

So Many Questions
Parashat Mattot Mas'ei
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Darshan
Temple Aliyah, Needham

Shabbat Shalom.

This week's double parashah, Mattot Mas'ei, finds the Israelite tribes preparing to cross the Jordan River to conquer Canaan, the Promised Land. But, before they get to the business of war and settlement, Moses gathers the heads of the tribes and relays to them God's commandments regarding oaths and vows. Chapter 30, verse 3 states "If a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath imposing an obligation on himself, he shall not break his pledge; he must carry out all that has crossed his lips." The chapter then addresses a different standard for women's vows. While divorced or widowed women must do the same and assume the obligations of their vows, women who still live in their father's house because of their youth and women who are married, can have their vows restrained by their fathers or husbands.

So many questions. Why does Moses speak to the heads of the tribes about this rather than to the people? Why the double standard for women? What does this say about the Israelite community and its values?

One thing this says is that we are a society which values its words, that our promises have the power to bind us and we must carry them out. This is a baseline premise of a social compact. Our words matter. What we say can define us and, consequently, we must choose our words carefully: we will be held to them.

Why did Moses speak to the leaders about this? Certainly, this is an important message for everyone. Well, let's think about who is most likely to publicly make promises? Who may, in the effort to persuade people to follow or support them, make vows they cannot be counted on to keep? Moses was well aware of the obligations of leadership and was telling the tribal leaders to speak with good intention and to act as role models for their clan. Choose your words and your promises carefully! They define you, bind you and set the standard for society.

The double standard for women is certainly troubling. I hate it when the Torah reveals this sexist divide. Surely, it is a reflection of the Biblical time that women were seen as not competent to bind themselves and that they would need their fathers or husbands to effectively ratify their vows. This is profoundly uncomfortable as we read the parashah today and flies in the face of our egalitarian values.

It takes some squinting, but a closer reading of these verses gives a glimpse of some forward progress towards a system more in line with our principles today. First, divorced and widowed women do have the power to bind themselves through vows, suggesting that there may be a nascent elevation of women to the men's level. Second, there are limitations placed on when men can annul a woman's vow. It must be on the same day as he heard it or else the woman's word stands. Finally, verse 6 states that if a

father restrains a young woman from her vow, the Lord will forgive her. This suggests that in God's eyes, the vow was valid even if a man tried to reverse it. It's not as though her father's annulment erased the vow. No, God still considered it a binding vow, needing forgiveness when a woman breaks it. These limitations on the rules can offer a vision of a more egalitarian system where woman edge closer to the standards set for men. It shows that God and the Torah anticipate that as a society matures, values evolve. We can bring ourselves closer to the kind of society based in equality and mutual respect.

On to the settlement. As the Israelites wait on the banks of the Jordan, the leaders of the Reubenites and the Gadites approach Moses and ask that their tribes be allowed to live permanently on this side, rather than take their portion in Canaan. They raise cattle; the ground is fertile, and they believe they will be successful where they are. Moses is, initially, very angry. He states in chapter 32, verse 6 "Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here?" He then evokes the whole history with the spies whose negative report of Canaan turned the Israelites against the enterprise and resulted in the 40 years in the desert. By verse 15, Moses is warning that this request will result in God abandoning the people in the wilderness and these tribes bringing calamity upon all these people.

Why is Moses so upset? Was this such a terrible request? Moses sees this prospect as the tribes of Reuben and Gad abandoning the other tribes because they already have what they need. They are not being team players, part of the community who cares for everyone but just protecting their own wealth, safety and security. These are not Jewish values—caring only for oneself and this does not reflect the vision of society that the Promised Land represents—a just society where everyone gets their portion and cares for each other. Moses fears that this will lead to catastrophe.

The leaders of Rueben and Gad, however, are quick to reassure Moses that this was never their intention. They are not trying to be selfish or avoid the danger of conquering the land. On the contrary, they offer to lead the charge. In verse 16, they say to Moses, "we will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. And we will hasten as shock troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home while our children stay in the fortified towns." They are not trying to avoid their societal obligations; rather, they embrace them. They are ready to be part of the Israelites in the fight for everyone.

Moses, to his credit, listened to the leaders and changed his position. Rather than stick to his immediate assessment of the situation, he was open to learning about the tribes and their motives. In listening carefully, he also detected a flaw in the tribes' plans and responds with a correction. He accepts the proposal but states "build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks." While the tribes prioritized the sheep by mentioning the sheepfolds first, Moses switches it around, exhorting the leaders to take care of the children—the people—first. The cattle, material wealth, economics, come second.

This offers several important values to consider and embrace as the Israelites prepare to establish their society in Canaan. First, we are team players. As a community, we must (as these tribes state in verse 18), "not return to our homes until every one of the

Israelites is in possession of his portion.” The fight for one must be the fight for all. Today, we find ourselves facing similar questions about caring for everyone in our society, even if some people have the privilege of safety and economic security. Unless, everyone has their portion, we are not contributing to the society that God requires. We have a mutual obligation to care for those less fortunate, to fight the collective battle even if our own needs have already been met.

Second, good leaders like Moses offer a role model of how to make decisions. We all make our assumptions but we are often wrong. We may believe people are acting out of bad motives and that calamity will ensue, but we are obligated to hear what people have to say and be open-minded to their needs and their intentions. How hard has it become in our country to listen to others and hear about their needs and their intentions? How quick are we—both our leaders and the people—to make our assumptions and close off further conversation. Furthermore, Moses’s requirement that the tribes tend to their *people* first and economy second illuminates the value system that we, as Jewish people, must follow. It is not enough to protect wealth. Our first responsibility is to protect our people and our community. Only when we do this can we achieve the goals of the Promised Land and create the society that it represents.

This is a double parashah, and the second part, Mas’ei helps tie this together. Chapter 33 begins by describing all 42 of the separate marches the Israelites took during their 40 years in the desert. It lists each one as a separate journey. We often speak of leaving Egypt—Mitzrayim—as leaving a narrow place. Many of us at the Seder, when we recount the exodus from this narrow place, see the metaphor for the narrow places in our own lives, the things that constrain us and keep us from freedom. The things that hold us back. We see the parallels in the personal and collective journey as we move toward greater freedom in all its iterations.

As the Israelites wandered in the desert, they had 42 separate journeys. They weren’t all the same length and distance. Some journeys were long; others short. Sometimes, the Israelites stayed in one camp for years; other times, just a few weeks or months. It was unpredictable, probably frightening. They may have known their starting place but they did not know how long they’d stay or what the next journey would bring. They would receive the Divine message to move and pick up and move. How scary not to know where they were heading, how long it would take to get there and what it would look like when they arrived.

How alike this feels to our lives today. We are on a difficult journey now, facing many obstacles. We don’t know when we will move forward or how we will conquer the narrow place, the obstacles that constrain us. All we know is that we must keep moving forward. The Israelites were moving toward Canaan, toward the Promised Land and God’s plan for a society they would build. This would be a society in which values would have evolved. Based on the values the Torah portion examines, this society would be marked by:

- Egalitarianism—equal rights and justice for all people and all members of our community
- A sense of shared responsibility—no one can stop fighting until everyone has their portion and a share of the riches of society

- Priorities consistent with Jewish values—children, family—all people’s well-being placed above economics and selfish protection of our own privilege
- A belief that words matter—where we speak with intention and follow through on our promises
- Moving forward—where we face the obstacles that constrain us individually and communally and remain ready to move forward when called
- Open-mindedness and flexibility—where we listen to others, challenge our own assumptions and our fears that it will bring on the worst results

This is the society that God desires and that we work for. This portion reminds us of our individual and communal responsibility to move closer toward it, to journey forward and—as our civic founding documents state—form a more perfect union.

We face numerous challenges and numerous obstacles—narrow places—now and multiple challenges to our values. This parashah pushes us to ask some questions:

- How do we act when our words matter?
- How do we hold our leaders to that standard?
- How do we move forward the progress to egalitarianism—for women and other members of our society that have not enjoyed the same rights and privileges
- How do we all act as team players, fighting for the safety and security of everyone, even when we ourselves already have what we need
- How do we show respect for others—listening without jumping to conclusions and trying to understand their positions, motives and needs.

Perhaps this is our call to journey forward—to move once more from a narrow place to the Promised Land.

Shabbat shalom!