

Mattot

מטות "Tribes"

Numbers 30:1 – 32:42

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion contains instructions on the importance of keeping vows made before God and then relates some of the history of the Israelites as they prepared to enter the land God had promised to their forefathers. In addition, we learn that we are near the end of Moses' life.

1. Vows - 30:1-16

a) The subject of vows was treated more fully in **Leviticus 27**. What is the special case that is considered in this passage?

This passage deals with vows in general but particularly vows taken by women. Because of their relationships with their husband or fathers, they were often special cases.

b) What were the rules if a woman should take a vow? How did her marital status affect those vows? What were the responsibilities of the father or husband?

When a woman was married or still living at home with her father, any vow or obligation she might make to God was subject to her husband's or father's approval. If he did not disapprove of her vow, then it stood. If he heard about it and nullified it, then the vow was cancelled. A widow or divorced woman's vows stood.

c) What can we learn about God's view of authority in the family? Do you think these rules are fair? How does **Matthew 5:37** apply here?

This law reinforced the husband and father as leader of his household effectively putting his wife or daughter under his authority. If a man and woman have an open, honest relationship, this should not cause a problem. Matthew 5:37 discourages making vows.

Scripture Link:

A **vow** is a promise to do something. A **vow TO God** is generally taken to demonstrate one's **commitment** to God, as a Nazirite vow (**Numbers 6:2-21**). A **vow made before God** is usually a promise to another person, such as wedding a vow. Vows are voluntary and personal. This passage makes it clear that God takes them very seriously. In **Matthew 5:33-37**, *Yeshua* discourages the taking of vows lest you break your commitment to God.

YHWH said to Moses, "Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people."

Numbers 31:1 - 2

Vengeance on the Midianites

God ordered Moses to "take vengeance on the Midianites" because of the incident described in **Numbers** chapter 25. From **Numbers 31:16**, we learn that it was Balaam who advised the Moabites to use their women to seduce the Israelite men into acts of sexual immorality. So although Balaam was not able to curse the Israelites himself, he was able to have the Israelites effectively curse themselves by committing sinful acts with these Moabite women.

Scripture Link:

In this passage (verses 19-24), Moses tells the soldiers returning from the battle with the Midianites that they must stay outside the camp until they have been cleansed and their garments and belongings purified. This is in obedience to the commands that Moses gave the Israelites in **Numbers 19:11-13** concerning the "water of cleansing" obtained from the ashes of the red heifer.

2. Vengeance on the Midianites - 31:1-24

a) What did God say would happen to Moses after the Israelites had "taken vengeance on the Midianites?" How do you think Moses may have felt about this?

God told Moses that after the Israelites had taken vengeance on the Midianites, he would be "gathered to your people," i.e., it was time to die. Although no one wants to die, at age 120 Moses may have been ready to lay down his burdens. God may have comforted him at this time.

b) How many Israelites went to battle with the Midianites? From which tribes did they come? Who else went along with them? What did he bring with him?

A thousand men from each tribe, 12,000 in all, went to war against the Midianites. Phinehas, son of Eleazar the priest went with them taking "articles from the sanctuary" including the silver trumpets. (What "articles" do you suppose he brought with him?)

c) How many Midianite men survived the battle with the Israelites? What were the names of the Midianite kings who died? Who else is mentioned that died in this battle?

Every Midianite man died in battle (verse 7). The 5 kings of Midian (Evi, Rekem, Zur, Hur, and Reba) all died. Balaam, son of Beor, (who we met in chapter 22) was also killed in this battle.

d) What was done with the Midianite women & children? What about the flocks and the herds? What was done to the towns where the Midianites had settled?

The women and children, the flocks and herds were brought to Moses and Eleazar as plunder. The cities of the Midianites were burned (verses 9-12).

e) Why was Moses angry with the Israelite army when they returned from the battle? What did he order to be done? How do you feel about this?

Moses was angry because the commanders of the army had allowed the women to live. He ordered that the women (many of whom had participated in the seduction of the Israelites in chapter 25) be put to death along with male children. Only virgin girls were spared. See Digging Deeper question at end of lesson for more discussion.

f) Why weren't the returning soldiers allowed inside the camp? What did they have to do to be allowed back in? What was done with the goods captured with the Midianites?

The soldiers who had come into contact with a dead body weren't allowed back into camp until they were ritually cleansed, a process that took 7 days as described in Leviticus. All the goods captured were also ritually cleansed in either fire or water.

3. Dividing the Spoils - 31:25-54

a) All the people and livestock that had been captured were to be divided equally between what two groups? Who did the counting and dividing?

Moses and Eleazar counted and divided the captured people and livestock equally between the soldiers who fought and the rest of the community.

b) What was each group commanded to set apart as a tribute to YHWH? To whom were these items given? Why do you think the tributes from the two groups were different?

From the soldiers, 1 out of every 500 was set apart for God whereas from the rest of the community, 1 out of 50 was set apart. These items were given to the Levites for use in caring for the Tabernacle. The community gave a larger proportion because they had not participated in the victory as had the soldiers.

c) How many Israelite men died in the battle? What did the officers and commanders do with their share of the gold they had plundered? According to verse 50, what was their reason for doing this?

According to verse 49, no Israelite men died in battle. The officers gave the gold articles each had acquired to the Levites "to make atonement" before God. (Are we always in need of atonement?)

The Spoils of War

From the description of the defeat of the Midianites, we have an idea of what the Israelite soldiers brought back to Moses and Eleazar. After killing all those who had participated in the seduction of the Israelites (**Numbers 25**) and burning their towns and cities, all that was left were the young women (virgins), the livestock, and whatever items of value the Israelites could carry. These were divided into two equal parts with one given to the soldiers themselves and the other given to the rest of the community. From these, each group gave a portion to the Levites as a tribute, or **thanksgiving offering**, to YHWH. In addition, the commanders gave a voluntary offering to YHWH both as a **thanksgiving offering** (because not one Israelite soldier had been killed – verse 49) and as an **atonement offering** (verse 50) for those sins committed during the battle.

A Repeat of History?

Moses was obviously concerned and alarmed when the Reubenites and the Gadites expressed their desire to live on the east side of the Jordan river and not cross into the land that God had promised the Israelites. He remembered the incident of the 12 men sent to spy out the land 40 years earlier (**Numbers 13**). When they returned, they discouraged the Israelites by telling them of the “giants that dwelt in the land.” It was this incident that caused the Israelites to spend the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness and Moses did not want to repeat that!

The solution that the leaders of the Reubenites and the Gadites presented seemed to allay Moses’ fears. History shows that the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh did indeed settle land on the east side of the Jordan river. Reuben and Gad ended up with land northeast of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) in what today is northern Jordan and southern Syria. Half the tribe of Manasseh settled in land just east of the Jordan river in Gilead, today’s central Jordan.

4. The Transjordan Tribes - 32:1-42

a) As the Israelites prepared to cross the Jordan river to enter Canaan, what did the tribes of Reuben and Gad want to do? Why did they want this?

The tribes of Reuben and Gad found the land east of the Jordan river to be very desirable for livestock and asked that it be their inheritance. They didn’t want to go any farther.

b) What was Moses’ response to the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites? What event in their past did Moses recall? In essence, of what did Moses accuse them?

It appears that Moses got angry, accusing them of being afraid to enter the land as their fathers had been 40 years earlier. He was determined that all of Israel would enter and claim the land.

c) How did the Reubenites and the Gadites respond to Moses’ criticism? What was their proposal? How did Moses receive their suggestion? Does this seem like a good solution to you?

The Reubenites and the Gadites responded by saying that they weren’t afraid and that they were willing to go with the rest of the Israelites to help conquer the land. They requested that they be allowed to leave their wives, children, and flocks east of the Jordan (Gilead) and that the men would go with the rest of the Israelites to conquer the Canaanites. It appears that Moses was somewhat reluctant but agreed, stating that they had better keep their promise or face God’s anger. The plan seemed fair.

d) Which tribes actually received their share of the land on the east side of the Jordan river? Which tribe received which land? Can you locate these areas on a map?

Verse 33 states that Moses gave the Gadites, the Reubenites, and half the tribe of Manasseh the land of the Amorites and Bashan. This is the land east of the Jordan river from the north end of the Dead Sea (Nebo) to the east side of the Sea of Galilee (Gilead). Today, it is the northern part of Jordan and may include part of Syria.

Digging deeper

1. How was the situation with the tribes of Reuben and Gad and their request of Moses different than the situation that occurred with the ten spies as recorded in Numbers 13? Can you see why Moses may have related their request to that situation?

In the case of the 10 spies that gave a bad report, the people were afraid to go into Canaan, not trusting God to give them victory over the inhabitants. In this case, there is no indication of fear on the part of the Reubenites or the Gadites; they simply desired the land east of the Jordan for their permanent settlement. Their agreement to accompany the rest of the Israelites in their conquest of Canaan demonstrated their lack of fear. Moses, however, was probably very sensitive about the last time they were poised, ready to enter the land when the people angered God by their lack of faith.

2. When God commanded the Israelites to take vengeance on the Midianites, they ended up killing even some women and children. Do you think this is consistent with God's character? What are your thoughts about this act? Does this change your attitude toward God?

God's character is a perfect mixture of love and justice. It's easy for us to accept the loving part but not so easy to accept the perfect justice. Genesis 15:16 records that God gave the people of the land many opportunities to repent and turn from their idolatrous ways, knowing that they would not. It appears that the Medianites were hopelessly corrupt and unable to respond to God. We must simply trust that God knows the heart of each individual and has his or her best interest at heart even if it involves their death. We assume that the Medianites were "innocent" when actually they were anything but innocent. (The same can be said of us also.)

For further study, see
Haftarah : Jeremiah 1:1 – 2:3
Brit Hadashah : Matthew 5:33-37