

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Matot Masei
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darchai.noam@gmail.com
www.darchai-noam.com

How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Matot Masei – We are all responsible for each other

This week's double Parsha of Matot Masei is at the beginning of the Nine Days. This time of year is a time of intense mourning over the Bet Hamikdash, culminating in Tisha B'Av, the saddest day of the year. It is a time for reflection as we try to rectify the sins that lead to the destruction, in particular sinat chinam (baseless hatred). Every year that the Bet Hamikdash is not rebuilt means that we have not yet managed to rectify those sins.

In Parshat Matot, we learn the laws relating to vows made by a married woman. The woman's husband has the authority to annul certain categories of vows that she makes. However, this authority only extends to those vows which will impact on the husband personally. Further, the husband only has the authority to annul such a vow on the day that he hears that the vow was made and only if he has not already confirmed that he wants the vow to stand. If that day passes without the husband exercising his authority, he is deemed to have ratified the vow and he has lost the chance to annul it.

*Any vow or any binding oath of self-affliction, her husband can either uphold it or revoke it. However, if her husband remained silent from day to day, he has upheld all the vows and prohibitions she has assumed; he has upheld them since he remained silent on the day he heard it. If he revokes them after having heard [them], **he shall bear her iniquity.**¹*

What is meant by the phrase “he shall bear her iniquity”? Why is the husband responsible for his wife's sin? The commentators² explain the case as follows. This refers to situations where the husband purported to annul the vow in circumstances where he was not actually entitled to do so (for instance, he had already confirmed the vow, or he annulled it on a day other than the day on which he heard it). The wife then relied on the purported annulment and broke her vow. Since her vow was not legitimately annulled, it turns out that the wife inadvertently broke her vow. This is a very serious act which is equivalent to breaking a Torah prohibition. (As an aside, this shows the significance of our spoken words).

Rashi explains that the wife is innocent in such a case. Even though the wife went back on her word, she only did so because her husband created a situation whereby she mistakenly thought that her vow had been annulled. Thus, the husband is really responsible for his wife's sin and is held accountable. The Ramban elaborates that we can learn two things from this verse:

- (i) Since the husband caused his wife to break a vow, he is held guilty as if he himself had made a vow and deliberately broken it.

¹ Parshat Mattot, Bamidbar 30: 14-16. Translation from https://www.chabad.org/library/bible_cdo/aid/63255/jewish/The-Bible-with-Rashi.htm

² See Rashi and the Ramban on the above quoted pasukim.

- (ii) The wife is entirely exempt – she is not even held accountable for inadvertently committing a sin.

The Ramban notes that had the wife known that the annulment was not valid, she would have been held responsible for the sin of breaking her word. In such a case, the husband would not be liable for causing his wife to sin. However, he still would be held liable if he knew that she was going to sin and did not try to stop her.

We learn from here that we are held accountable for our fellow Jew's sins in cases where we could have stopped them but failed to do so. The Gemara³ brings a chilling example of a case where the "righteous" people were the first to be punished because they failed to teach the others how to act correctly. However, we need to be very careful how we apply this rule in practice. The pasuk teaches us: "You shall rebuke your neighbour, but do not do a sin in the process"⁴. It is a mitzva to rebuke, but not if the effect of the rebuke will be negative. If we know that the other person will not accept the criticism and will become angry then it is often better left unsaid. There may be other, more creative ways than direct rebuke – e.g., teaching, public lectures, highlighting the issue indirectly such as through parables, giving the perpetrator a book that deals with the issue.

This principle of accountability is based on the principle of "kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh" – all Jewish people are responsible for each other. We can see how this principle applies in practice by considering the halachot of brachot. For instance, if two or more people are eating together, one person can say the bracha over the food on behalf of the other people. The other people thereby discharge their obligation to say the bracha just by listening to the bracha being recited, provided that they all have in mind that the bracha is being recited on everyone's behalf.⁵ This only works if the person reciting the bracha will be eating with the others.⁶ However, with brachot over mitzvot (such as kiddush or havdala) the principle of "kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh" applies. Even if I have already satisfied my own obligation for this particular mitzvah, if my friend has not yet performed the mitzvah then it is as if my performance of the mitzvah is lacking. I can therefore recite the bracha again for my friend. This is because I am responsible for my friend's obligation to perform the mitzvah.

In this time of the Three Weeks and the Nine Days, as we come towards Tisha B'Av, let's remember the principle of "kol Yisrael arevim zeh bazeh". All of the Jewish people are responsible for each other. We are one big family. The more we see each ourselves as responsible for each other, the more achdut we will have and the less likely we will be to harbour baseless hatred. As many have pointed out, the best remedy for sinat chinam (baseless hatred) is ahavat chinam – having baseless love for each other.

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember that we are responsible for trying to prevent other Jews from sinning. For instance, we have a responsibility to rebuke them. However, it is critical that we speak softly and gently, and only in cases where we think that the person will accept our criticism and will not become angry.
2. Even if we have performed a particular mitzva, remember that our own mitzva observance is incomplete if our friend has not yet fulfilled that mitzva.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

* To subscribe please email darchai.noam@gmail.com

³ Gemara Shabbat 55a. The example is taken from Sefer Yechezkel.

⁴ Vayikra 19:17.

⁵ It is preferable, although not obligatory for other people to say amen to the bracha.

⁶ Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim 113:14.