

(Dvar Torah continued from front page...)

radically introduced a fourth category of womanhood, the independent young woman or "p'nuya" who is not under male authority. Nevertheless, they did not disrupt the core gender hierarchy, wherein married women and daughters not yet living on their own have their relationship with God mediated by their menfolk.

The Tosefta (parallel text to the Mishnah from about the same period, Masechet 1:8) articulates this hierarchy with clarity when discussing the obligations that an adult has vis-a-vis his or her parent:

What is the obligation of the son to the parent? He feeds and gives drink, clothes and covers, takes out and brings in, and washes his face, hands and feet. Men and women are equal except that the man has the means at his disposal and the woman does not have the means at her disposal, because there is the authority of others over her.

Women end up exempt from caring for their parents because they are not free agents. It would be cruel or ultimately destructive to place an obligation upon her that she could not fulfill because of her husband's prior, and primary, claims. As Rabbi Pamela Barmash puts it, "her time, activity, and financial resources are not in her power". To allow women the power to make independent vows would undermine the whole hierarchical structure of society ("I vow never to wash the dishes/cook for you/sleep with you again!") Neither the Tanach nor the rabbis seem to want to allow models of religious liberty or piety that would subvert the established smooth running of society. After the Exodus from Egypt, Israelite men are radically free to serve God, but a woman's freedom is only partial.

Most of the liberal Jewish world has long since lost a sense of fully binding communal norms. Practically speaking then, all decisions to embrace a life of deeper Jewish practice now come from a place of individual piety rather than mere conformity. But with the huge cultural shift toward full egalitarianism in our personal relationships, many couples in the liberal Jewish world have extended our parashah's biblical right of veto to both sides in the relationship! There is often a tacit, or even an explicit agreement, that neither party will rock the marriage boat by getting more observant! The underlying assumption is that novel religious piety will inject damaging instability into a marriage. Deepening one's religious practice is hard enough when one is single, but nigh on impossible when one's partner holds the power of veto!

Since marital stability is such a high value for our tradition, there is an ever-present danger that the egalitarian relationships so many of us seek will, almost by definition, make us more attuned to the needs of our partners than to anything else that calls to us. With none of us fully in control of our own time, activities and financial resources, how do we tune in to God's voice?



TORAH SPARKS

Parashat Matot & Mas'ey

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Annual (Numbers 30:2-36:13): Etz Hayim p. 941; Hertz p. 702
 Triennial (Numbers 33:50-36:13): Etz Hayim p. 957; Hertz p. 716
 Haftarah (Yirmiyahu 2:4-28; 3:4): Etz Hayim p. 972; Hertz p. 725

D'var Torah: Partners & Obligations

Rabbi Joel Levy, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty & Rosh Yeshiva

The start of Mattot addresses the significance of religious oaths and vows. A man who makes a promise using the power of God-language binds himself totally to keep his word: (Bemidbar 30:3) "A man who vows a vow to YHVH or swears a sworn-oath... he is not to desecrate his word, according to all that goes out of his mouth, he is to do." A religious vow creates a unique individual obligation quite different from the shared communal obligations of the whole community.

I say "man" advisedly. For women, the situation is more complicated and the parashah goes on to paint a picture of most women living so deeply under the authority of men that most of their vows are subject to a male veto. There are three categories of women described here:

1. A young woman in her father's house; here the father has the right to annul her vows when he hears them. (30:4-6)
2. A married woman in her husband's domain; here too her husband has the right to annul her vows. (30:7-9, 11-16)
3. A widow or divorcee; she is free to make religious vows free of male interference. (30:10)

Since categories 1 and 2 of women live with and under the authority of men, the authoritative male in a woman's life can choose to prevent her from making any binding vow. It is disturbing to see that in this biblical classification a woman needs to wait for divorce/bereavement in order to experience the full freedom of an unmediated relationship with God! The early rabbis tweaked this model and

D'var Haftarah: Going After Mere Breath

Rabbi Mordechai Silverstein, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

We are in the midst of the three weeks of mourning over the destruction of Jerusalem and the First and Second Temples, once in 586 BCE and again in 70 CE. Is our mourning during this period just a commemoration of the past or does it represent something deeper? Rabbi Shalom Noah Berezovsky (the Slonimer Rebbe), in his work, *Netivot Shalom*, points out that the special days of the Jewish calendar are meaningful only because their messages are eternal - they have something to say about who we are as Jews and human beings that will be forever relevant. This week's haftarah, the second of the three special messages chosen to precede Tisha b'Av, the day in which we mourn the destruction of the First and Second Temples, illustrates this point. In it, Yirmiyahu, the prophet of the destruction of the First Temple, presents his people with two contrasting paths of action, one offering hope and the other disaster.

God, obviously, urges the people to choose the path of hope, reminding them to be cognizant of God's blessings for His people and, in particular, the nation forming redemption from Egypt. He challenges them to remember their unique identity based on this event and their relationship with God and asks them to be grateful for what God has done for them. In contrast, the people seem to be bent on disregarding the past, on adopting the religious and social patterns of their neighbors, lacking gratitude and in denying God. Yirmiyahu's message is that this attitude will bring about the destruction of the nation: "What wrong did your fathers find in Me that they grew distant from Me, went after mere breath and turned into mere breath? And they did not say: 'Where is the Lord who brought us up out of the land of Egypt and led us through the wilderness in a land of desert and pits, in a land of parched earth and death's shadow, in a land where no man has gone, and where no human dwelled?'" (2:5-6) Yirmiyahu is confounded by the people's choices. How could they cast off those events which shaped who they are and ignore the Source of who they are?

Judaism, as a religion, stresses the importance of gratitude and loyalty. As a perpetual minority people, it is very difficult to juggle the above values together with the desire to fit in and be like everyone else. Even when the choices taken are bad choices, mere "breath" without substance, even if they are clearly wrongheaded, the desire to conform is still strong. This dilemma has tormented Jews throughout the ages and the pull of the ephemeral "breath" never disappears. Yirmiyahu's message urges us not to forget where we come from and the power of our story when we confront life for to forget these things comes at a very high price.

Parashat Matot & Mas'ey Self-Study

Vered Hollander-Goldfarb, Conservative Yeshiva Faculty

This double parasha that ends the book of Bemidbar contains some topics that form a closure to events that started in earlier parashot, and others that are looking forward to the entry into the Land of Israel, just across the Jordan River.

- 1) In the previous parasha Moshe was instructed to assail the Midanities for their trickery in Baal Peor (resulting in the death of 24,000 Israelites). Now it is time to fulfill the instruction. Unlike other armed conflicts, in this one 'engagement in battle' is never mentioned. The instruction is to avenge (31:1-12). What might be the difference in the state of mind of the people participating? How might that manifest itself on the ground?
- 2) When sent out against the Midianites, every tribe sends an equal number of people regardless of the size of the tribe (31:4). Why?
- 3) The land conquered in trans Jordan (2 parashot ago) turns out to be excellent pasture land. 2 tribes, Reuven and Gad, ask to receive their allotted land there, and not on the west side of the Jordan (chapter 32). After some negotiations they get the land, as does ½ the tribe of Menashe. What would be the benefit of attaching ½ a tribe to the 2 tribes in trans Jordan?
- 4) The Israelites are instructed to set aside 6 cities of refuge, a place where a person who killed a fellow person accidentally may take refuge from the blood avenger until a court determined if the killing was indeed unintentional. 3 of these cities are in trans Jordan, despite only 2.5 tribes living on that side (35:9-24). What might be the reason for this?
- 5) The book closes (chapter 36) with a continuation of the story of the daughters of Tzlofchad whose demand to inherit land established the exception for land inheritance by women. The leaders of the tribe are concerned with the consequences of this exception. What will happen if the women marry men from other tribes, causing the land of the tribe to switch to the husband's tribe? The solution is that they may marry whomever they wish, if they marry within the tribe (36:6). Why do you think that the women did not contest this limitation?

Chazak Chazak V'Nitchazek!

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