“Reflecting Divine Will”

*D’var Torah* for Shabbat *Mattot-Mas’ey*, July 18, 2020

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The final two *parshiyot* of the Book of Numbers usually get combined. Therefore, both get short shrift, especially the first one, *Mattot*.

*Mattot*, meaning “the tribes,” begins with a section on keeping vows. It moves on to a bloody, brutal account of the Israelites’ war of vengeance against the Midianites. That’s not one of the most popular passages for modern Torah study, but it is in the Torah nonetheless. Finally, it presents the case of several tribes who ask permission to take up residence on the east side of Jordan, technically outside the “promised land” of the Israelites. They are granted permission with the assumption that they will make themselves available to defend the Land of Israel whenever the need arises.

The second portion is called *Mas’ey*, which means “journeys.” It lists, in order, the forty-two stops the Israelites make on their forty-year trek from Egypt to Sinai and onward to their final vantage point in preparation for crossing into Canaan. Then it lays out God’s plan for the Israelites to enter the Land, dispossess the current inhabitants (you heard me correctly), destroy all existing altars and idols, and divide up the territory by tribal allotment. It gives surprisingly detailed maps of each tribe’s inheritance. Within those tribal areas are to be designated six cities of refuge, which allow those who commit involuntary manslaughter to shelter until a proper trial can take place. Finally, it presents a second iteration of something we saw in last week’s portion, namely the claim made by the five daughters of Tzelophechad for the right as women to inherit their father’s share of their family’s ancestral land holding.

Generally speaking, this is the end of the Torah. Deuteronomy exists as a grand coda or re-cap. But the Torah could end here, and once upon time it apparently did end here.

I would like to take us to the beginning of *Mattot*, the first parashah, and then to the end of *Mas’ey*, the second parashah, to see how these two brief bookend passages can be combined to reveal an important general truth about the Torah.

First, *Mattot*. Moses is instructed to address the *rashei hamattot*, the “heads of the tribes of Israel,” to command the people to keep any and every vow that crosses their lips. Men, who have agency, must fulfill their vows. The penalty for breaking a vow is severe. Women, it turns out, must also fulfill their vows, unless overruled by their father (if they are single) or their husband (if they are married). Both the father and the husband are warned not to cancel the woman’s vow lightly. It seems that the Torah is crouching toward giving agency to women. Not feminism, perhaps, but proto-feminism.

Through the ages, the Rabbis cannot help making connections between “heads of tribes” and “keeping vows.” Why, they ask, is this mitzvah directed specifically to the heads of the tribes, when most mitzvot are commanded to Moses, Aaron, or both? Why to those individuals would be the equivalent of our own communal leaders, i.e., elected or appointed officials in any era?

Here are two classic responses. The first is from the *Chattam Sofer*, who is Rabbi Moses Schreiber, the great central European scholar and Jewish communal leader who lived from 1762-1839. Reflecting the mood of the Sages through the centuries, he asks that very question: Why is the commandment to *lo yachel d’varo*, to “not go back on one’s word,” – why is it directed not to Moses but to the officials that the people would know personally? Because, he says, most officials who are charged with the affairs of the community make all sorts of promises and vows and don’t fulfill them. This is why the Torah practically shames them into keeping their promises to their constituents. *Le plus ca change, le plus c’est la meme chose*.

The second comes from the *Shem Mi-Sh’muel*, who is the Polish Chassidic master Shmuel Bornshtain, 1855-1926. Quoting his own father, he concludes that these tribal leaders are referred to in the Hebrew of the Torah as *rashei hamattot*, literally “heads of the tribes,” because they are uniquely positioned to turn the attention of the elite - the societal and governmental leadership - downward toward the lowly people they represent. To turn their heads, as it were. He is punning on the word *mattot*, tribes, singular *matteh*, which also means a staff (like Moses’s and Aaron’s famous staffs), but which also means “to re-orient,” or “to lower.” *L’hattot.* To re-direct something “downward,” *l’mattah.*

He concludes by saying that the function of Moses’s *matteh* or staff was to turn God’s attention downward, *l’mattah*, toward the people of Israel, while Aaron’s staff turned the people closer to God. In both cases, they used their *mattot*, their turning tools, to model the function of true leaders. The leader does not obfuscate or make false promises. The leader bridges the gap between his lofty position above and the people below who trust in him by telling the truth and keeping his promises.

*Lo yachel d’varo.* They keep the sacred bond between the leader and the led. Indeed, it must be so for a human leader who holds the staff of authority. How much the more so for the leader of the universe. God’s promise is experienced by the average person through the lens of their local leaders, the flesh-and-blood persons who keep their vows as if God were always watching over those leaders’ shoulders.

Let’s go to the end of *Mas’ey*, which is also the end of the Book of Numbers. As I mentioned a moment ago, the concluding passage describes the case of Tzelophechad’s five daughters. They claim the right to inherit their ancestral land holding since their father has died and left no male heir. Moses has no idea how to rule in this case, but he has the humility and wisdom to turn to God. God “rules” as it were that the daughters’ claim is just. Again, the Torah leans ever so slightly in a proto-feminist direction.

But this granular case constitutes the end of the parashah, the end of the book, and for all practical purposes, the end of the Torah. Shouldn’t this spot in the text be reserved for some sort of sweeping observation about God, Torah, and the destiny of the people of Israel? Why does it end with a narrow example of case law?

Of the many fine responses to this question, I’ve chosen that of the so-called Izhbitzer Rebbe, Rabbi Mordechai Yosef Leiner (1801-1854). In his envelope-pushing commentary known as *Mei Hashiloach*, he asks that same question: Why not a broad, inspiring last word here about the eternal, unchanging commandments that are true and enduring in every place and in every era?

His answer: *r’tzon hashem hu she-ha’adam yavin v’yasig mah r’tzon haborei b’inyanei ha-rega’, l’fi ha-et v’haz’man hamit’chalef v’hamsh’taneh.* God wills it that humans would understand and grasp the will of their Creator in matters of the moment, things which change according to time and circumstance.

I warned you that the Izhbitzer pushes the envelope. Here he comes out and says that Jewish law – Torah law – must adapt to changing situations over time. The mitzvot are fixed and eternal, but the application of them must fit the demands of the moment.

In our case, the daughters of Tzelophechad present a problem that the Torah has never been called upon to solve. If Moses is to lead from both strength and truthfulness, he must solve *this* dilemma for *these* *real people* at *this real moment*. The Izhbitzer’s claim is that this is the Torah’s way of telling us that God’s presence – God’s *matteh*, if you will – can be experienced in the granular, in the everyday, in the ever-changing real world down below where we reside. No, it *must* be experienced that way.

Every word of the Torah, says the Izhbitzer, gives a *remez*, a hint as to what God wants from us. And to those who are looking and listening closely, every small matter reveals what God wants us to do and not do.

Hence the bookends of *Par’shat Mattot* and *Par’shat Mas’ey*. One tells us to keep our vows at all times, and the other to rule fairly in every situation. But both are telling us that the access point to God’s will is through people. In *Mattot* it is through elected and appointed officials whose vow of truth requires them to reflect God’s truth. In *Mas’ey* it is through the adjudication of so-called “little matters” in a way that channels God’s overarching reality.

Both ask us to seek God’s will. Both command us to determine that will, not in despotic claims and policies, but in the careful, loving, attentive way we treat one another, lead one another, govern one another, advise one another, help one another to cope with the day to day challenges of a very challenging life.