

PARSHAS MATTOS-MASSEI 5778

The parsha begins with the topic of nedarim and shevuos. There are various reasons why it is placed here. A shevuah is a statement which mentions the Shem Hashem — either implicitly or explicitly. The purpose of invoking the Shem Hashem is to declare that the truth of the statement or commitment is as true as the existence of Hashem Himself. We don't swear by anything else because the existence of Hashem is the only absolute truth in this world. The only measure by which we measure absolute truth is the by truth of Hashem. This is a shevuah.

A neder takes something which is unrestricted in its usage and makes it forbidden. There are two types of nedarim. One is to say that this object will be treated as if it was kodosh. Another type is to accept upon one's self to do a mitzvah. Violation of either violates the prohibition of lo yachel—making my words chullin. A shevuah is much more severe since one says something is as true as Hashem. If it turns out to be false one has desecrated Hashem's name by comparing His existence to something false. This is why the posuk says if someone swears in Hashem's Name in vain, the sin is unforgivable.

The midrashim on these psukim begin by quoting the posuk in Mishlei which says it is better not to take a neder than to take one and not fulfill it. A neder is only a lo sasei. But a person who doesn't pay attention to what comes out of his mouth, will ultimately violate a shevuah. One who violates a shevuah will eventually deny Hashem and there is no forgiveness for this. So it is forbidden to take a shevuah—even in truth—unless you reach a certain level of yiras shomayim and service of Hashem.

The Midrash says that there three examples of true yiras shomayim. While there are various levels of yiras shomayim, Hashem testified about three people who reached the highest level: Avrohom, Iyov and Yosef.

Avrohom reached his highest level after the akeidoh. Hashem asked to give up the thing which was most valuable to him. He was asked to choose what was really most valuable in his life. Avrohom was able to show how much a human being has to be willing to give up for Hashem, because this was the maximum one could give. Once he was able to do that, Avrohom proved that he was a yorei shomayim. He showed that Hashem is above all other sources of value in his life.

Iyov is described as a tom veyoshor and a yorei Elokim. He was honest and straight and perfect in his middos. Someone who is a true Yorei Elokim has to give himself over to extreme activity to show that Hashem is the supreme value. The truth of Hashem was reflected in Iyov's whole personality.

Yosef declared that he had yiras shomayim. In which context did this express itself? Yosef went through many nisyonos and he maintained his standard throughout all of them. He was blessed with tremendous success and charisma and he openly recognized and declared that he was only a tool of Hashem to achieve Hashem's plans. He had an overwhelming nisyon of

Eishes Potifar. She promised him everything olam hazeh had to offer. He realized that the condition was that he would be with her also in olam haboh as well! Yosef resisted her advances and was able to focus on not losing his olam haboh—because of his yiras shomayim.

In prison, he quickly showed his talents and took over the management of the prison. But, he also did two other things—he exercised his middos tovos by inquiring about and showing concern for the welfare of his fellow prisoners, and he interpreted dreams. But he never lost sight of the fact that all his talents and insight came directly from Hashem—his yiras shomayim didn't allow him to take credit for any of his accomplishments.

When he was promoted to the palace to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, he gives the same response that he gave to the two prisoners in the dungeon. I do nothing on my own. It is only Hashem. He is the same Yosef throughout and never lets the power and the position go to his head. There is no power in his life other than Hashem. When he confronts his brothers and threatens to put them in prison, he desists because he has yiras shomayim. The brothers think they are being framed by some cruel despot, but Yosef is thinking how he can arrange a way for his brothers to confront their past actions. When Yosef reveals himself at the end, he reassures them that he is not out for revenge. It is with the same humility and yiras shomayim: you didn't do anything to me—I would be in Egypt anyway—it was all what Hashem wanted. He used your jealousy. It would have happened anyway. He took credit for nothing and held no grudges. It is all from Hashem. This is yiras shomayim.

Only such people can take shevuos. They live with Hashem's emes 24/7, 365 days a year and they don't just pay lip service like most of us. Hashem is the ultimate reality of their world, and they put it into practice. The midrash tells us that only such people can take something and compare it to the truth of the Torah. Avrohom is able to give up everything for the truth of Hashem. Iyov was able to shape and form his basic personality around the emes of Hashem. Yosef stands against all the nisyonos with his steadfast yiras shomayim.

The next criterion for taking a shevuah is being a servant of Hashem. Once you realize the ultimate reality of this world is only Hashem, you empty your mind of any other pursuit or calculation and devote yourself entirely to serving Hashem. When you come to make decisions in this world, there is only one priority. No other value has any rank and occupies any importance.

Another prerequisite for taking shevuos is closeness—deveikus—to Hashem.

How does one cleave to Hashem? The midrash answers. Marry your daughter to a talmid chochom. Do business that benefits a talmid chochom. If Hashem is the source of all value and Torah is the most valuable thing, then you cling to those who represent Torah and look after their welfare.

If you take your yiras shomayim and realize that Hashem is the standard of emes and you revolve your life around that and you take steps to surround yourself with those who represent the truth of Torah, then you can take shevuos.

Yannai Hamelech hated talmidei chachomim. He preferred to keep the Torah in a forsaken corner only to be taken up by the most motivated and most dedicated. But it is not for the masses. He had a massive fortune and took a shevuas emes without really believing in the truth of Hashem and His Torah, and he lost all his money.

The midrash is telling us a very interesting principle.

If a person understands intellectually that Hashem is true, it is not enough. Hashem has to be the only reality that you live with constantly and no other thing in this world has value. You translate it into an entire world-view where you see everything that happens in those terms. No nisayon can sway you, no seductive offer of power or influence can overcome your focus on the ultimate truth of Hashem. When Yosef dealt with his brothers he said it had nothing to do with you! Hashem was just using your bad middos to arrange the outcome that He wanted. There was no ego and no sense of superiority over anyone else.

You empty out every other calculation that you have and devote your avodah to Torah alone. You only connect to, interact with, and benefit people who represent Torah. The midrash says understanding that Hashem is true is not enough. You have to know and feel with every fiber of your being that only Hashem is in charge of your life. You have to live and breathe emes in every waking moment. You need to integrate this awareness to the point where you can withstand the heaviest nisyonos of Yosef Hatzaddik. You have to have Hashem right in front of your eyes. If you take a true shevuah and you aren't on that level, even though you didn't commit an aveiroh, you abused that power. You aren't allowed to use a shevuah where you aren't actually living with the truth of Hashem and His Torah.

We now show how this connects with the rest of the parsha.

The end of the parsha conveys the request of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain to stay in Eiver HaYarden and not go into Eretz Yisroel proper. After they conquered powerful armies with unbelievable miracles, they became wealthy and saw all the vast fertile grazing land on this side of the Yarden. They said this is obviously what Hashem wants since we received all this through miracles that He wrought! Surely He wants us to stay here and enjoy the wealth that He gave us. Eretz Yisroel has kedushoh. So too does Eiver HaYarden. But, there are different levels and Eiver HaYarden is a second level of kedushoh. They said that we have to protect our money and we don't need first-level kedushoh. We will settle for second-level kedushoh. When they made the deal with Moshe to send their warriors together with the rest of Bnei Yisroel to fight, they said "we will build corrals for our flocks and cities for our children." When Moshe Rabbeinu reiterated the contract, he reversed the order—making sure to set their priorities straight— "first build cities for your children and then make corals for your flocks!"

But it's strange. If you ask Jewish mothers and fathers what is more important, money or children? They will certainly tell you it's their children! Probably Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain themselves would have given the correct answer. But subconsciously, this may not be the reality they lived with. Money was their number one priority. It was reflected in the decisions they made. All too often, parents first think about the quality of their parnossoh and then consider the quality of their

children's chinuch and ruchniyus as an afterthought.

The parsha continues to discuss the laws of the cities of refuge – the orei miklat. Why here?

Chazal noticed that there are a total of six orei miklat. Three of them are servicing 9½ shevotim in Eretz Yisroel proper while the other three will service only 2½ shevotim in Eiver HaYarden. They concluded that Eiver HaYarden breeds more accidental murderers than Eretz Yisroel. What does this mean? Is it the air? The water? The food? What causes people to become accidental murderers?

The answer is sloppiness, because of a lack of value for human life. If you demote your ruchniyus to a number two position, you really don't understand the value of your own and certainly not the value of someone else's life. Talmidei Chachomim understand the ultimate value that the Torah puts on human life. That is why they focus on what gives value to life. Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain chose to settle in Eiver HaYarden because they prioritized material concerns over spiritual concerns. Their parnossoh took precedence and they were lackadaisical about the lower level of kedushoh that they would be living on. This amounts to being sloppy about one's ruchniyus and about what is really important in life. They did not value their own life and hence did not value other people's life.

Human life is also sacred. One cannot afford to approach human life casually and flippantly.

In Israel, the value of human life gets eroded to the point where it becomes a simple commodity. I once had a grave medical situation with my daughter and I encountered a very callous attitude towards human life in the Israeli medical system. We travelled to Philadelphia to get better treatment and I voiced my complaints to the physician taking care of my daughter. I proposed that this callous attitude is the result of socialized medicine. He responded that he felt it was the army service, which all doctors in Israel undergo, which desensitizes them to the value of human life.

An Israeli newspaper wanted to honor Rav Chaim Soloveitchik's upcoming 100th yartzeit and interviewed me to get an insight into Reb Chaim. I repeated to them what I heard from Mori VeRebbi, zatzal, shortly after the Six Day War. At that point, the entire Jewish world was euphoric over the reconquering of the Kosel, Yerushalayim, and surrounding territories. People were extremely enthusiastic over the prospects of launching a massive settlement movement in the West Bank. My Rebbe, zatzal, told them a story of Rav Chaim's harrowing experience during the First World War. Because of the enormity of the Holocaust and the Second World War, people don't pay attention to appreciate how much devastation to countless Jewish communities was wrought during the First World War. Rav Chaim became a refugee from Brisk and had to relocate to Minsk. He was hearing reports of one community after the other being wiped out and became visibly shaken. Someone there tried to console him by saying maybe all this loss of Jewish life will be worthwhile if it will bring Moshiach. Rav Chaim got very upset and responded that we violate kedushas Shabbos in order to save a single Jewish life. This means the kedushoh of a single Jewish soul is more valuable than Shabbos. It has infinite value. So we cannot justify to ourselves the loss of Jewish life even for bringing Moshiach. It cannot justify losing a single Jewish life.

My Rebbe took this lesson and said if holding on to any of the territories conquered will be responsible for the loss of a single Jewish life, it is not worth it. He declared that he did not undervalue kedushas ho'oretz. The people who feel that

it is more important than the loss of Jewish life undervalue the kedushoh of the life of a single Jew. Neither kedushas ho'oretz nor the value of having the kosel outweigh the value of a single Jewish life. The reaction to this speech was very strong in certain circles here in Eretz Yisroel. But the principle is clear. When you put other priorities above Torah and above kedushoh, you become sloppy with the value of human life and it becomes more expendable in your eyes. Whatever that higher value may be—money, wealth, etc. —if Hashem and His Torah become number 2, you need extra orei miklat because you will inevitably be sloppy with human life.

The truth of Hashem and the truth of the Torah have to be paramount. You have to empty out all other calculations and philosophies. You have to connect yourself to the people who represent the Torah in this world.

Avrohom and Yov were unbelievably wealthy people, but they never lost sight of the truth. They maintained their yiras shomayim and took their ruchniyus with the utmost seriousness. Then they were able to compare the truth of their statements with the truth of Hashem Himself.

We are coming to the end of the year of growth in Torah and yiras shomayim. Use bein hazmanim to concretize and secure that growth with actual plans to internalize what you learned. Don't leave it in a corner somewhere to be neglected and forgotten.

If you have a proper understanding of the truth of Hashem as the only reality and the value of connecting to talmidei chachomim who know the value of a single Jewish neshomo, then you won't be sloppy and you will have the right priorities.