers - grateful for their miraculous victory - contributed 1/50th of their spoils to the Levites and made an additional freewill offering at the Mishkan.
- ²⁸ The tribes of Reuben, Gad, and half the tribe of Manasseh asked permission to settle in the pasture land of Gilead (on the east of the Jordan), since they had large herds of cattle.
- ²⁹ Moses was at first angry that they would discourage the other tribes from entering the land – just as the spies did in Kadesh Barnea earlier – but when the tribal leaders made a vow to join the fight while their families remained in Gilead, Moses finally consented.
- ³⁰ Those tribes that settled east of the Jordan during the first Assyrian invasion (c.740 BC).
- ³¹ In 722 BC the ruling city of the Northern Kingdom (Samaria) was finally taken captive by the Assyrians and the exiled population later became known as the "Ten Lost Tribes."
- ³² Moses said this to the leaders of the tribes that settled east of the Jordan River as a warning to them if they should break their vow.
- ³³ Examples include Jacob's vow (Gen. 28:20-21); Israel's vow (Num 21:1-3); the Nazirite vow (Num. 6:2); Jephthah's vow (Judges 11:30-31); Hannah's vow regarding Samuel (1 Sam. 1-2), King David's vow (Psalm 132); Absalom's vow (2 Sam. 15:8), Jonah's vow (Jonah 2:9), etc.



Discussion Topics

1. The Hebrew verb “charam” (חָרַם) means to “ban” or to “destroy,” usually thought of as the total destruction of the enemy and his goods at the conclusion of a military campaign. A *cherem* (חֵרֶם) is therefore the annihilation of God’s enemy (today it refers to “excommunication” from the Jewish community). How are we to understand God’s call for the genocide of the seven nations of Canaan as mentioned in the Torah? For example, God states that we are “to show no mercy to them” (Deut. 7:2) and to utterly exterminate the populations of these nations (Deut. 20:16-18). How are we to understand these commandments, especially in light of Yeshua’s ethic of showing love to one’s enemies?
2. Vengeance (נִקְמָה) is a concept contained in both the Old and New Testaments. “God of vengeance (אֱלֹהֵי נִקְמָה), LORD, God of vengeance, shine forth!” (Psalm 94:1). Paul wrote that “God will inflict *vengeance* (ἐκδίκησις) on those who do not obey the message of Yeshua our Messiah with the punishment of eternal destruction (2 Thess. 1:8-9). Discuss the idea of the wrath of God.
3. This portion finally identifies Balaam as the cause of the Israelites sin with the Midianite women (Num. 31:16). Why do you think the evil intent of Balaam’s plan was revealed in this narrative rather than earlier?
4. Rashi states that the tribes that settled east of the Jordan (Reuben, Gad, half of Manasseh) were more concerned with their property than their own children, because they spoke of the welfare of their cattle before their families (Num. 32:16). Moses reversed their order in his rebuke to them (Num. 32:24). Why do you think these tribes lost sight of the original vision of the Promised Land?
5. Why do you think women were treated differently regarding vows than men? Is this evidence of a patriarchal society, or perhaps something else?
6. Are all vows *necessarily* bad? What about marriage vows? What about vows to keep faith in the LORD and His promises? Discuss...
7. Rules for “kashering” utensils are defined in this portion (Num. 31:21-23). Discuss the idea that everyday objects should be cleansed before being used.

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Masei** (Numbers 33:1-36:13)
- Read the Haftarah (Jeremiah 2:4-28; 3:4)
- Read the New Testament (James 4:1-12)

