

Rabbi Elchanan Shoff

PARSHAS MATOS

Appointing the Heads

And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes for the Children of Israel saying, ‘this is the matter which Hashem commanded’ (Num. 30:2). *Yalkut HaGersbuni* expounds on this verse as though Moshe told the heads of the tribes that their very appointment to those positions is “the matter which Hashem commanded”. In other words, Moshe did not want the heads of the tribes to think that they reserved their appointments because of their own personal merits and righteousness—which might then cause the power to “go to their heads”. Instead, Moshe told them that their appointment was simply “the matter which Hashem commanded”—they were appointed by Divine decree regardless of their own personal merits or righteousness. Their appointment was simply a decree which Hashem had commanded Moshe to carry out and is not demonstrative of these leaders actually *deserving* these positions on their own.

Tribes – Travels – Words

And Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes for the Children of Israel saying, ‘this is the matter which Hashem has commanded’ (Num. 30:2). Rabbi Chaim Palagi (in *Amudei Chaim, Amud Avodah* 11) notes that three *parshiyos* of Mattos, Masei, and Devarim are always read during the Three Weeks of mourning between the 17th of Tammuz and the 9th of Av. He offers an explanation of this by noting that the names of these three *parshiyos* represent a cycle which began with the destruction of the Holy Temple. The Talmud says (*Sotah* 49a) that from the day that the Temple was destroyed, there is no day whose curses are not more numerous than the day preceding it. This means that since the destruction of the Temple, the Jewish people have constantly had to endure ever-worsening conditions as punishments for their sins. The word *mattos* means “tribes”, but it can also mean “stick” or “rod”—an instrument used for meting out corporal punishment (see Ps. 23:4). Accordingly, *mattos* alludes to the penalties and punishments which the Jewish People suffer. The word *masei* means “travels” and alludes to the fact that there is a way to make the said suffering go away and “travel” elsewhere. That way of getting rid of the punishments is through *Devarim*—“words”. “Words” is a code word for repentance, as the prophet Hoshea said “take along ‘words’ with you, and return to Hashem” (Hos. 14:3). By taking those “words” and repenting from one’s sins, one can make suffering go away and facilitate the building of the Holy Temple, speedily and in our days: Amen.

The Pre-Natal Oath

A man, when he vows a vow to Hashem or he swears an oath to forbid a forbidden [thing] on his soul, he shall not profane his words; in accordance with all that exited his mouth he shall do (Num. 30:3). *Beis Shmuel Acharon* (p. 211, Weiss ed.) interprets the

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antecedent of the pronoun *he* in the phrase “all that exited his mouth he shall do” differently than the simplest reading. The simple reading means that whoever takes a vow should follow whatever instructions he had uttered and that’s how he should act. However, *Beis Shmuel Acharon* offers another layer of meaning. He points to the Talmud (*Niddah* 30b) that says that before a soul arrives in this world, it is made to take an oath that it will be righteous and not be wicked. *Beis Shmuel Acharon* explains that the verse at hand is specifically discussing this oath. Accordingly, he explains that “he shall not profane his words” refers to every person’s obligation to fulfill his pre-natal oath that he will be righteous and will not be wicked. With this in mind, he explains that the end of the verse “in accordance with all that exited his mouth he shall do” refers not to a person’s obligation to keep his word, but to an assurance from Hashem that He will do whatever the righteous man says. He renders the phrase: “in accordance with all that exited his [i.e. the righteous person’s] mouth He [i.e. Hashem] shall do,” because Hashem fulfills the words of a tzaddik.

Elul!!!

He shall not profane his words... (Num. 30:3). In the *gematria* section (cited from Rabbeinu Shimshon) of Rabbi Mordechai of Tzfas’s *Sifsei Koben* (end of *Parshas Mattos*), it notes that the last letters of the words in the phrase “He shall not profane his words...” (א לא ככל יחל דברו = אלול) spells out the word Elul—the last month of the Hebrew calendar. He explains that this alludes to the notion of releasing all of one’s vows before Rosh HaShannah (which is why we perform *Hataras Nedarim* on Erev Rosh HaShannah, the last day of Elul). This idea is also cited by the *Shaarei Teshuvah* to *Orach Chaim* 581 (Laws of Rosh HaShannah) in the name of *Sifsei Koben*.

Half-Vows

...in accordance with all that exited his mouth he shall do (Num. 30:3). The wording of this passage suggests (as explained in the Talmud Yerushalmi, cited by the Rabbeinu Nissim to *Nedarim*) that a vow which has been partially released automatically becomes fully released and is not longer valid whatsoever.

What made Rabbi Akiva cry?

Her husband will cancel them [i.e. the vows], and Hashem will forgive her (Num. 30:13). The Talmud (*Nazir* 23a) infers from this verse that if a woman’s husband cancelled her vow, but she did not know that it cancelled and ended up violating her vow, she requires some degree of atonement from Above for her transgression. The Talmud relates that because of this, whenever Rabbi Akiva would reach this verse, he would begin to cry, saying, “Just as if somebody intended to eat pork [which is something forbidden] and ended up actually eating lamb [which is permitted], then he needs atonement and forgiveness, then certainly somebody who intended to eat pork and actually ended up eating pork would need atonement and forgiveness.”

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Beis Shmuel Acharon (Parshas Pinchas) cites the *Nezer HaKodesh* (to Bereishis Rabbah 84:17) also cited by Rabbi Yosef Engel in *Gilyonei HaShas* (*Nazir* 23a) who asks why, of all people, would Rabbi Akiva in specific cry when encountering this passage. Is it not true that this lesson about the severity of sin should inspire anybody? He answers that it is evident from many *seforim* that the Ten Martyrs—of whom Rabbi Akiva was one—were reincarnations of the Ten Sons of Yaakov who were punished for selling Yosef as a slave. Even though as Yosef told them, “You intended to do bad to me, [but] God planned it for the good” (Gen. 50:20), this does not exonerate his brothers, it merely likens them to somebody who intended to eat pork and ended up eating something permitted (see also *Ohr Hachaim* there and *Kli Chemdah*, *Vayechi* 3). Now, Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of Yosef’s brother Shimon,¹ who played the most active role in selling Yosef, so Rabbi Akiva received the most gruesome death of all Ten Martyrs. In view of this, it makes a lot of sense that it was specifically Rabbi Akiva who cried when he reached the passage that teaches that one who intends to sin but ends up doing something good still requires atonement.

Rabbi Yechezkel Levinstein (in *Ohr Yechezkel*, vol. 6 *Yirah u-Mussar* p. 127) explains the novelty in this Talmudic principle. Before this teaching was introduced, one might have thought that the requirement for atonement and forgiveness are direct outcomes of the act of sin. However, in this teaching Rabbi Akiva saw that it is not the *act* of sin which creates the need for atonement and forgiveness, but it is the sinner’s mindset and his disregard/rebellion against the word of Hashem which requires him to seek atonement and

¹ Other sources claim that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of other personalities. Rabbi Yechiel Michel Halpern in *Seder HaDoros* (*Seder Tanaim v’Amoraim*, s.v. רבי עקיבא) writes in the name of the Arizal that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of Yaakov Avinu. He explains that just as Yaakov Avinu shepherded his father-in-law’s flock, so did Rabbi Akiva shepherd Kalba-Savua’s flock, and just as Yaakov Avinu married two wives, so did Rabbi Akiva marry both Kalba-Savua’s daughter and the wife of the Roman official Turnus-Rufus. Indeed, the very name Akiva (יעקב = עקיבא) has the same letters as the name Yaakov. The only thing is that the name Akiva has an additional letter in the end, in some sources it is an *aleph* and in some sources it is the letter *hey*. Rabbi Yitzchok Ohr Zarua of Vienna was once trying to figure out how to spell the name Akiva and he was shown in a dream the verse “A light is sown for the righteous, and for the upright of heart, happiness” (עקיבה = אור זרוע לצדיק ולישרי לב שמחה) in which the final letters of the last five words spell out the name Akiva with a *hey*. The Gerrer Rebbe *Chiddushei HaRim* notes that even though the Babylonian Talmud typically spells Akiva with an *aleph* at the end, that is only because when Rabbi Akiva died, he died with the word “one” (אחד) on his lips, and so the ultimate letter of his name too represents the number one (א = 1), but otherwise a personal named Akiva should really spell his name with a HEY. Rabbi Menachem Azariah of Fano (*Gilgulei Nishmaos* 76) writes that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of Zimri, son of Salu, the prince of the tribe of Shimmon who fornicated with the Midianite princess Kozbi. Rabbi Avraham Azuai (in *Chesed L’Avraham* 45:25) similarly writes that Rabbi Akiva was a reincarnation of Zimri, the wife of the Turnusrufus was a reincarnation of Kozbi, and Rabbi Akiva’s 24,000 students who died between Pesach and Shavuot were reincarnations of the 24,000 people who died in this plague.

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forgiveness. This is why even if a person only *intends* to sin but has not *actually* sinned, he still needs atonement and forgiveness for his rebellion against Hashem.

Cancelling Hashem's vow

***Her husband will cancel them...* (Num. 30:13).** When Psalms mentions Hashem taking an oath that the Jews will have to wander in the desert for forty years, the Psalmist stresses that point that Hashem “swore in My [i.e. His] anger”. Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr (in *Toras Chaim* to *Sanbedrin* 110b) explains that the point here is not to say that His oath can be released without *bataras nedarim* because it was only taken in anger. He explains that the Mishnah in *Chagigah* says that *bataras nedarim* is a legal concept which “hangs in the air” and had very flimsy basis in the actual text, relying almost entirely upon our tradition from Sinai. Rabbi Yehoshua offers Scriptural support for this idea from the passage in Psalms which clearly implies that should Hashem retract His oath, he would need to be *mattir* it and cannot just rely on the fact that it was taken “in anger”. Indeed, the Halacha is that if somebody takes an oath out of anger, it still has legal effect and he requires *bataras nedarim* in order to be released of that vow. For example, the *Shulchan Aruch* (*Yoreh Deah* 234) rules that if a woman asked her husband not to copulate with her and he became angry and swore that he will *never* copulate with her, then the oath takes effect and he needs *bataras nedarim* to allow him to once again be with his wife.

Instead, Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr argues that if Hashem were to overturn His oath to have the Jews wander the desert for forty years, this would have been through a *bataras nedarim* effectuated by the Heavenly Court, not through the argument that the oath was taken out of anger. However, the problem with this is that in *Bava Basra* (76b) Rabbah bar Bar Chana said that he heard a Heavenly voice decrying the Jewish exile by saying, “Woe unto Me, that I have sworn and now that I have sworn, who could possibly cancel my oath for Me?” In light of the above, there should be a simple way out of this, the Heavenly Court could issue a *bataras nedarim* to overturn His oath to exile the Jews just like it could have overturned His oath that they wander the desert for forty years?

Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr resolves this question by differentiating between the current exile and the decree that the Jews wander the desert for forty years. He explains that in order for a court to legally effectuate a *bataras nedarim*, the one who took the vow must regret taking that vow or oath in a way that it would have never been pronounced. Accordingly, if He regretted sending the Jews into the desert for forty years, then *bataras nedarim* would have been effective on His vow to do so. However, when it comes to the exile, one cannot say that Hashem completely regrets sending the Jews into exile, because He really wants them to achieve atonement by suffering outside of their homeland. The only point which He regrets is the *length* of the exile, but not the exile itself. Therefore, since He does not regret the entire matter, *bataras nedarim* cannot be applied, so the Heavenly voice sought somebody to *cancel*

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the vow in the manner that a husband cancels his wife's vows, not to *release* the vow in the manner that a court releases one's vows.

Given this approach, Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr writes that it was quite appropriate that this Heavenly voice expressing Hashem's anguish be revealed to Rabbah bar Bar Chana. This is because in certain ways, the wise and righteous men related to Hashem like a husband relates to his wife. For this reason, Moshe Rabbeinu is called "The Man of God" (איש האלקים) which can also be read as "The Husband of God". This is because a righteous person can use his prayer and merits to cancel Hashem's decrees in much the same way that a husband can legally cancel his wife's vows. Accordingly, when the Heavenly voice expressing Hashem's anguish over the exile revealed itself to Rabbah bar Bar Chana, it asked "...who will *cancel* it for Me?" using the terminology reserved for a husband *cancelling* his wife's vows, as opposed to a court *releasing* a person's vows.

The notion that a person's declarations uttered in a state of anger have legal standing is also found in *Bava Basra* when discussing a special way of writing bills of divorce which the rabbis introduced for Kohanim, because Kohanim were more volatile people and could more easily be angered, yet if they hastily divorced their wives, they would be unable to remarry them (because a Kohen is forbidden from marrying a divorcee). To avoid this, the rabbis instituted a special way of writing bills of divorce which slows down the process and allows the Kohen time to "cool off" before actually divorcing his wife. This too shows that legal acts or declarations taken in a state of anger actually work. Nonetheless, Rabbi Avraham Chaim Schorr notes that Rabbeinu Yeruchem (*Sefer Mesharim, Nesiv* 29) writes that if one told his hired worker, "Just go" he is exempt from paying without any additional declaration of forfeiture, but some say that if he says this in a state of anger, then it doesn't count.

[Killing Bilaam and the Midianite Kings](#)

And the kings of Midian, they killed according to their corpses: Evi, and Rekem, and Tzur, an Chur, and Reva—the five kings of Midian—and Bilaam, son of Beor, they killed with the sword (Num. 31:8). Rabbi Mordechai HaKohen of Tzfas in *Sifsei Kohen* explains that they only killed Bilaam by natural means, but the other kings of Midian were killed in miraculous ways. He explains that usually the Jewish People wage war with their mouth (i.e. prayer) which brings about casualties to the enemy through supernatural methods. However when it came to Bilaam, since he used the Jews' weapon of the "mouth" (i.e. because he tried to curse them), they used *his* weapon of the "sword" and that is how he was killed.

The *Nefesh haGer* points out in his introduction that whenever the Torah says that somebody died "according to the sword", Targum Onkelos translated it as "by the word of the sword". He notes that every time a Jew kills somebody with a sword, the Torah says "according to the sword" (לפי חרב), but whenever a non-Jew kills with the sword, the Torah says "by

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sword” (לחרב) or “with the sword” (בחרב). The one exception to this rule is when the Jews killed Bilaam, the Torah does not say “according to the sword”, rather it says “with the sword”. The reason for this is because the power of the Jew is with the voice; in prayer and Torah learning. Any success that a Jew has with the sword is only because his voice is being used properly.

The Big War

And Elazar the Kohen said to the military men who came to the war, ‘this is the statute of the Torah which Hashem commanded Moshe...’ (Num. 31:21). In this passage, Elazar was teaching the soldiers how to deal with booty taken from the war, yet the Torah calls them “the military men who came to the war”; why does it say “who came *to* the war” instead of “who came *from* the war”? The Pupa Rav (*Arugas HaBosem*, p. 113b) explains this wording based on a passage in R. Bechaya ibn Paquda’s work *Chovos HaLevavos* (*Shaar Yichud Hamaaseh*, ch. 5). He writes that one time a pious man saw people returning from fighting a war very intense war against their enemies and he told them, “You have returned from the small war victorious, now it’s time to prepare for the big war.” Astonished, they asked him, “What big war?” And he said, “The war against the Yetzer Hara and his armies”. In a small war, after one or two decisive victories, the enemy will not bother you again; you have won. But in the big war against the Yetzer Hara, even 100 victories is not enough. And if he wins, you die. And if you win once, you still have to keep fighting again him for the rest of your life. As the rabbis say (*Avos* 2:4), “Do not believe in yourself until the day you die”. The Yetzer Hara does not relent or weaken his resolve. Because of this idea, Elazar referred to those returning from the war against Midian as those “who came *to* the war”, because they will continue to battle against the Yetzer HaRa.²

Another answer to this question is that cited by Rabbi Avraham Bick in *Yesod Obel Moed* (cited by *Yalkut HaGershuni*) who answered this question with another question: Rabbi Yonasan Eyebchutz in *Kreisi Upleisi* (*Yoreh Deah* 103) asks why Hashem needed to command those who returned from the war with Midian to *kasher* the metal vessels they took from the Midianites, if according to Biblical law, a vessel which was not used within 24 hours no longer retains inside it forbidden tastes (even though by rabbinic law, it does), and it is safe to assume that by the time the Jewish soldiers returned from the war, the metal vessels they had with them had not been used for non-Kosher for longer than 24 hours? He answers that it is true that there was no practical Halachic ramification at that point, because according to Biblical law the vessels had already become permitted, but Hashem still taught them the law of *koshering* metal vessels in case they would have to ever go out and fight again, they would know that the metal vessels used within 24 hours for non-Kosher are forbidden.

² Rabbi Shmuel Berenbaum in *B-Korei Shmo* (Parshas Bechukosai) speaks about this point at length.

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Accordingly, it makes sense that the Torah would say “who came *to* the war” because it is not talking about *this* war, but the *next* war.

Looting for others

The army men looted each man for himself (Num. 31:53). *Yalkut HaGersbuni* explains that this verse means that the soldiers looted “for each man”, meaning that they gave away whatever they took. When the king Munbaz gave away his father’s treasury, he said, “My forefathers hid away [treasure] for others, and I would hide away [treasure] for myself!” This means that he looked to the soldiers of this war with Midian and saw that they gave away all the booty they yielded from the war, and decided that “he too would give away his wealth to the poor.” Munbaz realized that keeping your money for yourself doesn’t really benefit you since in the long run, one dies and others inherit it, whereas when one gives one’s money away to charity, he accrues merits that he can truly take with him, and will be his property forever.

“We” the people with the *aleph*

We will go charged in front of Hashem... (Num. 32:32). Rabbi Gershon Asheknazi, author of *Avodas HaGersbuni* notes in *Tiferes HaGersbuni* (Parshas Noach, pgs. 15–16 Stefanski ed.) that in three places the word “we” (usually spelled אנחנו) is spelled with a missing *aleph* (נחנו): The first is here when Yosef’s brother’s told him (before they know his identity) “we (נחנו) are all sons of one man” (Gen. 42:11), the second time is here in this verse, and the third time is in lamenting the destruction of Jerusalem: “We (נחנו) sinned and rebelled, You did not forgive” (Lam. 3:42). He explains the connection shared by these three places based upon the Gemara (*Sanhedrin* 38a) which says that man was created singular (as opposed to all other creatures of which Hashem created by the herd, gaggle, and pride from the onset) in order that the heretics not say that there are multiple powers in the Heaven. Alternatively, the Talmud says it was because of the righteous and the wicked; Hashem did not originally create multiple people so that the righteous would not say we descend from a righteous one and the wicked would say we descend from a wicked one. Rashi explains that if the righteous will say they descend from a righteous one, then they would use that argument to say that they don’t have to refrain from sin because they will surely not sin, and if the wicked will say they descend from a wicked one, they will use that to justify not repenting by saying that anyways they are destined to sin. Because of this, the Torah says “we are all sons of one man” without an *aleph*, and then explains this verse with the next one. Why are we all sons of one man? So that “We will go charged in front of Hashem” and will be motivated to stop ourselves from sinning and “we sinned and rebelled You did not forgive us” which means that if we do sin, we will be ready to repent.

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Sivma – The Unholy City

...and Nevo and Maal Meon which had switched names, and Sivma. And they called with the names the names of the cities which they built (Num. 32:38). The Mishnah (*Bava Kamma* 1:1) teaches that there are four categories (“fathers”) of damages: ox (שׁוֹר), pit (בוֹר), maveh (מַבְעָה) and fire (הַבְעֵר). Rabbi Menachem Azria of Fano (*Asara Maamaros, Maamar Chikur Din*, 1:3, also cited by *Chasam Sofer* in his introduction to *Bava Kamma* and in *Beis David* there) notes that the acronym of these four categories spells out the name of the city Sivmah (שׁוֹר בּוֹר מַבְעָה הַבְעֵר = שׁבמה) which is the last of the cities that the Jews captured in the trans-Jordan region and corresponds to the Holy City of Jerusalem in the realm of evil.