

PARASHAH: Mattot (Tribes)
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 30:2(1)-32:42
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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

This is **Parashat Mattot**. From here until the ending of B'midbar (Numbers), the subject of Tribes is in full view. HaShem is preparing the desert-weary people for entering into their long-awaited inheritance. After 40 years of wandering under the divine judging hand of the Almighty, coupled with over 400 years in physical, mental, and (in every way) spiritual bondage in a foreign land, the descendants of Avraham are finally ready to have a land of their own!

Before the passage delves into the physical Land the Torah portion addresses the vow (Heb: neder), and the oath (Heb: sh'vuah), so that is where I will make some observations. I will comment on the Land in the final parashah (called **Masa'ei** [Stages])

The spoken word can be powerful. In the case of the Creation account, the Holy One spoke the very universe into existence! The familiar phrase, "And God said..." can be found numerous times in B'reshet chapter one, emphasizing the importance of spoken words. In this particular case, nothing is more powerful than the spoken (or written, for that matter) Word of ADONAI Tzva'ot (LORD of Hosts).

The rabbis teach that man, as the created image (Heb: tzelem) of HaShem, we have incredible power in our speech! The Torah also teaches on this power that resides within the tongue of a man. In truth, the Scriptures are replete with verses about the tongue of man. I shall single out two of my favorite passages:

**"Come, children, listen to me:
I will teach you the fear of ADONAI.
Which of you takes pleasure in living?
Who wants a long life to see good things?
[If you do,] keep your tongue from evil
and your lips from deceiving talk;
turn from evil, and do good;
seek peace, go after it!" (Tehillim [Psalms] 34:12[11]-15[14])**

And from the B'rit Chadashah (Renewed Covenant, Apostolic Scriptures i.e., New Testament):

"Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways. If anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to bridle the whole body as well. If we put the bits into the horses' mouths so that they will obey us, we direct their entire body as well. Look at the ships also, though they are so great and are driven by strong winds, are still directed by a very small rudder wherever the inclination of the pilot desires. So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and yet it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire! And the tongue is a fire, the very world of iniquity; the tongue is set among our members as that which defiles the entire body, and sets on fire the course of our life, and is set on fire by hell. For every species of beasts and birds, of reptiles and creatures of the sea, is tamed and has been tamed by the human race. But no one can tame the tongue; it is a restless evil and full of deadly poison. With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God; from the same mouth come both blessing and cursing. My brethren, these things ought not to be this way. Does a fountain send out from the same opening both fresh and bitter water? Can a fig tree, my brethren, produce olives, or a vine produce figs? Nor can salt water produce fresh." (Ya'akov [James] 3:1-12, NASV)

Here in our Torah portion, Moshe gives instructions from the tongue of HaShem (no pun intended) as to what some certain vows and oaths entail. I won't go into the details of each vow, but I will make a correction to a common misunderstanding related to these passages.

In the Torah portion, Moshe clearly allows for vows and oaths to be taken by individuals. This, by the way, also includes by context, the familiar Nazir vow spoken of at other places in the Torah. In our misunderstanding of Torah concepts, we sometimes see a contradiction of this passage with a well-known phrase spoken by Yeshua in the B'rit Chadashah. Our passage in question is

Mattityahu (Matthew) 5:31-37 and the setting is Yeshua's own halakhah (manner of Torah interpretation involving practical application) on what is known as the Beatitudes.

"Again, ye have heard that it has been said to the ancients, Thou shalt not forswear thyself, but shalt render to the Lord what thou hast sworn. But I say unto you, Do not swear at all; neither by the heaven, because it is [the] throne of God; nor by the earth, because it is [the] footstool of his feet; nor by Jerusalem, because it is [the] city of the great King. Neither shalt thou swear by thy head, because thou canst not make one hair white or black. But let your word be Yea, yea; Nay, nay; but what is more than these is from evil." (Matt. 5:33-37, Darby Version)

From a cursory reading of Yeshua's statement, he appears to be contradicting what Moshe has been teaching the people all along. In fact, to strengthen this posit, Yeshua's cryptic statement, "You have heard it said..." dots his halakhah all the way through chapter 5. He is obviously trying to counter some sort of false teaching here, but is it the written Torah of his Father that he is challenging?

A proper hermeneutic (biblical interpretive viewpoint) starts with this all-important truth: **Scripture cannot contradict Scripture**. There is simply no way to correctly harmonize the text if we allow for one passage to contradict another. In our particular example here in Mattityahu, Yeshua clearly states that we should not swear at all. What is he really saying?

His teaching is an admonition to uphold the validity of one's word, even to the simple form of a "yes" or a "no". This is made clear by his closing remarks to his listening audience (verse 37). In other words, far from abolishing the importance or application of oaths and vows, he is actually strengthening the bond that goes into effect once a person places himself under such obligations. To be sure, his halakhah centers on the fact that a simple "yes" or "no" actually carries the same weight as a more complicated vow or oath.

To make this explanation more clear, we must understand his statement, "Do not swear at all", to be a prohibition, not against taking vows or oaths, but a prohibition against perjuring oneself. Do not make vows or oaths lightly or in vanity! If you swear to something, see to it that you carry out your word! Even to the simple form of your common, everyday "yes" and "no". This is the heart of Yeshua's teaching here, which strongly upholds the truest intent of what Moshe was also teaching in the Torah.

Which one of you married couples did not undertake an exchanging of vows to be with your spouse? Who among you has been called to the witness stand of a courtroom and not made to swear to tell the truth? Do we see these as violations

of Yeshua's halakhah? Of course not. Obviously, the wedding vow and the courtroom oath are taken in truthfulness, with every intent to follow through with our testimony. This is exactly what Yeshua is teaching here. He wanted to contradict the rampant practice of swearing falsely or flippantly. The **Talmud** also backs up Yeshua's interpretation:

In the Mishna [Pirke Avot 1:17], Shimon the son of Rabban Gamliel said: "All of my days I was raised amongst the sages and I didn't find anything better for the body than silence."

What does this statement from Shimon mean? In agreement with Yeshua, it is better to say nothing at all, than to swear and promise false words.

Moving on from vows (but not from the topic of the tongue), I want to close by sharing an interesting story also found in the Talmud. The story revolves around the power of the spoken word, and what comes about when we fail to give a good word of testimony to one who really needs to hear it. The story may or may not be factual, but that is not the point. The sages were intending to convey a particular message through the medium of fable and folklore, and to that end, the intended lesson would be preserved from generation to generation. The concept explained here, as enumerated by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner of Project Genesis: Torah on the Information Superhighway [<http://www.torah.org>], is that each of us has within the very mouth that HaShem gave unto us, "the opportunity to lift the earth up to the heavens."

'The story is told that when the Baal (not to be confused with the false god Ba'al) Shem Tov [the leader of a sect of Jews bearing the title "Master of the Good Name"] was getting ready to leave this world, he summoned his close disciples, revealing to each one the mission they were meant to fulfill. One student by the name of Rav Chaim was told that he would earn his livelihood by passing from town to town and relating stories of the Baal Shem Tov.

A bit taken aback, he nervously asked how long he'd need to travel around telling stories. "You will be shown a sign from heaven and you will know that the time has arrived that you may stop," the Baal Shem Tov responded.

And so it was. After the Baal Shem Tov passed away, Rav Chaim packed his bags and began to travel, spreading the stories of his Rebbe [master teacher] wherever he went.

It came about that Rav Chaim heard of a very wealthy man named Reuven who was willing to pay handsomely to hear any stories about the Baal Shem Tov. Rav Chaim went to his home and told him that he knew a wealth of stories that he'd be happy to share with him.

Filled with anticipation, Reuven invited many guests for a beautiful, warm Shabbos [Sabbath] filled with inspiring stories about the Baal Shem Tov.

After a lavish meal, Reuven and all his guests turned excitedly to Rav Chaim, waiting to hear some of his stories. Rav Chaim was about to begin when, to his horror, he realized that his mind had seemingly gone blank. He could not remember a single episode involving his Rebbe. With his face a bright red color, he explained that he was exhausted from traveling and assured the guests that after a good night's sleep he would entertain them with stories the next day.

At the Shabbos afternoon meal however, the same thing occurred. Rav Chaim was stupefied, unable to understand or believe what was happening. Once again, he apologized and asked to be given another chance at the third meal.

The third meal came and went with Rav Chaim still drawing blanks. After Shabbos, the disappointed guests left and Rav Chaim apologized to his crestfallen host. He had already ascended onto his wagon to leave when suddenly, as with a flash of lightning, one story returned to his mind. He excitedly ran to Reuven to tell him that he had just remembered a story.

One day I accompanied the Baal Shem Tov to a town for Shabbos. We arrived on Thursday and were surprised to find the town market empty and desolate. We knocked on the first door that we found with a mezuzah on it and were frantically pulled inside. "Don't you know what day it is today? Don't you know its Greena Dorneshtag (Green Thursday)? The anti-Semitic priest riles up his congregants and then sends them out on a pogrom!"

"My Rebbe turned to me," Rav Chaim continued, "and sent me to tell the priest that Rav Yisroel Baal Shem Tov wanted to see him. The people begged him not to send me to what they saw as certain death, but he insisted that I do as he had said. Trembling, I approached the priest as he was delivering his fiery speech to a large mob and gave him the message. He appeared frightened and told me to tell the Baal Shem Tov that he'll come after his speech."

"Happy to be alive, I delivered his message back to the Baal Shem Tov. 'Tell him he must come immediately,' the Baal Shem Tov told me, sending me back a second time. This time the priest excused himself, explaining that he'd return in a few minutes and accompanied me back to the Baal Shem Tov."

"The two were together in a room for a while. My story ends here because I don't know what they discussed or what happened to the priest afterwards." Looking shaken, Reuven told Rav Chaim, "I now have a story to tell you. You don't recognize me? I am that priest! The church kidnapped me when I was young and they succeeded in purging any memories of my life as a Jew.

"I grew older and became a member of the clergy and eventually became priest of the entire area. However, I was disturbed by a recurring dream where the Baal Shem Tov would appear, tell me that I'm Jewish and warn me to return to my true religion.

"I ignored those crazy dreams and continued with my 'holy' work. However, on that Greena Dorneshtag when you appeared with the Baal Shem Tov's message, I felt that I must comply.

"When the Baal Shem Tov spoke to me and told me who I really was and where my responsibilities lied I decided to leave the Church and return to my religion. The Baal Shem Tov told me that when someone would come and tell me this story, that would be the sign that my t'shuvah [repentance] was accepted.

"That is why I was always eager to hear stories about the Baal Shem Tov. When you came and couldn't remember any stories I was destroyed—my t'shuvah had not yet been accepted. Now your words have told me the decision made in heaven—my atrocities have been forgiven."

Now what do you suppose would've happened to Reuven if Rav Chaim had not spoken up?

The closing blessing is as follows:

***"Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v'chay-yeh o'lam nata-b'tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn."***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

"Shabbat Shalom!"

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