

The
CHASSIDUS
PERSPECTIVE
with Reb Yoel Kahn



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THE VALUE OF VOWS

Sefarim explain that each *parshah* is connected with the time of year when it is read. Since Parshas Matos is always read during the Three Weeks, it follows that there must be a connection between the two.

Parshas Matos begins with the subject of vows, in which a person resolves to abstain from enjoying a specific food or activity.

Pirkei Avos states that "vows are a barrier [that leads] to abstinence." This is said in a positive light; the Mishnah is recommending vows as a method of eschewing materialism. Yet, elsewhere Chazal admonish us not to add prohibitions on top of those already given by the Torah. How can these two approaches be reconciled?

VOWS: A METHOD OF SELF-CONTROL

The resolution lies in determining the state of a given individual. If someone is solely focused on spirituality, and material pleasures do not attract his attention, he is exhorted to use everything at his disposal for holiness. Such a person should not abstain from things that are permitted; to the contrary, he should use them for holy pursuits.

On the other hand, if one is on a lower level, and materialism tempts him, indulging in permitted pleasures may ultimately lead him to engage in forbidden activities. Furthermore, even if that would be of no concern, the mere indulgence in permissible pleasures is also improper. For such a person, it is recommended to make vows, to help him curb his physical passions.

A similar concept exists on a communal scale as well. Our *chachamim* instituted various decrees and restrictions, instructing us to avoid certain activities so we will not come to perform a Biblical transgression.

The phenomenon of instituting *gezeiros* became prevalent specifically during the era of the *Bayis Sheini*, and not earlier. At the time of the first Beis Hamikdash, Bnei Yisroel were on a higher level and did not need these restrictions. To the contrary, they were to use what was permissible for *kedushah*. But as holiness subsided from the world, the need grew to create protections from potential pitfalls.

It appears, then, that the need for vows and restrictions reflects a

person's low spiritual state (and similarly, the low spiritual state of *Klal Yisroel* as a whole).

GREATER THAN A KORBAN

When we examine the issue a bit more, though, a more positive element of vows comes to light.

Interestingly, the prohibitive nature of a vow is initiated by proclaiming that the object in question is off-limits like a *korban*. If one were to state, "This object is prohibited like non-kosher meat," the vow does not take effect.

So on the one hand a vow is associated with lowliness, where one is in a position where he must refrain from what is permissible. But at the same time, the manner in which he abstains is (not by declaring that the item is viewed as non-kosher, but) through investing some form of holiness within the restricted item, similar to a *korban*.

In fact, vows have a certain advantage over *korbanos*. *Korbanos* are limited to certain types

of animals, and are bound by certain time restrictions (the Beis Hamikdash era and so on). Vows, on the other hand, do not possess these limitations. One may resolve to abstain from (and thereby instill holiness within) any entity he wishes, and at any time!

LOWER, YET HIGHER

This demonstrates that while the state of a Jew making vows might be low, yet these vows contain the possibility for attaining new heights, the likes of which would otherwise be unattainable. True, he is in a state where vows are needed, and if not for them he might fall even lower, but once he makes them and keeps them, they elevate him to a higher level.

In the same way, the restrictions decreed by the sages of the second-Beis-Hamikdash era may have been the result of darker times, yet through instituting and observing them, we can reach greater heights than what could have been achieved when they weren't necessary. The same is true in later generations, when the *geonim* and *tzaddikim* of each period instituted additional decrees and *takanos*.

Through observing the *gezeiros* of Chazal, we can reach greater heights than what could have been achieved when they weren't necessary.

Moreover, vows ultimately enable one to reach a level where they are no longer necessary.

This is alluded to in the fact that a vow can be annulled (through a husband or father, or through a *chacham*, who has the advantage of being able to revoke the vow retroactively as if it had never occurred). In the practical sense, the one making a vow and the one annulling it are two separate individuals. However, in the spiritual sense, the concepts of making a vow and of annulling it can both exist by a single person: through keeping his vow, the same individual who previously needed to abstain will find himself uplifted, to the extent that the vow can be “annulled”—he can utilize permissible items for holiness and transform them into a dwelling for Hashem.

FROM BRANCH TO STAFF

This idea—that although one is in a state where vows are necessary, that itself lifts a person to greater heights—is alluded to in the name of the *parshah*, Matos.

The word *matos* is used to refer to the tribes (“*rashei ha’matos*”—the heads of the tribes), although the more common word for tribe is *shevet*. These two terms—*mateh* and *shevet*—also share a different meaning: a branch or staff. The difference between them is that a *shevet* refers to a branch that is either still attached to the tree or has just recently been cut off. Such a branch is soft and moist, as it still retains the vitality it received from the tree. The term *mateh*, by contrast, is used once the branch has dried out and hardened into a staff.

These two terms reflect two conditions in which a Jew can be found. The *neshamah* starts off Above, where it is connected to spirituality. Even once it descends to this world, initially it maintained that connection (during the time of the first Beis Hamikdash), similar to a branch that still retains its vitality.

As our spiritual state deteriorated, we lost that connection and “dried out.” However, that itself gives rise to a newfound strength. When we stand steadfast and resolve to abstain from anything that may lead to spiritual harm, the deep powers of our *neshamah* are revealed, unleashing a strength we did not possess before. The “descent” into a state of *mateh* proves at the same time to be an

“ascent” into being strengthened to the extent that nothing can sway us from our resolve.

CONVERTS OF GOLUS

We can now understand the connection between Parshas Matos and the Three Weeks.

The Three Weeks represent a state of *churban*, destruction, when we are severed from our source. However, exile is simultaneously a time when we reap many spiritual sparks.

Chazal tell us that “Bnei Yisroel only entered exile in order to accumulate converts.” This doesn’t only refer to actual converts, but includes the sparks of holiness found in exile, which are similarly called “converts.”

What is a convert? A convert is someone who initially possessed a spark of *kedushah*, but it was hidden to such an extent that he wasn’t considered a Jew in any way. Then, when this spark becomes aroused, the person is inspired to convert.

(This is why Chazal often use the terminology, “A child who matured, a slave who was redeemed, and a *ger* who converted.” Shouldn’t they have stated, “a *non-Jew* who converted,” similar to the other categories? *Sefarim* explain that this is because a *ger* possesses a spark of holiness even before he converts.)


Every object likewise contains concealed spiritual energy, but is awaiting “conversion”—to be used for a holy purpose, a task accomplished through us being in exile.

And thus, while the exile is the result of our sins, it is not simply a punishment. Rather, it is a time when we achieve new heights and elevate our surroundings to *kedushah*. Through observing the decrees instituted by Chazal and the later

sages (which today have the status of *halachah*), as well as resolving to abstain from certain pleasures on our own, we attain a new level of strength (*matos*), and we elevate the sparks found in exile, transforming the world into a dwelling for Hashem.

For further learning see *Likkutei Sichos* vol. 4, pp. 1076-1079. Vol. 18, pp. 382-384. Vol. 28, pp. 282-283.

Exile is not simply a punishment; it is a time when we achieve new heights.



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