

United We Stand

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Parshas Mattos/Masei

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The Parsha's Paths

And Moshe gave to them, the people of Gad, the people of Reuven, and half the tribe of Menashe (32:33)

As the Jewish people prepare to finally enter the land of Israel after having conquered the bordering lands of Sichon and Og, the tribes of Reuven and Gad make what seems to be a disturbing request: Rather than cross the Jordan to conquer and settle in the land of Israel proper, they wished to choose the territory of Sichon as their land. Moshe issues them a harsh rebuke, as their request seems tantamount to the episode of the Spies, when the people rejected the Land of Israel. The tribes of Reuven and Gad explain that they had no intention of abandoning the rest of the people in their conquest of Israel; they would fight with everyone else. They simply wanted the territory of Sichon to be their portion of land. Moshe accepts this and assigns the land to Reuven, Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe.

While Moshe ultimately accepted the requests of Reuven and Gad, Chazal argue that they still acted inappropriately in wanting land that was on a lower spiritual level and removed from the rest of the nation, seemingly for material considerations. As a consequence, they were the first of the Ten Lost Tribes to be exiled.

In any event, one detail of this story remains particularly perplexing. Only the tribes of Reuven and Gad request the land, and yet Moshe ultimately assigns it to both Reuven, Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe. Why are they only mentioned later?

The Talmud Yerushalmi (Bikkurim 1:8) quotes a view that Menashe did not ask to settle there; Moshe assigned them to the post. Netziv explains that, being somewhat removed from the rest of the people, Reuven and Gad were in danger of becoming spiritually distant and disconnected. The tribe of Menashe was known for producing scholars and spiritual leaders, and so Moshe wanted a portion of their tribe to settle with Reuven and Gad to be their spiritual guides. This would help ensure that the Jewish people would remain united and loyal to the same Torah tradition through the ages.

The story of the people of Reuven and Gad is a powerful paradigm for relating to other Jews and Jewish communities who may not always have the correct priorities. Moshe assessed that it would not be

productive to coerce them to only settle in Israel proper; likewise, we are not always in a position where insistence and coercion are productive or feasible. Nevertheless, it is equally inappropriate to ignore and distance ourselves from these Jews, either; we have a responsibility to be there for them in whatever way we can. In the same way the tribe of Menashe was enlisted by Moshe to strengthen the Torah learning of the tribes of Gad and Reuven, we should do what we can to be involved in the spiritual welfare of all Jews, providing resources and positioning ourselves to have an influence.

Deeper Meanings

The beginning of this week's Parsha deals with the laws of vows and their nullification. While normally if one regrets one's vow they can ask a scholar to nullify it, Rabbeinu Bachya cites the Gemara (Gittin 36a) which states that a vow made "*al daas rabim*" (dependant on the will of masses) can never be nullified. Practically speaking, if one makes a vow in the presence of three people and makes the vow dependant on their affirmation, that vow can never be undone.

However, there is an exception. According to both Tosafos (ibid) and Rashi (Makkos 16a), such a vow can be nullified in order to facilitate a mitzvah for the sake of the public. For example, if someone vows that he will never teach Torah, perform a *bris milah*, or write *sifrei Torah* again, and he becomes needed to do so, then his vow may be nullified. Rabbeinu Bachya cites the explanation of Rashi as to why this is so: The *daas* (will) of the masses is only to fulfill the *mitzvos*, not to nullify them.

This sounds like a very nice idea, but what does that mean? As horrible as it is, we could in theory imagine a scenario where the masses do, in fact, want to cease performing a certain mitzvah. Why should we necessarily assume that they would not want such a thing, to the point of it being a legal principle? Furthermore, we could envision many non-mitzvah things a person may vow not to do that the public would not be happy about; say, for example, that the only shoemaker in town vowed not to make any more

shoes. Nevertheless, it seems that such a vow could not be nullified. What, then, is so unique about a vow that prevents doing a mitzvah in that it goes against the will of the people?

Perhaps part of the answer lies in a Rambam on Pirkei Avos. The Mishnah in Avos famously advises “acquire for yourself a friend.” Rambam explains that not all friends are created equal. Some friendships are based on a business partnership; others are based on the pleasure each friend provides for the other. The highest level of friendship, however, is based on the sharing of a common ideal. This is the friendship referred to by the mishnah.

This comment provides a fundamental insight in what it means to be a united people. What connects Jews together? If it is merely that we can mutually benefit each other, that seems like a rather weak connection. The deepest and strongest connection is through the sharing of ideals, of values so strong that they consume our essence and supersede all other considerations. The stronger and more all-encompassing of ourselves the values are, the stronger the relationship.

The common ideal we share with our fellow Jews is our destiny and commitment to G-d and His Torah. This commitment envelops our identities as children of G-d and speaks to the deepest yearnings of our souls. The more we embrace and strengthen this commitment, the stronger our relationship becomes not only with G-d, but with our fellow Jews, as well.

Thus, when we get together, we can only ever be defined as a *rabim*, a collective group, if we are aligned with the Will of G-d. If we wish to affirm something that goes against His Will, we are simply a gathering of individuals. We may stand to gain from joining with each other, but ultimately our desires are selfishly rooted for our own individual gain; they do not truly reflect a collective will.

That is why, perhaps, a vow that prevents the performance of a *mitzvah* can be nullified; it was never truly based on the will of the public, since the public will is rooted in the Will of G-d. As we begin to prepare for Tisha B'Av and remember the hatred that led to the destruction of the Beis-Hamikdash, let us take this opportunity to strengthen our sense of communal identity, rooted in a shared relationship with the Divine that comes before all else.

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Atarot and Divon (32:3).

When the Gadites and Reubenites request to settle where they are, they list the names of the cities, and these names constitute the entirety of a verse. The Talmud (Berachos 8b) records that Rav Huna bar Yehuda in the name of Rav Ami said that a person should always complete the Parsha with the community, *shnayim mikra viechad targum* (reading the text of the Parsha twice and reading the targum (Onkelos or [preferably, according to R. Willig] Rashi) once, **and even the verse atarot vidivon**, for anyone who completes the Parsha with the community, their days and years are lengthened.

Why does the Talmud single out the verse about the cities Reuben and Gad wished to settle? Rabeinu Bachya points out that the names of all these cities were references to idolatry, so a person might not want to say them - in fact, the Reubenites and Gadites wanted to change them. Thus, we are told that we should read these *pesukim* anyway, because they, too, are an essential part of Torah, and in fact hidden in the names of these cities are fundamental Kabbalistic ideas.

Perhaps the message of Rabbeinu Bachya is that while there are many parts to the Torah that not everyone can fully appreciate, our joining with the community in studying the entirety of the Torah affirms our idealist aspirations to cling to G-d's will and our attachment to those in our community that are able to appreciate the parts of Torah that are beyond us. Shnayim Mikra epitomizes the unity and communal identity of the Jewish people in the service of G-d. In that sense, perhaps, our days and years may not only be lengthened literally, but are also lengthened in terms of our attachment to the days and years of all our fellow Jews in striving together to do G-d's will.

Goal of the week

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This week's bulletin is dedicated for a Refuah Sheleima for Shaindel Temma bas Rochel Zlotta and Gavriel Margoliot Ben Malka. Please have them in mind in your Tefillos.

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