

## **Matot-Masei: A Place of Complexity** **Elisha Gechter, Class of 2025**

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The concluding double portion of Bamidbar, *parshat* Matot-Masei, presents a tapestry of contradictions, both legal and spiritual. Such nuances and contradictions are familiar in Torah text, and have been interpreted by commentators over centuries to enrich our grasp of *halakha* and of the right way to act in the world.

One notable contradiction concerns the empowerment and restrictions imposed on women. Matot opens with laws concerning vows: While a man's vow is binding, a woman's vow can be annulled by her father or husband (Numbers 30:6). This legal disparity, according to Rabbi Jill Hammer, indicates a spiritual disparity, as vows in Biblical times were “like a kind of offering practice, a way of showing devotion to God and often of showing gratitude for some personal abundance or miraculous intervention one had received” (AJR August 2, 2019 *A D’var Torah for Parashat Matot-Masei*). So an inability to vow with full agency meant a diminishment in one’s devotional capacities. And yet, there are some women whose vows are not at risk of being reversed by a man, namely widows and divorcees. With no man around to affirm or nullify their vows, their words stick. So some women are powerful while others are powerless. Masei similarly closes by celebrating the precedent set by the daughters of Tzelofchad, who inherit land in the absence of male heirs. Yet, this newfound freedom is tempered by restrictions requiring them to marry within their tribe to preserve tribal lands, introducing another layer of complexity. Again we see here both an expansion and a curtailing of women’s freedoms.

The contradictions regarding attitudes toward bloodshed in this *parsha* are particularly intriguing. In Matot, God commands vengeance against the Midianites for having led Israel astray in the last *parsha*, resulting in a bloody conflict (Numbers 25:17 and 18). Surprisingly, Moses orders the killing of Midianite women, despite his own marriage to a Midianite woman. This contradiction is pointed out by Nechama Goldman Barash who furthers the complexity by showing that this week’s *parsha* also adds information we didn’t have in the previous one. “We discover that the Midianite women, in addition to the Moabite women, were the ones who carried out the bidding of Balaam and led the Israelites to stray against God at Peor” (“The Israelites and Midianite women,” *Jerusalem Post*, July 2020).

On top of that, the returning soldiers, having engaged in battle, are required to isolate themselves outside the camp for a week, and then purify themselves. This need for ritual purification, using the ashes of the red heifer, underscores the spiritual contamination associated with bloodshed and even mandated warfare. On the surface, the reason for this separation from the *makhane* (camp) was very practical. The Bechor Shor (a 12th-century

French Tosafist) explains there was a fear that the soldiers' *tumat met*, contamination from a dead body, would spread widely in the camp. But Chizkuni (13th-century French Biblical commentator) also notes a spiritual contamination: The impetus for the campaign had been the Israelites' own spiritual defilement by worshiping *Ba'al Peor*. To further this idea of spiritual impurity, or unreadiness, Rabeynu Bachya (13th-century Spanish Kabbalistic commentator) explains that the returning soldiers were forbidden to enter the courtyard of the Tabernacle in their condition out of regard for the *Shekhinah* which was present there.

This idea of spiritual impurity as the cost of war/spilling blood draws on a verse further along, in *parshat Masei*, where the laws of manslaughter are discussed. Here, the subject is death, though not in the context of war. The Torah wants to protect those who have killed someone by accident from revenge exacted by a "blood avenger." Bamidbar 35:33-34 bring us the notion that blood pollutes the land:

You shall not pollute the land in which you live; for blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it, except by the blood of the one who shed it.

You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I God abide among the Israelite people.

Putting aside the contradiction that blood pollutes land unless it is spilled by a blood avenger, I want to focus on how this *tumah* (pollution) layers on top of the *tumah* from Matot. If we have the notion of blood polluting the land when someone is killed, and that threatens the holiness of the land that God resides in, why do we have a mandated war which results in physical and spiritual *tumah*? And why is there no means to purify the land from such *tumah*, the way there is to purify the soldiers? I think we see that it's not just the individual's *tumah* or the *tumah* of the collective that the Torah is concerned about; there is also a distinct concern for the sanctity and purity of the land.

Nechama Leibowitz brings a beautiful meditation from Martin Buber on this matter:

What the Bible wants to express is the shared being of the two—man and the earth—a sharing that develops and becomes a special solidarity. The earth bears the curse of man's actions, it is a guarantor for him. The earth in the Bible is responsible for man's guilt. Man is the cause of the fate of the earth through his actions and omissions and again it becomes his fate. The relationship between man and the earth takes on a different and even stronger expression when it is not about the earth in general, but specifically in the land of Canaan a nation or human being who sins, "makes a mistake"

in the land (Deuteronomy 24:4), that is: brings it to a state of internal disintegration. The earth has a natural combination and order, which are lost due to man's fault. Man is placed under the yoke of the commandment of God who reveals His will to him, and he is given by the same God's act of creation in such a courageous connection with the earth, that his reference to the divine commandment directly causes the benefit or harm of the land (Gilyonot Nechama - *parshat* Matot Masai - תשי"ג).

In the richness of the contradiction of bloodshed, we find the inextricable link between humanity and land that plays out in many ways beyond the pages of our *parsha*. Buber's notion of solidarity between humans and earth goes back to the roots of our creation, when God breathed life into a clump of earth. In the verses above we see that life breath is a give and take. When one human takes away breath, or blood, from another, it reverberates in the land. Especially when that land is inhabited by *Shekhina*, that connection needs to be tended to. Of course as humans we make mistakes, and we need to learn from those mistakes. From Buber's words, it seems that the earth, our "guarantor," could be there to help us remember to get back up when we fall down.

This reminds me of [Joey Newcomb](#)'s rendition of a Chassidic *niggun* by Reb Levi Yitzchak of Berditchev. He includes the words "you fall down, you get back up" and quotes Mishlei "*sheva yipol tzadik v'kam*," "seven times a tzadik falls and gets up" (Mishlei 24:16). When we are living on holy land, a space inhabited by divine presence, there is a powerful rooting for us to get back up when we have made a mistake, when we have brought something that breaks us, that breaks our community.

I think that, ultimately, the contradictions in Matot and Masei, especially when read together, focus us on the complexities inherent in our legal and ethical systems and urge us towards greater responsibility and accountability in our relationship with the world and with one another. Whether considering the extent or limits of the power of a woman to make a vow and inherit property, or the legal and spiritual disparity of loss of life, we all stand to benefit from a reckoning with nuance and complexity.

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