

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת מטות

וידבר משה אל ראשי המטות לבני ישראל לאמר זה הדבר אשר צוה ה' "Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes, to the Children of Israel, saying: This is the thing that Hashem has commanded" (30:2)

Why does this posuk refer to the tribal leaders as "roshei hamatos," "heads of the tribes," rather than the usual title of "nesiim," "princes"? R' Nissan Alpert explains that Moshe gave an added message to the leaders of the people. A leader can govern benevolently or forcibly. Moshe instructed the leaders to use their words to guide the people and not to use strength and intimidation. The way to reach out to people is by speaking to them nicely, not by displaying power and strength. The word "mateh" can also mean "staff," a reference to the right that the leaders were invested with allowing the use of force. They may have the right to use their power to lead the people but "this is the word that Hashem commanded," Hashem desires that they should use the power of speech instead because it is more effective. This is the message that lies beneath the surface of this posuk which uses a unique formulation not found elsewhere.

איש כי ידר נדר לה' או השבע שבעה לאסר אסר על נפשו לא יחל דברו ככל היצא מפיו יעשה

"If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears a oath to establish a prohibition upon himself, he shall not desecrate his word; according to whatever comes from his mouth he shall do" (30:3)

The Chida has a very interesting interpretation of this posuk. If a person guards his tongue, refrains from speaking evil and sanctifies his mouth, his prayers will be heard to and "according to whatever comes out of his mouth" will be done. The efficacy of our prayers depends on how we use our power of speech. If a person keeps his mouth pure, it remains unblemished and will be successful in petitioning Hashem. A mouth that is used for improper speech becomes defective and loses effectiveness. Prayer is our way of conversing with Hashem and we must make sure to preserve that open line of communication. If we misuse the all-important power of speech that Hashem grants us, then we lose this valuable connection with our Father in heaven.

R' Chaim Vital has a different interpretation of the posuk. He writes that one should be very careful regarding his words because "according to whatever comes out of his mouth" will be done. Whatever comes out of one's mouth has an impact on himself and the world around him, for either good or bad. If a person speaks words of Torah or speaks nicely about another person, it has a profoundly positive impact on him and it also has beneficial effects on the world around him. If one speaks evil of another person, uses profanity, or otherwise speaks in an improper fashion, he brings about a detrimental effect within himself and his speech also has negative ramifications in the heavenly realm.

וישלח אתם משה אלף למטה לצבא אתם ואת פינחס בן אלעזר הכהן לצבא וכלי הקדש וחצצרות התרועה בידו

“Moshe sent them - a thousand men from each tribe for the legion - them and Pinchas son of Elazar the Kohen to the legion, and the sacred vessels and the trumpets for sounding in his hand” (31:6)

The midrash in the Yalkut Shimoni asks: If Hashem told Moshe to take revenge on Midian, why did he not go to battle himself? After all, Chazal tell us that it is better for a person to do a mitzva himself rather than to send a messenger to do the mitzva. The midrash answers that Moshe did not go out to battle because he felt that he owed a debt of gratitude to Midian for being his place of refuge from Pharaoh for many years. He had lived and raised a family in Midian while he was a fugitive. Therefore, he did not want to personally take part in the destruction of Midian. R' Eliyahu Lopian elaborates in his sefer Lev Eliyahu that Moshe understood that it could not be that Hashem wanted him to do this himself. Hashem would not command him to harm someone who had been kind to him for He had already commanded the people regarding hakaras hatov. Moshe himself had already applied this principle when Aharon initiated the first three plagues in Mitzrayim because Moshe had recused himself due to his obligation of hakaras hatov. He interpreted Hashem's command to mean that he should send someone else to carry out the job, not that he should do it himself.

This is a great lesson for us. Even though the country of Midian did not do anything that special for Moshe and was nothing more than a safe haven, he was still grateful and appreciative of what they had done for him and would not hurt them. We too should be sure to appreciate, not only the individuals who are kind to us, but also the country in which we live and the kindness that it does for us and the liberties that it grants us. This is why many shuls have the custom to recite a prayer for the welfare of their government and their country's leader every Shabbos. As the Jews went into their first exile in Bavel, Hashem instructed them to "seek out the peace of the city that you dwell in." It is important to pray on behalf of the countries that shelter us in our exile and recognize how much we owe them.

ואת מלכי מדין הרגו על חלליהם את אוי ואת רקם ואת צור ואת חור ואת רבע חמשת מלכי מדין ואת בלעם בן בעור הרגו בחרב

“They killed the kings of Midyan along with their slain ones: Evi, Rekem, Tzur, Chur and Reva, the five kings of Midyan; and Bilam son of Be’or they slew with the sword” (31:8)

Why does the Torah find it important to tell us exactly how Bilam was killed? Rashi answers that Bilam used the specialty of the Jews, their power of speech, against them. As an appropriate punishment, the Jews used the specialty of the nations of the world, their sword, against Bilam.

The Chofetz Chaim elaborates that we must recognize that our prayers and our mouths are our secret weapons and our special power. Just as a soldier is constantly inspecting his weapons to be sure that they are in perfect condition, a person must inspect

his mouth and be sure that it is in pristine condition. This includes watching what we eat and what we say. Our nation has survived through the many different eras of world history, not because of our great might, but because of our mouths, our prayers and our ability to talk to Hashem. We must realize the importance of our davening and use our prayers to their fullest potential.

אך את הזהב ואת הכסף את הנחשת את הברזל את הבדיל ואת העפרת
“Only the gold and the silver, the copper, the iron, the tin and the lead” (31:22)

Rashi says that the word "only" teaches that only the metal must remain when the utensil is purified. Any rust or other dirt on the surface of the item must be cleaned thoroughly before one can purify the utensil. The Chofetz Chaim writes that the same steps for purification that the Torah prescribes for metal utensils also applies to the process of purification for people. One must first remove his external impurities by ceasing from acting incorrectly, repenting for his sins and regretting his earlier deeds. Only then can he become completely pure. Another aspect of cleansing metal utensils is that the purification is done in the same way as the contamination occurred. If the impurity came about through fire, it must be purified with fire. The same is true of people. When a person sins with fire and fervor, he must replicate this enthusiasm when repenting. The sins must be counteracted by using the same characteristics for good. For example, if one sins with his mouth by speaking loshon hara, he should use his mouth to do mitzvos, such as learning Torah.

R' Moshe Feinstein writes in Darash Moshe that just like the utensil can be restored to its original state of purity, every single person has the ability to rejuvenate even after he has slipped in his service of Hashem. One should never give up hope just because he has momentarily fallen from the level that he was at previously. He should resolve to purify himself and then he will be able to get back to where he was before.

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