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PARSHA INSIGHTS

by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

Another Hundred Dollar Bill

"If a man takes a vow to G-d..." (30:3)

A tramp is standing by the side of the road. A big Rolls-Royce pulls up right next to him. One of the tinted windows in the back rolls down with a soft electronic purr, coming to rest at the end of its travel with a reassuring clunk. A hand in a white cotton glove emerges from the car holding a crisp new \$100 bill. A voice emanates from the car. "It's for you," says the voice. The tramp gazes at the gloved hand in disbelief. "What?" The tramp looks around to make sure no one is standing behind him. "Are you speaking to me?" says the tramp. "Here, take the money!" Gingerly, he approaches the car, half-expecting that this is some kind of practical joke, and the money and the car will vanish in a second. He extends his hand and ever so slowly grasps the note. As soon as his fingers clutch the bill securely, the hand retracts into the car. The window rises with a soft purr and the Rolls-Royce speeds into the distance. The tramp stands transfixed to the spot, beaming from ear to ear with equal amounts of incredulity and joy.

The next day the tramp is standing in the same spot. The same Rolls-Royce draws up next to him. Again, one of the tinted windows in the back rolls down with a soft electronic purr. The same white-gloved hand emerges from the car holding another crisp \$100 bill. The tramp cannot believe his luck. Again he extends his hand and slowly grasps the note. And as soon as his fingers clutch the bill the hand retracts into the car and the Rolls-Royce speeds into the distance. Again the tramp is overjoyed. But maybe not quite as overjoyed as the previous day.

The next day the same thing happens, and the next and the next and the next...

This goes on for about a month. One day, the Rolls-Royce draws up at the lights. This time, however, nothing happens. After a few seconds the tramp knocks on the glass, but it stays firmly closed. So he knocks harder and then starts to shout, "Where's my hundred dollars?"

The Midrash quotes the line from our *parsha* and comments on it: "If a man takes a vow to G-d..." – a man doesn't know the length of his allotted time in this world. What is the connection between "If a man takes a vow to G-d..." and knowing how long we have to live in this world?

The Talmud (*Nedarim* 10) says that when a person makes a vow to bring an offering to G-d, he shouldn't say, "To G-d, an offering." Rather, he should say, "An offering to G-d." The reason is that maybe he will utter G-d's ineffable name "To G-d" and not complete the sentence by saying "an offering." It will thus transpire that he uttered G-d's name in vain. The commentators explain that the Talmud is referring here to a situation where the person might die before he is able to complete the sentence. This is the meaning of the Midrash. Since a person does not know when his time is up he should be careful how he phrases a vow.

At first sight one might think that the Talmud is preoccupied with an extremely remote case. I mean, how many people drop dead in mid-sentence just when they happen to be in the middle of making a vow?

Most of us look at our lives as though we deserve to live. We may not say it, but we feel that way. That's why we complain against G-d when people die 'prematurely.' If we looked at every moment we breathe in this world as yet another hundred-dollar bill, maybe we wouldn't be so quick to complain when G-d takes back something that was a free handout in the first place. When we see every second as a separate and new gift, we do not assume that necessarily we will be given the gift to complete even the sentence that we have started to speak.

- Sources: *Nachal Kedumim* and *Kedushas Levi in Mayana shel Torah*

TALMUD TIPS

by Rabbi Moshe Newman

Matot: *Temura* 2-8

A Change for the Worse

“Everyone can effect temura, whether the person is male or female. This doesn’t mean that a person is permitted to do temura, but if the person does it, it is done. And the person receives a punishment of lashes by Beit Din.”

This is what we learn at the beginning of the first *mishna* in *Masechet Temura*. This Tractate elaborates on the laws of the consequences of one who has a *korban* to be offered in the Beit Hamikdash, and says that he wants to exchange it with a different animal of his that is currently *chullin* (i.e. not sanctified). His intention is that the *korban* should become *chullin*, and that the *chullin* animal should become *kodesh* (sanctified) to be his *korban* instead.

An expression of this intent is called an act of *temura*, meaning “exchange.” The way in which a person with a *kodesh* animal would express this intent is by taking a *chullin* animal and saying, “This (*chullin* animal) is *temurat* this (*kodesh* animal).” Or by saying, “This is *tachat* (in place of) this.” Unlike the permitted process of *redeeming* a *kodesh* animal under certain circumstances to cause it to become *chullin*, *temura* is always prohibited and results in quite unintended and undesired – and painful – consequences for the person. As we see at the beginning of our *mishna*, the *kodesh* animal remains *kodesh*, the *chullin* animal becomes *kodesh* with the same *kedusha* as the *kodesh* animal, and the person receives a corporal punishment of lashes.

This mitzvah and process is taught in the Torah in Sefer Vayikra 27:10 where it states: “He shall not exchange it and he will not replace it (with a *chullin* animal that he wants to become *kodesh* and offer instead), not a good one for a bad one, and not a bad one for a good one; and if he does (try to) exchange it, an animal for an animal, it will be that (both) it and its exchange will be *kodesh*.”

What is meant by “a good one for a bad one” or a “bad one for a good one”? Rashi explains, based on Chazal’s teachings, that a “good one” is an unblemished *korban*, that is fit to bring as an offering, whereas a “bad one” is a blemished animal that is not suitable to be offered in the Beit Hamikdash. It can also refer to the inferior and superior quality/cost of the two animals involved in the *temura* process.

One may wonder why the Torah prohibits not only an attempt at “downgrading” by doing *temura* of an inferior animal instead of a superior one, but also prohibits

“upgrading” when attempting *temura* in order to bring in its place a better *korban* than the one he presently has. And why do *both* animals end up with the status of being *kodesh*?

A reason given for this seemingly unusual prohibition is that the Torah wants to discourage a person from trying to skimp and save money by means of exchanging his superior *korban* with an inferior animal that he would bring as an offering in its place. But why prohibit an exchange in the opposite direction as well? The Torah imposed an across-the-board ban in order to prevent him from exchanging for an *inferior* animal, while rationalizing that it is actually a *superior* one. And not only is an attempted exchange prohibited by the Torah, but the Torah further discourages a person from attempting any exchange by decreeing that his attempt boomerangs, and as a result both animals end up as *kodesh*. (Rambam, Laws of *Temura* 4:13; and see there that he offers a similar rationale for the need for a person to add a fifth of the value when *redeeming* an object that he had previously made *kodesh*.)

Rav Shimshon Rafael Hirsch comments on the verse of *temura* in great and beautiful detail. He writes that an important lesson which we learn from this mitzvah is the inviolable nature of a *korban* with *kedusha* that was dedicated to be offered in the Beit Hamikdash. Any attempt to interfere with this *kedusha* is unthinkable. Therefore, *any* attempted exchange – whether it be a downgrade or even an upgrade – is in truth a *downgrade* according to the Torah. Just as one would not imagine violating the air space over the White House, similarly one should understand that it is absolutely wrong and prohibited to “bring *chullin* into the existing space already occupied by *kodesh*.” Rav Hirsch emphasizes the eminently important nature of *kedusha*. He adds that we also see this idea manifested in another halacha of *temura*: even a person who transgresses *temura b’shogeg* (unintentionally) is punished with lashes – a phenomenon that we do not otherwise find throughout the entire Torah!

▪ *Temura 2a*

Q & A

Questions

1. Who may annul a vow?
2. When may a father annul his widowed daughter's vows?
3. Why were the Jewish People not commanded to attack Moav, as they were to attack Midian?
4. Those selected to fight Midian went unwillingly. Why?
5. What holy vessels accompanied the Jewish People into battle?
6. Those who killed in the war against Midian were required to remain outside the "machaneh" (camp). Which *machaneh*?
7. Besides removing traces of forbidden food, what else is needed to make metal vessels obtained from a non-Jew fit for a Jewish owner?
8. "We will build sheep-pens here for our livestock and cities for our little ones." What was improper about this statement?
9. During the conquest of the Land, where did *Bnei Gad* and *Bnei Reuven* position themselves?
10. What promise did *Bnei Gad* and *Bnei Reuven* make beyond that which Moshe required?

?

All references are to the verses and Rashi's commentary, unless otherwise stated.

Answers

1. 30:2 - Preferably, an expert in the laws of *nedarim*. Otherwise, three ordinary people.
2. 30:10 - If she is under 12 and 1/2 years old and widowed before she was fully married.
3. 31:2 - Because Moav only acted out of fear against the Jewish People. Also, Ruth was destined to come from Moav.
4. 31:5 - They knew that Moshe's death would follow.
5. 31:6 - The *aron* and the *tzitz*.
6. 31:19 - The *Machaneh Shechina*.
7. 31:23 - Immersion in a *mikveh*.
8. 32:16 - They showed more regard for their property than for their children.
9. 32:17 - At the head of the troops.
10. 32:24 - Moshe required them to remain west of the Jordan during the conquest of the Land. They promised to remain after the conquest until the Land was divided among the tribes.

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Earth-Shake

Rattled in L.A. wrote:

We went to our Synagogue on Friday night, to give thanks following the recent California earthquake. The Rabbi spoke about how it is difficult to believe that a decent, good, all-caring, and all-powerful G-d would cause an earthquake.

Is this true? Doesn't G-d control natural phenomena such as earthquakes?

Dear Rattled,

First, I would like you to know that we here in Israel were also shocked and stunned by the earthquake and the great hardships that have unfolded because of it. By no means do we intend to preach to you from this column, but as Jews we look for meaning in everything that happens in our lives, and it is in that light that I would like to suggest the following:

The Mishna in Tractate Brachot says that when one sees an earthquake one should make the blessing, "Blessed be He whose strength and power fill the world." This clearly expresses the belief that G-d controls earthquakes, and causes them so that we can experience His might and power. Why do some need to experience it now and why do some have to experience it more than others? I do not think that anyone can know for sure why other people experience earthquakes. But we can try to find meaning and purpose for ourselves as individuals.

The Talmud in the beginning of Tractate Brachot says that if someone is suffering they should review their actions. There must be some way that this suffering can give meaning to a piece of my being that needed to be nurtured. The Mishna in Brachot also mentions that if someone suffers a personal loss they should say: "Blessed be He, the true Judge."

There is a wonderful Chassidic story about Rabbi Levi Yitzchak of Berditchov. He once had it announced that after the Mincha service on Shabbat he would be lecturing on the subject of "What I, Levi Yitzchak, would do if I were G-d."

There was much excitement about the topic, and the synagogue was filled to overflowing when the time for the discourse arrived. Rabbi Levi Yitzchak dramatically made his way to the lectern, and in an emotional voice said: "If I, Levi Yitzchak were G-d, I would...do...exactly what G-d does. The problem is that I am not G-d, am not all-seeing and all-knowing, and that's why I don't understand so much of what He is doing." Essentially, that is what we mean when we make the blessing "Blessed be He, the true Judge."

As Jews we are ever hopeful that every dramatic event will bring us closer to a time when G-d's presence is openly revealed.

The following is not an argument for why the earthquake happened; it is intended as a ray of hope on a dark and tragic landscape. The Israeli city of Tzfat has suffered several devastating earthquakes. After one of them in the year 1839, the Chassidic Rabbi, Rebbe Avraham Dov of Avritch, said the following: "This catastrophe is a sign of the redemption. The Talmud in Sanhedrin alludes to the time when the Mashiach will redeem us. He will come when 'This gate shall collapse, be rebuilt, collapse, be rebuilt again and again, until there will not be enough time to rebuild it before the Mashiach comes.' The word gate in Hebrew is *sha'ar*. These same three (Hebrew) letters when reshuffled spell the word *ra'ash* (meaning earthquake)...May this be the last 'collapsing of the gate' mentioned in the Talmud, and may we soon see the final redemption in our time – Amen."

Ditto!

- Sources: Mishna, Tractate Brachot, page 54a; Talmud, Tractate Brachot, page 5b; Talmud, Tractate Sanhedrin, page 98a; Safed the Mystical City, by Dovid Rossoff, pp. 163-164

PARSHA OVERVIEW

Moshe teaches the rules and restrictions governing oaths and vows, especially the role of a husband or father in either upholding or annulling a vow. *Bnei Yisrael* wage war against Midian. They kill the five Midianite kings, all the males and Bilaam. Moshe is upset that women were taken captive. They were catalysts for the immoral behavior of the Jewish People. He rebukes the officers. The spoils of war are counted and apportioned. The commanding officers report to Moshe that there was not one casualty among *Bnei Yisrael*. They bring an offering that is taken by Moshe and Elazar and placed in the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Tent of Meeting).

The Tribes of Gad and Reuven, who own large quantities of livestock, petition Moshe to allow them to remain east of the Jordan and not enter the Land of Israel. They explain that the land east of the Jordan is quite suitable grazing land for their livestock. Moshe's initial response is that this request will discourage the rest of *Bnei Yisrael*, and that it is akin to the sin of the spies. They assure Moshe that they will first help conquer Israel, and only then will they go back to their homes on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moshe grants their request on condition that they uphold their part of the deal.

WHAT'S IN A WORD?

Synonyms in the Hebrew Language
by Rabbi Reuven Chaim Klein

Heavy Taxes and Empty Pockets

The Bible uses two Hebrew words for “taxes”: *mas* (or *missim* in plural) and *meches*. In this essay we will explore the etymology and meanings of these two words. Afterwards, we will discuss the three Aramaic words found in the Bible to mean “tax”: *minda*, *belo*, and *halach*. And then, three more Aramaic words in the Talmud: *karga*, *amona*, and *taska*. We will also trace the etymologies of those words and in doing so we will hone in on their exact meanings.

Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim of Breslau (1740-1814) offers three possibly etymologies for the Hebrew word *mas*. Firstly, in his work *Yerios Shlomo* he suggests that the root of *mas* is the letter SAMECH alone, which denotes “rejection” and “disassociation.” Other words derived from this root include *nas* (“fleeing”), and *ma'us* (“disgusting”). He connects “taxes” to “rejection” and “disassociation” because when one pays taxes he “disassociates” himself from that money and gives it over to the authorities.

Secondly, in his work *Cheshek Shlomo* Rabbi Pappenheim proposes that the root of *mas* is MEM-SAMECH, which means “melting” or “disintegrating.” He explains that this refers to “taxes” because they melt away one’s assets and cause them to disintegrate.

Thirdly, Rabbi Pappenheim (also in *Cheshek Shlomo*) explains that the word *mas* is derived from the root SIN-ALEPH (*sa*), which refers to “carrying” or “lifting.” This is relevant to “taxes” because they represent a burden which one must “carry.” Interestingly, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* the noun *tax* has two definitions: “a compulsory

contribution to state revenue” and “a strain or heavy demand.” If Rabbi Pappenheim is correct, the second meaning is actually the basis for the first.

Although *mas* is typically translated as “tax,” some scholars argue that a more accurate translation would be “corvée work,” meaning a system of compulsory, unpaid labor or civil service imposed by a sovereign. This meaning of “forced labor” is borne out by the Bible in several places. For example, the Torah terms the Egyptian taskmasters who oversaw the enslaved Jews as *sarei missim* – “Officers of *Missim* [the plural of *mas*]” (Ex. 1:11). Similarly, when King Solomon instituted mandatory conscription of civilians, this levy was called a *mas* (I Kings 5:27).

The other Biblical Hebrew word that sometimes means tax is *meches*. It appears six times in the Bible in that sense, with all instances clustered in one chapter (Num. 31:28-41). In that context, *meches* refers to the consecrated booty from the Jews’ war against the Midianites, which was to be given to G-d.

Dr. Hayim Tawil of Yeshiva University argues that the Biblical Hebrew *meches* is actually a loanword from the Akkadian *miksu* (“dues” or “tributes”), a word derived from the Akkadian verb *makasu* (“to collect a share from a rented field, to collect taxes, duty”). However, others have found a Hebrew basis for that word.

Menachem ibn Saruk (920-970) identifies the root of *meches* as KAF-SAMECH, while Rabbi Yehuda ibn Chayyuj, Rabbi Yonah ibn Janach (990-1050), and Rabbi David Kimchi (1160-1235) – also known as Radak – write that its root is

KAF-SAMECH-SAMECH. Either way, these roots mean “number.” This explains how *meches* was borrowed to mean “tax” – a rate is usually a function of “numbers.”

Rabbi Pappenheim agrees that the root of *meches* is KAF-SAMECH, yet argues that the core meaning of KAF-SAMECH is not “number” but “covering.” Another word with the same root – *kis* (“pocket”) – is a “covered” space into which one puts small items, like coins, to avoid losing them. Thus, the related word *meches* refers specifically to the type of tax which ends up in the king’s pocket/purse (as opposed to other taxes which are used for public works). In the case of the Jewish People, that King is G-d, to whom the *meches* is given.

The above-cited grammarians point to the Hebrew word *michsat* (Ex. 12:4) – used to describe the number of individuals collectively offering a single Paschal Lamb – as evidence that the root KAF-SAMECH means “number.” However, Rabbi Pappenheim argues that this too is merely a borrowed usage. He explains that *michsat* refers to the idea that multiple people pool their money into single pot or “pocket” to purchase the sacrifice.

Now let us examine the Aramaic words for “tax.” The Bible uses these three words when it reports that Cyrus, king of Persia, issued a special exemption releasing the Men of the Great Assembly from paying taxes. They were released from paying *minda*, *belo*, and *halach* (Ezra 7:24) – all Aramaic words.

Rabbi Baruch Avraham Toledano (1825-1917) writes that *minda* is related to the Hebrew word *middah* (“measure” or “dimension”) since it was the fee imposed as a function of the measurement of one’s property. *Belo* is an expression of “wearing out” and refers to food which gets digested and “worn out”. And *halach* is related to the word *holech* (“walking” or “travelling”), and refers to taxes used for the upkeep of transportation infrastructure such as public roads and bridges.

The Talmud (*Bava Basra* 8a and *Nedarim* 62b) explains that *minda* refers to the king’s portion (*manat hamelech*). This seems to be the Aramaic equivalent of *meches* (as explained by Rabbi Pappenheim), i.e. a tax for the king’s personal profit.

The second term used in the verse is *belo*, which the Talmud (there) explains refers to *gulgalta* money. As is evident from the ensuing discussion in the Talmud, the term *gulgalta*

means the same thing as *karga*. The Aramaic word *karga* (derived from the Persian *karaka* and/or Arabic *harag*) refers to a “poll tax” or “head tax,” which was a fixed sum that each individual was obligated to pay (see Rashi to *Bava Metzria* 73b). The word *gulgalta* is actually an Aramization of the Hebrew word *gulgolet* (“skull”), as the capitation tax applied to each individual (i.e. “head”).

The Talmud explains that the third term in the verse, *halach*, means *amona*, which was a “crop tax” levied on farmers. Rashi (to *Pesachim* 6a, *Bava Basra* 8a) explains that *amona* entailed paying the government a tenth of one’s animals and grain every year. In fact, historians record that in the Roman Empire there was a tax called *annona* that was used to supply grain and other foodstuffs to the city of Rome. *Annona* was derived from the Latin word *annus* (“year,” the source of the English word *annual*), because it was calculated from the sum total of the year’s harvests.

Alternatively, Rabbi Nossou of Rome in *Sefer HaAruch* explains that *amona* was a meal that each city had to supply to the king or army when they travelled (i.e. *halach* – “go”) through that city. Rabbeinu Nissim (to *Nedarim* 62b) offers two ways of fitting this explanation to the word *amona*. First, he writes that *amona* is Greek for “meal.” Second, he writes that *amona* means “partnership,” just like we find that the River Arnon was the border between the Moabites and Emorites (Num. 21:13), effectively joining those two territories. These two explanations are also cited by Maharam Chalavah and Meiri (to *Pesachim* 6a).

There is another Talmudic term for tax, namely *taska*, meaning “property tax” (see Rashi to *Gittin* 58b, *Bava Metzria* 73b, 108a). Elsewhere, *taska* means “sack” (Rashi to *Megillah* 7b) or “basket” (*Tosafos* to *Avodah Zarah* 14b). So it seems that its use as a word for property tax is simply a borrowed meaning. In Modern Hebrew *taska* is replaced with *amona*, which has been redefined to mean “property tax.” Likewise, in Modern Hebrew, *mas* is the generic word for “tax,” while *meches* refers specifically to “customs tax.”

We thus have many words which mean tax: *mas* and *meches* in Biblical Hebrew; and *minda*, *belo*, and *halach* in Biblical Aramaic; and *gulgalta*, *karga*, *amona*, and *taska* in Talmudic Aramaic.

For questions, comments, or to propose ideas for a future article, please contact the author at rcklein@ohr.edu

LETTER AND SPIRIT

Insights based on the writings of Rav S.R. Hirsch
by Rabbi Yosef Hershman

Dignity Restored

After the tragic sin of the people with the licentious daughters of Midian, Moshe is given his last instruction: wage war with Midian. The language of the command is instructive: *Accomplish the vengeance [n'kom nikmat] of the Children of Israel from the Midianites.* As the transmitter of G-d's Torah, which is based on chastity and loyalty to G-d, Moshe's final task is to strike a blow against the Midianites in order to safeguard these two pillars. By doing so he will protect the people from further threats of idolatry and licentiousness.

The word for avenge — *nakam* — is related phonetically to the word *kum*, stand. *Nekamah* raises up justice which has been trampled underfoot or it raises up a person who has been humbled to the ground. The avenger identifies with the object that he seeks to raise up. This explains the prepositional form used with this verb: “accomplish the vengeance of the Children of Israel *from* the Midianites.” If the purpose of *nekamah* was to push down the enemy and take revenge upon him, the construction would be, “accomplish the vengeance...*on* the Midianites.” Rather, the purpose is to raise Israel up *from* the

Midianites. When they are raised above this menacing enemy, Israel is then freed from the power of Midian's wiles. Free to regain their spiritual identity and attain moral liberation from the forces of corrosive neighbors.

The war itself bears this out. Moshe commanded *the nation*, the same “*am*” that was described as sinning. It is not the leaders that must raise the people, but the people that must raise themselves. The war is not waged against Moav, who sought to weaken Israel physically, but rather against Midian, who nearly effected a complete spiritual destruction. It was necessary for the people themselves, who succumbed to Midian's temptations, to restore their moral and spiritual integrity.

We have many modern day Moavs, and even more modern day Midians. Iran, Hamas, ISIS, Hezbollah — they all crave our physical destruction. Yet, we learn that it is not Moav but Midian which poses the greater threat; alluring materialism, intoxicating technology, degradation of basic morality — it is against these spiritual enemies which we are to fight, and thereby raise ourselves above their influence.

- Sources: Commentary Bamidbar 31:3

LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the people of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

Rabbi Meir and Miracles

When the great Sage Rabbi Meir went to redeem his sister-in-law from her forced confinement to a Roman house of ill repute, the bribed guard on duty expressed reluctance to cooperate for fear that he would be executed by the authorities who had placed her there.

“Whenever you are in danger,” Rabbi Meir assured him, “just utter the prayer ‘G-d of Meir, answer me’ and you will immediately be saved.”

To prove the potency of the prayer, Rabbi Meir incited some nearby man-eating dogs to attack the guard. As they approached, the man cried out: “G-d of Meir, answer me.” And the dangerous dogs retreated.

The guard then released the young lady but he was eventually discovered and sentenced to death by hanging. As he mounted the gallows he recalled Rabbi Meir's promise and uttered the prayer “G-d of Meir, answer me”. In miraculous fashion he was released by his executioners. (*Mesechta Avodah Zara* 18a)

Rabbi Meir's tomb is assumed to be located in Tiveria and is one of the more popular places for prayer. His name lives on not only in his countless statements in the Talmud but also in the many charities which bear the name “Rabbi Meir Baal HaNess,” meaning “Rabbi Meir the Miracle Worker.