

Parashat Matot begins with the laws pertaining to vows and their annulment. One is obligated to honor their word. The Parashah focuses initially on a vow taken by an individual, a single young girl around the age of 12 whose father is responsible for her and then continues with a girl of similar age who is married and whose husband discovers that she has accepted upon herself a vow that will affect him. In these cases, there is the option of Hafara, where the father or husband annuls the vow immediately upon hearing that his daughter or wife has taken the vow. There is also the option of Pesach, where the vow may be annulled at a future point by a Beit Din or single expert if the individual taking the vow expresses remorse and how he would never have taken the vow if he knew then what he knows now.

The Parashah continues with the battle to destroy Midian Gd that commanded Moses about in Parashat Pinchas. Upon completing the mission, the soldiers return to Moses and Elazar who castigate them for capturing the women of Midian and the children. We must understand what mission Moses charged them with when they went to battle. Some commentaries note that Moses did not give explicit instructions as to what they should do to Midian. So why was he so angry with them?

The Parashah concludes with the story of the 2 and a half tribes who decided to take their portion on the east bank of the Jordan River, in the territory conquered from Sichon and Og. Moses initially rebukes them for repeating the same approach that 38 years before ended in the calamity of the people sentenced to die in the desert because of the sin of the spies. Moses was shocked that after all they had been through, they would attempt to repeat their sin. We must understand what Moses told them and what they committed to do.

The Torah focuses on the dissolution of a vow accepted by a female minor, who has not yet reached the age of maturity, 12 years old, as well as the vows accepted by a wife who is older than 12 but those vows would have a negative impact on her husband. There are two ways to annul a vow. The first, Hafara, requires the father of a minor or her husband to annul the vow the day he hears of it. If he waits more than a day, it is considered that he accepts the vow and it remains in full force. The second way is through Hatara, where the court or an individual expert searches for an opening to annul the vow. If the individual expresses regret over taking the vow in the first place and had he known then what he knows now, he would never have taken the vow, the court can dissolve the vow. The difference between these two forms of dissolution is Hafara works from now on; it severs the vow. The original vow remains in place, but the consequences of violating the oath from now on are removed. Hatara on the other hand uproots the entire vow retroactively, rendering it as if it never existed in the first place.

Our Rabbis say (משנה חגיגה פ"א) that the dissolution of vows floats in the air, היתר נדרים פורחין באויר, that one should not be able to retroactively reverse the effects of their actions through speech alone. If one causes damage to another party, the effects of the damage remain regardless of the remorse expressed by the offender. Yet, through Hatara one can completely uproot the offending vow as if it never happened! This is the same principle upon which repentance, Teshuva, is built. We can never undo the action. Yet if we follow the format of the Teshuva required for the committed sin, we can reverse it and expunge it as if it never occurred. Teshuva requires 3 phases:

- 1) recognition of the sin.
- 2) regret over the past actions.
- 3) acceptance to never act the same way again, even if confronted with the same situation and circumstances. It requires the offending individual separate himself from such situations and to be hyper vigilant to ensure that they do not fall back on their old habits and addictions.

With this background, let us return to the two major events of the Parashah. The Jewish People sinned most egregiously with the daughters of Midian. They violated one of the cardinal sins, Illicit sexual relations, גילוי ערוה, in the most brazen and public way. Their sin and punishment were severe, resulting in the death of 24,000 people. Pinchas' bold act forced the people to reckon with their actions and realize how severely they sinned and damaged their relationship with Gd. They had to atone for their sin and reestablish their connection to Gd.

Their opportunity to demonstrate their change of heart came swiftly when Gd ordered the people to destroy Midian. Each tribe contributed soldiers to the force charged with this mission. In planning for the battle, they should have expected to confront some of the women they sinned with only days before, drawing Gd's anger. They should have killed the Midianite women who caused them so much trouble and eliminated the entire Midianite population, especially the women. Doing so would have proven that when faced with an identical situation to the one they sinned in, they would not repeat their mistake.

When they returned from battle and Moses saw that they spared the women, he lashed out at them. He thought that by keeping them alive, the people had not fully repented. How could they reclaim their relationship with Gd if they repeated their mistake with the women of Midian? The people were shaken to their core and understood their mistake. When Moses saw their remorse and that they intended all along to act in accordance with Gd's wishes and fully repent, he provided them the steps to reset with Gd. And the people complied. Their act of repentance removed the stain of sin, just like Hatara uproots a vow.

Let's move to the end of the Parashah. The tribes of Reuben and Gad decide to take their inheritance on the east bank of the Jordan River. Doing so would imply they would not join their brethren in their battle to remove the Canaanites and divide their ancestral land. Moses immediately castigates them. Why was he so upset with them?

Moses assumed they were repeating the same mistake the people made 38 years before. When they were on the verge of entering the land, all 13 tribes including Shevet Levi, they decided to send spies to report on the land. The decision to send spies was rooted in their underlying doubts of Gd's ability to fulfill His promise and bring them into the land. The resulting calamity condemned them to spend the next 38 years in the desert and sentenced the generation above the age of 20 to die in the wilderness.

Moses thought they had repented that sin and moved on. They would prove it by marching into the Promised Land together, all 13 tribes in unison. Now the two tribes were upsetting the apple cart. By asking for their inheritance on the East Bank of the Jordan they were apparently repeating the mistake from 38 years: doubting Gd would be able to bring them into the land and

conquer it. The ripple effects of their demand would cause the rest of the tribes to doubt Gd again, potentially condemning this generation to die in the wilderness, like the previous one. And with his impending death, Moses was afraid there would be no one to intercede on their behalf in the event Gd grew angry again with them like before. He thought their request proved their supposed repentance for the sin of sending the spies 38 years before was merely a sham.

The tribes of Gad and Reuben realized that they did not present their proposal properly. They assured Moses their intentions were pure. They had no doubts or reservations as to Gd's ability to bring them all into the Promised Land. They had no qualms about the land either. Their reason for requesting land on the eastern bank of the Jordan River was a practical one: they had large herds of cattle and the areas that were conquered were prime grazing lands. It would make sense for them to take over these lands. They were asking Moses to grow the inheritance pie to include the lands of Sichon and Og and give it to them to settle. They volunteered to lead the rest of the tribes in battle and to remain on the western side of the Jordan River until the other tribes took possession of their inheritance. They would build fortified cities for their children and cattle so they would be protected and safe while they were fighting with their brethren to uproot the 31 kings on the western side of the Jordan River.

After hearing their explanation, Moses was reassured that their intentions were indeed pure. However, he still had the potential problem that other tribes would decide they also wanted to forego their inheritance in the Promised Land and request their inheritance in the same area the tribes of Reuben and Gad were asking for. Perhaps they would fear that the loss of 2 tribes of soldiers would severely handicap them and dim their chances for military success. Moses therefore required the 2 tribes to take an oath as to their intentions to remain at the forefront of the battle and not return until the other tribes received their portion like them. This oath was taken to the remaining tribes, who became the keepers of the oath. Why was it necessary?

When one takes an oath to another individual, the oath may not be annulled without the consent of the party to whom the oath was taken. The laws of Pesach and Hatara do not apply without his consent. We derive this from the discussion between Pharaoh and Joseph after the death of Jacob. Joseph requested permission from Pharaoh to honor the vow he took to his father Jacob that he would bury him in Hebron in Mearat HaMachpelah. Pharaoh told him to annul the vow. Joseph said he could not because he had made his father the keeper of the vow, and since his father passed away, there was no way to annul it. When Pharaoh insisted, Joseph reminded him of the vow he took to Pharaoh not to publicize that he knew an additional language that Pharaoh did not. Since the number of languages a person knew was a determining factor in who was appointed king, Pharaoh had an interest in Joseph not revealing this information, so he had Joseph take a vow to him that he would not reveal it. Joseph told Pharaoh that if he insists that Joseph annul his vow to his father, he will do the same regarding the vow he took to Pharaoh. Upon hearing this, Pharaoh relented and allowed Joseph to bury his father in Hebron, as he promised. (סוטה לו:)

The tribes were concerned that the 2 and a half tribes would in the future realize that their vow was too difficult to keep. They would seek Hatara of their commitment on the grounds that had they known of the difficulties that would be involved in honoring their commitment, they never would have taken it. With Hatarat HaNeder, they would be absolved of their commitment to help

the other tribes conquer their inheritance. Moses insisted they take the vow to him and the other tribes, making them the owners of the vow, thus precluding the two and a half tribes seeking to annul their commitment without their consent.

Once the two and a half tribes took this oath, Moses and the rest of the tribes were convinced of their sincerity and agreed to give them the lands on the eastern bank of the Jordan river as their inheritance, and they settled the land. The repentance of the people was realized. With the oath in place, the two and a half tribes made their ironclad commitment to the remaining tribes, and the incident did not precipitate another crisis that would have potentially catastrophic repercussions. The laws pertaining to oaths and vows, as well as their connection to repentance, were central to this story as well.

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