

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת מטות-מסעי

אלף למטה אלף למטה לכל מטות ישראל תשלחו לצבא

“A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe, for all the tribes of Israel shall you send to the legion” (31:4)

The Midrash Rabbah in Shir HaShirim comments that Moshe chose the 1,000 soldiers from each tribe by selecting men who did not put on their Tefillin Shel Rosh before their Tefillin Shel Yad. Why was this a determining factor in choosing the troops for the battle against Midian. R' Moshe Sternbuch suggests the following explanation: The tefillin on one's arm represents the performance of mitzvos while the tefillin on one's head represents the thought process and the understanding of mitzvos. The mark of a Jew is our ancestors' exclamation of “נעשה ונשמע,” we will do and then we will listen, at Har Sinai. We must always remember that we perform mitzvos because they are the Divine command, regardless of whether we fully grasp the nature of the mitzvos and the reasons behind them. We put tefillin on our arms before placing tefillin on our heads to illustrate the idea that doing a mitzvah precedes the comprehension of a mitzvah.

This mentality was most essential in this battle against Midian. Hashem assigned them a very serious mission of killing many people in Midian. They could have stopped and decided that the war was not humane and that this was not the right way to treat other people. Therefore, Moshe chose men who had illustrated their commitment to following the word of Hashem through the order in which they put on their tefillin. He needed people who understood that whatever Hashem asks of us is for the best and that it must be done without questioning its underlying reasons.

ויצבאו על מדין כאשר צוה ה' את משה ויהרגו כל זכר

“They massed against Midian, as Hashem had commanded Moshe, and they killed every male” (31:7)

Why does the Torah say that they besieged Midian “as Hashem had commanded Moshe”? Why was the command relevant specifically to the

siege? Chazal learn from here that there was a special nature to this siege, which applies to all wars fought voluntarily by the Jewish people (with the exclusion of wars fought as a mitzvah, i.e. the wars against the Canaanites and wars against Amalek). When the Jewish army besieges a city, they must not surround it on all four sides. Rather, they must leave one side open and allow the inhabitants of the town an escape route.

The Ramban even goes so far as to count this as one of the 613 mitzvos and suggests two ways to explain this command, which does not seem to be sensible military policy. One reason is to teach the importance of mercy toward fellow human beings, even toward enemies in wartime. A second reason is to avoid a confrontation with an army that is fighting for its life, a situation in which they could really inflict damage out of desperation. If they have a way out, they may not fight as hard. The Rambam, on the other hand, does not count this as one of the 613 mitzvos. The commentary Megillas Esther says that the Rambam considers this to be part of the general mitzvah of how a Jewish army is to conduct itself in a voluntary war. These guidelines, contained in Parshas Shoftim, include many other peaceful measures, such as offering peace to all opponents before battle. This restriction against a full siege is just another facet of this general approach of treating enemies with a certain amount of kindness and mercy.

We see how far the Torah goes in its efforts to teach us compassion. Even in war, the Torah wants us to treat people mercifully and to recognize that even our enemies are still human beings. How much more so must we remember that other people who are not our mortal enemies deserve to be treated mercifully.

כל דבר אשר יבא באש תעבירו באש וטהר אך במי נדה יתחטא וכל אשר לא יבא באש תעבירו במים

“Everything that comes into fire – you shall pass through the fire and it will be purified; but it must be purified with the water of sprinkling; and everything that would not come in the fire, you shall pass through the water” (31:23)

We know that a nidah must go to the mikveh in order to complete her process of purification. This is not stated outright but is derived from the

Torah, with the exact source being the subject of debate among commentators. Tosfos on Yoma 78a points to this posuk as the source of the halacha. Tosfos explains that the water sprinkled on people to purify them is called “water of the nidah” because water is also used to purify a nidah in the form of a mikveh.

It seems strange that this halacha should not be made clearer in the Torah. Rabbi Friedman suggests an explanation for why this law is hidden and not mentioned explicitly. There is a halacha that a woman is supposed to conduct herself modestly by making sure that nobody other than her husband knows when she goes to the mikveh (Rema Yoreh Deah 198:48). Perhaps the Torah hints to this need for modesty and secrecy by hiding the source for this halacha. It is only alluded to in the Torah, but not more, to underscore the need for privacy in this aspect of life.

ומקנה רב היה לבני ראובן ולבני גד עצום מאד ויראו את ארץ יעזר ואת ארץ גלעד
והנה המקום מקום מקנה

“The children of Reuven and the children of Gad had abundant livestock – very great. They saw the land of Yazer and the land of Gilad, and behold, the place was a place for livestock” (32:1)

The Midrash Rabbah teaches that the tribes of Gad and Reuven separated themselves from everyone else because of their wealth. They were blessed with great fortune, but they were unable to prioritize correctly and to maintain a proper focus on the important things in a life of Torah. Even though there might have been good reasons to stay in ארץ ישראל, they made their decision to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan because they were more concerned with their money than with their spiritual welfare. They chose to sacrifice their portion in Eretz Yisrael and their connection to their brothers for financial considerations, despite the fact that this would minimize the spiritual influence from the rest of the nation. Because of this, they were punished with exile eight years earlier than the other tribes.

When faced with decisions about where to live, it is imperative that people remember what is more important in life and what is less important. Financial considerations should not dictate how one provides for his spiritual needs. If a person has his priorities mixed up, it can have dire consequences.

ויחנו על הירדן מבית הישמת עד אבל השטים בערבת מואב

“They encamped by the Yarden, from Beis HaYeshimos until the plains of Shittim, in the plains of Moav” (33:49)

The Kli Yakar has a fascinating דרוש on this posuk. He asks: Why does the Torah need to specify the area of the Jewish encampment? He says that the names of these locations, בית הישמת and אבל השטים, are meant to be interpreted homiletically. Literally, they mean “destroyed house” and “mourning of cedars.” The Kli Yakar explains that this refers to the destruction of the בית המקדש and the death of tzadikim, who are likened to cedars. These two events are compared to one another in accordance with the teaching of Chazal that the death of a righteous person is as tragic as the destruction of the בית המקדש. The reason why this lesson is taught here is because this section, the latter half of Bnei Yisrael’s travels in the desert, began with the description of Aharon HaKohen’s death at Hor Hahar. Just as this lesson about the gravity of a tzadik’s death was originally taught in connection with Miriam’s passing in Parshas Chukas, it is reiterated here in connection with Aharon’s death in Parshas Masei.

We see from here that the greatness of a tzadik is not something to be taken lightly. It behooves us to connect with the tzadikim that we have because, in a sense, they are like a בית המקדש because they are holy people. Rabbi Yechiel London זצ"ל used to take his family to visit tzadikim every year on Erev Yom Kippur in order to be blessed by them. He recognized the importance of connecting to the righteousness of tzadikim. This is an especially important message for this time of year, when we are mourning the destruction of the בית המקדש. We still have an opportunity to connect with a similar holiness in this day and age by developing relationships with tzadikim.

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