

Parsha Matot and Masei., vows and a travelogue. Parsha Matot starts with G-d commanding the chiefs of the tribes about vows, nedarim. Parsha Masei starts with a long enumeration of the 42 stopping places of the Israelites as they moved from Egypt through Sinai.

Vows and wandering are emblematic of the Jewish people in history and of each individual Jewish life.

### Vows

There is thick discussion of vows in the tractate Nedarim which is the subject of the current daf yomi. The power of vows are great. The vows we make, perhaps uttered imprecisely in haste and in emotion, have meaning even if we regret them later.

Our vows must be taken seriously. We create reality via the speech-act. G-d created the world through words.

We have to live up to what we say. The failure to fulfill a vow is a betrayal. We are at a loss. We lose faith in ourselves. Others lose confidence in us

The Rabbis understood we would vow in vain, but they wanted to find ways to restore the wholeness we lose. The Rabbis take apart our vows in the Tractate Nedarim. They scrutinize them and find ingenious ways to get us off the hook.

Yet they have another motive for making us careful about our vows.

Our primary obligation is to G-d, Torah, and the Jewish people, and not the vows we make to ourselves. We might make what is allowed forbidden. That is the sin of the Nazir, who vows not benefit from grapes and not to cut his hair. His spirituality is outside what the Rabbis consider necessary. Upon fulfilling his vow, he must bring a sin offering.

What if each Jew did the same?

The Rabbis are wary of vows, lest if we forbid the permitted, chas veshalom, we might permit the forbidden.

We must not build new fences on our own, nor cut down fences the Rabbis established. They are the guardians of the most important vow that the Jewish people have made on Har Sinai. They understand that people will vow but they set limits on our vows so that each person does not adopt spiritual practices that place them outside the community.

They understand that we will go on making vows without thought or rational consideration, in moments of agitation, anger, and confusion. Their aim is to govern the vow making. As with regard to so many human inclinations, they want to set appropriate boundaries.

As Rabbi Linzer points out, it is not surprising that tractate Nedarim, branches out into a discussion of the Brit Milah, which can be translated as the covenant of words, milah, being the Hebrew word for word.

### Wanderings

Words are what we have taken with us in our many wanderings. That is the connection between Parsha Matot and Parshat Maasei. In our history as a people we take the words of the Torah with us wherever we go.

In Parshat Matot, the Torah enumerates 42 stopping points between Egypt and the Promised Land. Our history has had more than 42 pit stops – just think of Egypt, Babylon, Rome, France, Germany, England,

Spain, Portugal, Italy, North Africa, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, India, China, Poland, Russia, the U.S., Canada, Latin America, and Israel.

Have I left anything out?

Though our vows to remain true to G-d, Torah, and the Jewish people have stayed with us, in some places they weakened. In some places, they strengthened,

A destination of great interest is Barcelona where Judy and I visited this summer. Here is where Ramban's great disputation with the Christian convert, Pablo Christiani, took place. Here is where the Rashba wrote a Talmudic commentary still scrupulously studied in most yeshivot in the world today.

Barcelona also is the city of Hasdai Ibn Shaprut, the great Rabbi and philosopher who broke with Aristotle's idea of a closed universe, whose idea of infinity helped establish the foundations for modern science.

The Jewish moment in Barcelona was short like our stay in many places. Probably it was no more than 200 good years. Though not more than 2000 Jewish souls lived in this community at its height, it produced meaningful cultural artifacts

Like many diaspora stays it came to a tragic end. Not that long after the Black Plague, Martinez, a Catholic priest from Seville, unleashed a string of massacres throughout Spain that ended the great Spanish Jewish symbiosis over 100 years before the expulsion of 1492.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of Av in the year 1390 in Barcelona, Hasdai Ibn Shaprut's son and many other Jews were killed

We have from Hasdai his description of what took place.

And they fought the Jews that were in the fortress with bows and catapults, and beat and struck them there in the tower...

Many sanctified the Holy Name, my *only* son among them, an innocent lamb; him have I offered up as a burnt offering...

Many slaughtered themselves and some threw themselves from the tower . . . and some went out and were martyred in the street. .

And all the others changed their religion.

Only a few fled to the places of the nobles . . . a child might count them. . .

And for our many sins there is not this day a single Israelite to be found in Barcelona.

In his *History of the Jews of Spain* Yitzhak Baer writes.

A list of the *conversos* of Barcelona, who later submitted legal claims for the return of their looted possessions, contains the names of dignitaries and aristocrats, talmudic scholars, physicians, wealthy merchants, and former leaders of the community.

Baer continues that an elegist, exposing the shame, wrote about the holy community, where the Rashba and Rabbi Nissim Gerondi had taught:

For Barcelona moan! Her pride is overthrown...  
Alas for that pure maid who now has strayed,  
Raised her skirts and stripped herself for all to see!

Many years earlier, Ramban after the disputation no longer felt safe in Spain, and journeyed to Eretz Yisrael where he died. The phrase that introduces Parshat Maasei is going out and coming back. This suggests that the wanderings end. There is a return to Israel.

Some of our wanderings have been sweet. We left a mark. Some were bitter. There was no Torah. There was no water, which stands for Torah.

Much of our wandering was and is non-descript. There is not much to note about it like all the names of the places of the Israelites wanderings mentioned in this week's parsha.

And some of our wanderings have been both sweet and bitter. In Barcelona the wandering started out sweet. It ended exceptionally bitter.

Rabbi Riskin points to the phrase that introduces parshat Maasei that that ends with the beginning. Our wanderings cycle back. They culminate in a return.

### Conclusion

Today we have witnessed the miracle of the return to the land of Israel. But not everybody has made this return.

What nourishes us here and in the land of Israel are our vows to God, to the Jewish people to the Torah.

We have a primary vow to G-d to do and to listen. Any other vows we make might get in the way. So the Rabbis were wary of vows.

Rather than vow, we say "beli neder," without a vow. Prior to the high holidays and on Yom Kippur we annul the vows we made during the year with the awesome kol nedri melody. This custom originated in

Spain partially it is thought as a way to deal with vows Jews made to save their lives by denying their religion.

Physical threats still exist. In France, it is palpable and in the U.S. mostly under the surface. In Israel it comes from Hamas, Hezbollah, and their Arab and Iranian backers.

The challenge for us no matter where we live is to be true to our tradition while at the same time clinging to the freedom we have to make vows, any vows we may choose.

Shabbat Shalom