

Parshat Matot-Masei

Standing at the Crossroads: Matot-Masei and an Opportunity for Teshuva Rabba Claudia Marbach - Class of 2018

This week we find ourselves at the end of the book of Bamidbar. After forty years of wandering in the desert, Bnei Yisrael are on the banks of the Yarden. The last time they were there, they sent the spies to check out the land. Upon the spies return, the people chose to hear only the negative reports. Consequently, they were punished with a long, arduous journey. Once again, Bnei Yisrael are at a crossroads. How will they proceed? The Talmud in Yoma 86b tells us that the essence of teshuva is being in the same place and choosing a different path. This week marks the siyum of Masechet Yoma in the Daf Yomi cycle, which also discusses the process of teshuva. We are in the weeks before Tisha B'Av, when, as Rabbi Alan Lew teaches, "we are reminded that catastrophes will keep recurring in our lives until we get things right, until we learn what we need to learn from them."¹ Maybe this year we can think of this critical moment before Bnei Yisrael fought their way into the land as sparking our process of teshuva.

Matot begins with laws about taking vows and oaths -- who can make them and how to annul them. The Or HaChaim says that both vows and oaths fall into two categories: the spiritual and the physical. The first refers to our performance of mitzvot and the second to what we eat and drink and where and with whom we live. Oaths and vows are often utilized to force us to change our behavior. The Rabbis take these commitments seriously but also show compassion, instituting Kol Nidre, our annual public annulment of vows. Using vows as a tool to change our habits it's tricky. While often useful catalysts, they can sometimes be too blunt an instrument. When we publicly annul our vows on Yom Kippur, we are admitting how difficult it is to change and acknowledging the need to forgive ourselves and others.

The Talmud tells us that the destruction of the Temple was caused by *sinat chinam*, senseless hatred, caused by not listening carefully to others. Daryl Davis, a Black musician recently highlighted in the New York Times, has made it his life mission to engage in dialogue with members of the KKK and claims to have persuaded over two hundred people to leave hate groups. He [asks](#) "how can you hate me when you don't even know me?" Mr. Davis suggests that curiously listening, with no preconditions, helps change minds. Midrash Tehillim 12 tells us that "every statement that God said to Moshe, God would say forty-nine reasons (panim, lit. faces) that a matter could be pure, and forty-nine reasons that a matter could be impure." Rabbi Daniel Roth and Rabba Yaffa Epstein teach us that this text invites us, as Daryl Davis does, to approach others with intellectual humility and curiosity. Maybe one way to find our way to teshuva is not through oaths sworn in haste, but rather through patient dialogue.

Later in Matot, the representatives of the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe ask Moshe for permission to settle on the eastern bank of the Yarden. Moshe reacts with horror and anger, assuming they plan to abandon the rest of the people in the fight to capture the land. Moshe is immediately reminded of the incident of the spies, accusing Reuven, Gad and Menashe of fomenting division and controversy among the people. Ramban explains that Moshe thought that these tribes were either scared like the spies, too lacking in belief

¹ This is Real and You are Totally Unprepared, Rabbi Alan Lew p.41

in God to enter the land of Israel, or too focussed on material possessions. He does not take the time to consider the reasons they might have had for wanting to stay behind. The tribe leaders did not anticipate Moshe's perspective either and did not understand Moshe's belief that God should decide who settles where. When they explain their plan to settle their families and then promise to be on the front lines of the battles, Moshe is appeased and they are later lauded for their bravery (Devarim 33:20).

Vows and oaths cut off dialogue, while teshuva provides opportunities for conversations, curiosity and humility. The end of Masechet Yoma tells us that we have to ask for forgiveness three times (Yoma 87a). The Talmud then goes on to tell stories about how Rabbis searched for opportunities for reconciliation. Rabbi Zeira would pace outside a place where someone who had wronged him would be and Rav sought Rabbi Hanina's forgiveness for thirteen years in a row (Yoma 87a-b). The three weeks between the 17th of Tammuz and Tisha B'Av are called *bein hametzarim*, between the narrow places. Like Bnei Yisrael, we stand at a crossroads, just beginning to think about our own process of teshuva. Like Bnei Yisrael at the Yarden river, let us focus not on setting inflexible vows and resolutions, but seeking out conversation, understanding and new perspectives.



Rabba Claudia Marbach received semikha from Maharat in 2018. Rabba Claudia is the director of Teen Beit Midrash, a pluralistic and inclusive place for teens explore their identity and deepen their knowledge through the serious study of Talmud. She also runs a pop-up beit midrash for women in Boston, called One Night Shtender and co-runs a partnership minyan called Yedid Nefesh in Newton, MA. Rabba Claudia has served a middle school teacher at JCDS Boston, a pluralistic Jewish Day School, for fifteen years, where she developed the Rabbinics curriculum, taught tefillah and moral dilemmas. Rabba Claudia received her AB in English from Barnard College, and JD from Boston University. She studied at Michlala, Drisha and Pardes.