

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Matot-Masei
August 3, 2019 *** 2 Av, 5779

Kol Rina – An Independent Minyan, is a traditional egalitarian community. We are haimish (homey/folksy), friendly, participatory, warm and welcoming. We hold weekly services in South Orange as well as holiday services and celebrations which are completely lay led. We welcome all to our services and programs from non-Hebrew readers to Jewish communal and education professionals.

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Matot-Masei in a Nutshell

https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2244/jewish/Matot-Massei-in-a-Nutshell.htm

Moses conveys the laws governing the annulment of vows to the heads of the tribes of Israel. War is waged against Midian for their role in plotting the moral destruction of Israel, and the Torah gives a detailed account of the war spoils and how they were allocated amongst the people, the warriors, the Levites and the high priest.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad (later joined by half of the tribe of Manasseh) ask for the lands east of the Jordan as their portion in the Promised Land, these being prime pastureland for their cattle. Moses is initially angered by the request, but subsequently agrees on the condition that they first join, and lead, in Israel's conquest of the lands west of the Jordan.

The forty-two journeys and encampments of Israel are listed, from the Exodus to their encampment on the plains of Moab across the river from the land of Canaan. The boundaries of the Promised Land are given, and cities of refuge are designated as havens and places of exile for inadvertent murderers. The daughters of Tzelafchad marry within their own tribe of Manasseh, so that the estate which they inherit from their father should not pass to the province of another tribe.

Matot-Massei Haftarah in a Nutshell

The prophet Jeremiah transmits G-d's message to the Jewish people, in strong tones of abandonment of G-d. "What wrong did your forefathers find in Me, that they have forsaken Me, and have said, 'G-d is empty, He is void, He is nothing'?"

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futile?" He reminds them of the kindness G-d did for them, taking them out of Egypt and leading them through the desert and settling them in the Promised Land, yet they repaid kindness with disloyalty. "For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the spring of living waters, [and furthermore, this was in order] to dig for

G-d asks them to view the actions of their neighboring nations, the Kittites and Kedarites, "and see whether there was any such thing, whether a nation exchanged a god, although they are not gods. Yet My nation exchanged their glory for what does not avail."

Jeremiah then goes on to foretell the suffering the Jewish people will suffer at the hands of their enemies, and also their erstwhile allies: "Your evil will chastise you, and I you shall know and see that your

evil will chastise you, and I you shall know and see that your people that if they return to G-d with sincerity, they will be restored to their full glory.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Priorities <http://rabbisacks.org/priorities-matot-5779/> Sacks

<http://rabbisacks.org/priorities-matot-5779/>

The Israelites were almost within sight of the Promised Land. They had successfully waged their first battles. They had just won a victory over the Midianites. There is a new tone to the narrative. We no longer hear the querulous complaints that had been the bass note of so much of the wilderness years.

We know why. That undertone was the sound of the generation, born in slavery, that had left Egypt. By now, almost forty years have passed. The second generation, born in freedom and toughened by conditions in the desert, have a more purposeful feel about them. Battle-trying, they no longer doubt their ability, with God's help, to fight and win.

Yet it is at just this point that a problem arises, different in kind from those that had gone before. The people as a whole now have their attention focused on the destination: the land west of the river Jordan, the place that even the spies had confirmed to be "flowing with milk and honey" (Num. 13:27).

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they were travelling was ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would prefer to stay there, to the east of the Jordan, and propose this to Moses. Unsurprisingly, he is angry at the suggestion: "Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, 'Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why would you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them?'" (Num. 32:6-7). He reminds them of the disastrous consequences of the earlier discouragement on the part of the spies. The whole nation will suffer. This decision would show not only that they are ambivalent about God's gift of the land but also that they have learned nothing from history.

The tribes do not argue with his claim. They accept its validity, but they point out that his concern is not incompatible with their objectives. They suggest a compromise:

Then they came up to him and said, "We would like to build sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. But we will then arm ourselves and go as an advance guard before the Israelites until we have established them in their home. Meanwhile our children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan." (Num. 32:16-19)

We are willing, in other words, to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead. Not only this, but we are prepared to be the nation's advance guard, in the forefront of the battle. We are not afraid of combat, nor are we trying to evade our responsibilities to our people as a whole. It is simply that we wish to raise cattle, and

for this, the land to the east of the Jordan is ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agrees. If they keep their word, they will be allowed to settle east of the Jordan. And so, indeed, it happened (Josh. 22:1–5).

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the Sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said: “Then they came up to him and said, ‘We would like to build sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.’” Moses replied: “Build towns for your children, and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised” (Num. 32:24).

The ordering of the nouns here is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they spoke of their flocks first, their children second.[1] Moses reversed the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes:

They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: “Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks.”
(Commentary to Num. 32:16)

A Midrash[2] makes the same point by way of an ingenious interpretation of a verse in Ecclesiastes: “The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left” (Eccl. 10:2). The Midrash identifies “right” with Torah and life: “He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand” (Deut. 33:2). “Left,” by contrast, refers to worldly goods:

Long life is in her right hand;
In her left hand are riches and honour. (Prov. 3:16)

Hence, infers the Midrash, the men of Reuben and Gad put “riches and honour” before faith and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong. The Midrash continues: “The Holy One, Blessed Be He, said to them: ‘Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.’”

This turned out to be not a minor incident in the wilderness long ago, but rather, a consistent pattern throughout much of Jewish history. The fate of Jewish communities, for the most part, was determined by a single factor: their decision, or lack of decision, to put children and their education first. Already in the first century, Josephus was able to write: “The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.”[3] The Rabbis ruled that “any town that lacks children at school is to be excommunicated” (Shabbat 119b). Already in the first century, the Jewish community in Israel had established a network of schools at which attendance was compulsory (Bava Batra 21a) – the first such system in history.

The pattern persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In twelfth-century France a Christian scholar noted: “A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God’s law – and not only his sons, but his daughters too.”[4]

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all.[5] In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organise the educational system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family:

The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys’ school. Parents will bend the sky to educate their son. The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay

for her son's schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew – for her the two are synonymous.[6]

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became Rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshiva heads and chassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.[7]

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilisation that has so predicated its very existence on putting children and their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues – Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor historical detail but a fundamental statement of Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary. Civilisations that value the young stay young. Those that invest in the future have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our faith and way of life into the next generation. [1] Note also the parallel between the decision of the leaders of Reuben and Gad and that of Lot, in Genesis 13:10–13. Lot too made his choice of dwelling place based on economic considerations – the prosperity of Sodom and the cities of the plain – without considering the impact the environment would have on his children. [2] Numbers Rabbah 22:9. [3] Josephus, *Contra Apionem*, ii, 177–178. [4] Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1952), 78. [5] Salo Baron, *The Jewish Community* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1945), 2:171–173. [6] Mark Zborowski and Elizabeth Herzog, *Life Is with People: The Culture of the Shtetl* (New York: Schocken, 1974), 87. [7] My book on this subject is Jonathan Sacks, *Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1994).

[Boundaries on the Move – Mattot Masei by Benjamin D. Sommer](http://www.jtsa.edu/boundaries-on-the-move)

<http://www.jtsa.edu/boundaries-on-the-move>

Every week, we read a parashah from the Torah during our Shabbat morning service, and then the beginning of the next parashah during our Shabbat afternoon service. The result of reading from two parashiyot on a single day can be surprising. This week, as we read first from Masei, the last parashah of Numbers, and then from Devarim, the first from Deuteronomy, we can hear an ancient debate about an issue that remains deeply contested: where to draw the line.

Parashat Masei (at Numbers 34) contains what we might call a map in prose. This map describes the extent of the Promised Land that the Israelites will soon enter. The boundaries are defined as follows:

- The southern boundary runs through the Negev Desert about 30–45 miles south of Beersheva, so that the northern part of Negev is within the Promised Land.
- Much of the western boundary consists of the Mediterranean Sea. Moving southward, the western boundary continues along the riverbed called the River of Egypt (נַחַל מִצְרַיִם), Wadi El-Arish today, which runs west of the Gaza Strip.
- The northern boundary runs through current-day Lebanon, probably starting slightly south of Beirut and extending east.
- The eastern boundary's northern flank is somewhere to the east of Damascus. It then moves westward to Lake Kinneret (the Sea of Galilee), and continues south along the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

But next week's parashah, at Deut. 1:7, provides a different description of the Promised Land's borders, also found in more detail in Gen. 15:18–21. According to the map those passages share, the Promised Land is considerably larger:

- The western boundary is still the Mediterranean and the River of Egypt.

- The northern boundary is not clarified with great specificity, but it seems to extend up to Asia Minor (today's Turkey).
- The eastern boundary is the Euphrates River in northeastern Syria.
- The southern boundary is not spelled out, but it may extend all the way to the Gulf of Eilat.

The most important difference between the two maps involves Transjordan, which was inhabited in ancient times by two and a half Israelite tribes: Reuben, Gad, and part of Manasseh. Several passages elsewhere in the Bible agree with one or the other map. Josh. 13, 14, and 22 describe how each of the twelve tribes received their own territory under the supervision of Joshua. These chapters assume the map from this week's reading in Numbers, treating Israelite tribes in Transjordan as residing outside Israel's territory. But other passages agree with Deut. 1 and Gen. 15, regarding the Transjordan's inhabitants as within the Promised Land (Exod. 23:31, Deut. 11:24, Josh. 21, 2 Sam. 24, and 1 Kings 4–5).

How can we account for the presence of these two "maps" in the Torah? Modern biblical scholars such as me believe that the Torah was formed when scribes combined several documents that had been written by groups of sages, priests, and prophets from ancient Israel. All of them were mediating and interpreting messages from God and traditions they received from their ancestors. The more limited map of the Promised Land from this week's parashah stems from the Priestly school of ancient Israel, whom we call the P authors. The other map appears in Deuteronomy, which was written by Levites, and in sections of Genesis and Exodus written by scribes called the J and E authors.

The differing opinions regarding borders lead each school of thought to view certain events differently from the other. Where did God change Jacob's name to Israel? J and P both remember this important event: In J (Gen. 32:27–30), this event happened at Peniel, in Transjordan. But that version of the story is problematic for the Priestly authors, because in their view, Peniel is located outside the Promised Land, and one would assume this momentous event took place inside the Land. In a P passage (Gen. 35:6–15), God bestows the name Israel on Jacob and his progeny at Bethel, on the west side of the Jordan River.

Similarly, in this week's Torah reading: when P tells us about the tribes of Reuben and Gad settling in Transjordan, they make it clear that their settlement there it is a concession. God permits them to live there only if they help conquer the Promised Land too (Num. 32:16ff.); the key word repeated in verses 20, 23, 29, and 30, is **אם**, "if." When Deuteronomy tells us about this same event at the end of next week's parashah (3:12ff.), the tribes' settlement there is neither conditional nor a concession. The land east of the Jordan is God's gift to those tribes; the key verb is **נתתי**, "I have given you" (vv. 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19, and twice in 20). The men from these tribes still fight in the Israelite army, but their receipt of their land in Transjordan is not contingent on their doing so.

We can notice a consistent **מחלוקת** or debate in the Torah about the extent of the Promised Land. The Torah provides two conflicting maps of the Land, along with two sets of texts that consistently view events through the lens provided by the one map or the other.

What do we learn from all this?

First, of all, it is significant that the debate occurs at all. The boundaries of the Land of Israel according to the Bible are not set in stone; there is more than one biblical view of its correct or ideal boundaries. Similar flexibility regarding the boundaries shows up in the Book of Kings. After Hiram the king of Tyre provides lumber and gold with which Solomon had the Temple built, Solomon transferred twenty towns in the Galilee to King Hiram to pay for these materials (1 Kings 9:11). This story gives rise to another disagreement, however. Later biblical historians who wrote the Book of Chronicles

regarded the idea that the king of Israel could give up parts of the Promised Land in the conduct of international diplomacy as problematic, and so they altered the story so that Hiram granted the towns to Solomon (2 Chron. 8:2). (However the later version does not quite explain why Hiram would pay Solomon in return for goods that Hiram sent to Solomon!)

The variety of views grows even larger in rabbinic literature. The Mishnah asks what areas are covered by the laws of shemittah, the command to let farmland lie fallow every seventh year (Shevi'it 6:1). It rules that the Land of Israel within which land must lie fallow does not correspond to either biblical map. Instead, these laws are fully in effect only in the limited area settled by the Jews who returned from the Babylonian exile. In areas that had been settled by the Israelites centuries earlier in the time of Joshua, the laws of shemittah are partially in effect. And what of areas of the Land (according to either biblical map) that were not settled by Israelites at all—that is, Syria and Lebanon? The Mishnah rules that the laws of shemittah are not in effect there at all. For the Sages of the Mishnah, political realities play a role in defining the extent of the Land for halakhic purposes.

There is some flexibility regarding the boundaries of the Land. The Torah gives more than one map. The Mishnah assumes that the boundaries change over time.

But the whole debate is premised on a bedrock assumption: although the boundaries can shift, there are boundaries. Whatever their disagreements over details, all the biblical authors agree that there is such a thing as the Promised Land, and it's located on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. Some Jews in modern times (for example, in Germany in the 19th century) wanted to eliminate notions of Promised Land and sacred space from Judaism. For the varied authors of the Torah, such a purging is just not possible. Like it or not, land matters to Judaism. There's flexibility regarding where and how it matters, but not on the question of whether it matters at all.

This lesson goes beyond geography. The same basic idea that comes out of comparing this week's Torah reading with next week's applies more broadly in Judaism: There are boundaries. We can debate where they should be located; sometimes, they move. But the debate starts from the acknowledgement that boundaries are important to us as Jews.

This lesson is one that has particular import for Conservative Jews. The project of our movement is to bring Torah and its observance into the modern world. As we do so, it's crucial to recall that in *מִסְעָנוּ*, in our journeys, we're not free as Jews to go anywhere at all. This is something Jews on the right and on the left both need to accept. Jews on the right need to realize that boundaries can be flexible, and the Bible is okay with that. Jews on the left need to realize there are boundaries, so that not every change we want to make is acceptable.

One might have thought that a list of geographic place-names, a map in prose, might be a little, well, boring, or even irrelevant. But a careful look at what seems boring in this week's Torah reading turns out to be instructive. In the ways they differ, and in the ways they don't, the Torah's varied maps of the Promised Land serve as instruction, as guidance, as Torah for us modern Jews. (*Benjamin D. Sommer is Professor of Bible and Ancient Semitic Languages at JTS*)

[Matot -Masei by Rabbanit Bili Rabenstein, Israeil Beit Midrash, Midreshet Lindenbaum
https://ots.org.il/parshat-matot-masei/](https://ots.org.il/parshat-matot-masei/)

The journey to the Land of Israel and the journey through the Land of Israel – ethical pronouncements and accepting a complex reality – The Conclusion of the Book of Numbers

Parshat Masei concludes the book of Numbers, and true to its name, it summarizes the journey that the people of Israel took through the desert. Chapter 33 is dedicated to

summarizing the journey, while chapter 34 lays out the borders of the Land of Israel and lists the names of those leaders who will inherit the land. Presumably, it would have made sense to conclude the Book of Numbers here, at the end of the account of the journey until that point, and when the next destination has been set.

However, contrary to what we would expect, after this logical conclusion, the Torah continues with a discussion of three more specific subjects, and the Book of Numbers ends only after those chapters. This surprising conclusion calls for further investigation. The three subjects discussed at this point are the Levitical cities, the "cities of refuge", and the decision that a daughter who inherits her father's estate must only marry one from her tribe. I'll try to briefly analyze these three subjects, and focus on the values they represent.

Levitical cities

Presumably, we could argue that the value underpinning this chapter is caring for the underprivileged. By choosing this point in the text to discuss the subject, the Torah has indicated that this is a central value, which will form the underpinnings for life in the land. However, if this were to be the statement the Torah was interested in making, it would have been best to have listed the other commandments tied to caring for the underprivileged in society, such as the laws regarding our dealings with orphans and widows. Therefore, the real focus of this Parsha would seem to be the issue of inheritance. Every Israelite, both rich or poor, is given an inheritance. Only the portion of the Levites was held back, and in light of this, each of the tribes is asked not to stay holed up within the confines of their lands, but rather, to see past their borders and donate part of their inherited lands to the Levites. The Torah states that the Levitical cities must be given to them by the Israelites. The action of giving, by one party, and the action of receiving, by the other, sets out the relationship between Levites and Israelites, and leaves a lasting impression on the psyches of all involved.

An inheriting daughter

The third and last chapter in the Book of Numbers discusses the law regarding the daughters of Zelophehad, who inherited their father's portion, as described in Parshat Pinchas. Their fellow tribesmen told Moses of their concern that the daughters of Zelophehad would marry people from other tribes, and that this would cause the portion of the tribe of Menashe to shrink. We would have expected this story to have been recorded earlier, in Parshat Pinchas. The Ibn Ezra (and other later commentators) explains that this episode was recounted at this juncture to complement the chapters that deal with estates and how they are to be divided up, following the commandments on the establishment of Levitical cities.

"Pleasant ways" – idealism meets reality

I'd like to suggest that this chapter is a counterweight to the picture illustrated in the case of the Levitical cities. The underlying principle behind the designation of Levitical cities is national unity, to insure that all of the Israelites act together, as one. This commandment is designed to tear down the walls between the tribes and create a broader framework than the tribal system. A national framework.

However, Menashe's request returns us to the tribal framework. It calls on us to cling on to that system. Nahmanides mentions that apparently, this request, namely that the women of the tribe only marry fellow tribesmen, had only been heeded by that generation, since it would be virtually impossible to maintain this "tribal purity" in future generations. Moreover, when the Gemara discusses the factors that set apart the fifteenth of the month of Av, making it one of the two happiest dates in the history of the Jewish people, it lists a number of explanations. The first explanation is that on this day, the edict requiring inheriting daughters to only marry within their tribes was cancelled: "However, what is the special joy of the fifteenth of Av? Rav Yehuda said that Shmuel said: This was the day on which the members of different tribes were permitted to enter one another's tribe, by intermarriage. What did they expound, in

support of their conclusion that this Halakha was no longer in effect? The verse states: "This is the matter that Hashem has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad... They derived from the verse that this matter shall be practiced only in this generation". So, according to Shmuel's method of understanding the verse, the decision that an inheriting daughter would only marry within her tribe was a retroactive decision, and we should be glad that it was cancelled.

Here, we have a wonderful Biblical model for "Its ways are pleasant ways": on the one hand, the Torah unequivocally determines the objective and what we should aspire to – we aim to create the framework of a nation, without any walls to divide us, or tribal separations. On the other hand, the model recognizes the reality the nation was faced with at that point in time, and in that location. Each tribe was poised to enter the Land of Israel, and saw itself as a separate entity. It was almost overprotective of its own inheritance, which could be threatened by the other tribes. Halakha provides a solution that works within this reality. It doesn't take a stand against this tribalist thought, though the day the edict is cancelled will become a national holiday that expresses the achievement of our objective.

By connecting the discussion of the Levitical cities with that of inheriting daughters, the Torah charts out a path to uniting the nation, while recognizing the voices arising from people and letting those voices be heard.

Cities of Refuge

The two chapters discussed above – the designation of Levitical cities and the laws of inheriting daughters – are separated by another chapter: the discussion of the cities of refuge. There are several reasons that these chapters appear one after another. The first is that the Torah is dealing with different cities that the Israelites are commanded to set aside from the territories they had inherited, so that they could be used for the common good. The second is that the cities of refuge were all Levitical cities. I would propose that beyond this logical connection, the chapter on the cities of refuge appears at the very end of one of the Five Books of Moses because of the values it contains, values that are the building blocks for forging a society on its way to the Land of Israel.

In the text, a city to which someone who had accidentally killed someone else could flee is called a "city of refuge". The language changes when we transition from the Biblical text to rabbinical literature. In rabbinical literature, the cities of refuge are depicted as a place of banishment. The semantic gap between the words "refuge" and "banishment" is substantial, for several reasons. The word "refuge" carries the connotation of a place where one could escape to for protection and compassion. For that person, staying in that place of refuge is an opportunity. It has truly rescued him or her. However, the word "banishment", borrowed from the field of criminal law, connotes something entirely different. In this case, this is an individual whom society is required to punish for his or her crimes.

It seems as though our sages had strayed from the simple reading of the text. If we revisit the text, we'll discover the penal aspect of the cities of refuge implied in the Torah itself. First, we mustn't ignore the explicit language of the text: "[one who] murders accidentally". Second, the Torah states that the murderer must remain in the city of refuge "until the death of the high priest... after the death of the high priest, the murderer may return to his land holding." If these cities were only meant for providing protection, the death of the high priest would not remove the danger facing one who had accidentally murdered. By tying the death of the high priest to this law, the Torah leads us to the understanding that by living in a city of refuge, the accidental murderer was indeed serving out a sentence. Thus we can conclude that the sages had not created their own interpretation of the text ex nihilo. Rather, they have uncovered another layer hidden deep within the text itself, though this isn't stated explicitly.

A world of complexities

This in-depth reading of the chapter on the cities of refuge leads to formulating a complex principle with regard to accidental murderers. On the one hand, these individuals are in need of protection, and society must make sure they are safe. On the other hand, the Torah incisively maintains that taking another person's life isn't something that can be taken lightly, and that these incidents must rattle individuals and their surroundings.

Seemingly, with the Israelites at the doorstep to the Land of Israel as the book recounting the Israelites' wandering in the desert comes to a close, the Torah must present this double-sided picture, founded upon the value of the life of the accidental murder, a person that we must protect, for better or for worse, as well as the value of those lives that were lost, and the need to pay a price for their deaths.

In conclusion, the three final chapters of the Book of Numbers illustrate the necessity to perceive the complexities of reality.

On a national level, the tension between the chapter on Levitical cities and the chapter on the inheriting daughters is a symbolic manifestation of the tension between idealism and reality. The Torah discusses the ideal of erasing tribal borders, but it also recognizes that at that time, this was the Israelites' conception, and the Torah allows this view to be expressed in halakhic ordinances.

On a more personal level, the individual case of the accidental murder is examined in the chapter on cities of refuge, while considering various aspects of this picture: the need to protect a person who is being pursued, while punishing that person for the death he or she caused.

In this way, the conclusion of the Book of Numbers is directly tied to developing a more nuanced way of looking at things, which takes into consideration a combination of facts and a complete worldview. Perhaps, until this point in the Book of Numbers, the nation had never needed to perform this kind of introspection. Now, however, at the doorstep of the Promised Land, is the time to do so.

Absolute truth

This is one more point to raise, however. I believe that I'd be remiss to conclude the study of Parshat Masei with a mere statement that praises complexity. After all, even when studying complexity, we must adopt a complex method of contemplation.

The chapter on the cities of refuge ends with these words: "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 him who shed it. You shall not defile the land in which you live, in which I Myself abide, for I, Hashem, abide among the Israelite people."

I feel within this complex picture involving the figure of an accidental murderer, the Torah unequivocally determines that our values must be clear and succinct: "... the land can have no expiation for blood that is shed on it". These verses teach us that the estate we inherited, which we forcefully took, is not promised to us for all time. This is the land where Hashem dwells, and if we defile it by spilling innocent blood, it might spew us out. Similarly, while charting a path that beckons us to contemplate things while taking in their complexity, and to be open to the various aspects of every case, the Torah sets clear red lines that are never to be crossed.

Parashat Matot-Masei 5779 By Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD

<https://ajrsem.org/teachings/divreitorah/>

This week we have a double parashah: Matot-Masei. The name of Parashat Matot means staffs (as in big sticks). A staff is a sign of authority, and this parashah is full of reflections on tribal and patriarchal authority. As it moves through its various narratives, the parashah demonstrates how small acts of violence can lead to larger ones.

The parashah opens with an explanation of the practice of nedarim or vows. This was

an important Israelite practice that was open to laypeople, not only clergy. The making and keeping of a vow—such as a vow to become a nazirite and not cut your hair, or Hannah's vow to give Samuel to the Temple—was a kind of offering practice. It was a way of showing devotion to God and often of showing gratitude for some personal abundance or miraculous intervention one had received.

However, this vowing practice was not equally open to everyone. Women living in their father's house, or married woman, needed tacit approval from their fathers or husbands to make a vow. If their male relative objected, the vow was annulled. "If a woman makes a vow to YHWH or takes an oath imposing an obligation on herself while still in her father's household as a young woman, and her father learns of her vow or her self-imposed obligation and offers no objection, all of her vows shall stand. But if her father restrains her on the day he finds out, none of her vows or self-imposed obligations shall stand, and YHWH will forgive her, since her father restrained her." (Numbers 30:4-6) A husband could also annul vows, and he could, on his wedding day, annul a vow that had been approved by the woman's father long before. The law splits the authority between the human patriarch and the divine patriarch. The woman can make the vow to God, and she can keep it, provided her father or husband does not object. He is also not allowed to annul her vow later on, if he becomes angry with her or with the consequences of her vow. He must annul it in the day that he hears it, or forever hold his peace. There are some checks on his power to abrogate her vow.

I can imagine some benign patriarch somewhere arguing that this is for the woman's protection: this way, he can protect her from any negative consequences of a foolish vow. Or maybe the practice is for his benefit after all. What if she vows to stop making breakfast, or go on a thirty-day pilgrimage, or stop being a wife and mother at all? One can see how restrictions on the power to make vows are a part of a wider system of laws that keep women in a particular subordinate role in society.

The position of women in Israelite society had many facets—for example, we know about the annual women's dancing ritual in Shiloh that is probably the same as the love festival of Tu b'Av that took place this month, and about a variety of prophetesses and at least one female judge. We know the story of how the daughters of Tzelofhad inherited their father's portion of the land. So this is a complex picture. And, there is clearly oppression that women as a group face, and this law is one aspect of that reality.

The very next story in the parashah we come to is a battle against the Midianites. This battle is vengeance for the events at Ba'al Peor, when the Midianites invited the Israelites to worship the god of Ba'al Peor. God wants vengeance on the Midianites, and so the Israelite warriors head into battle taking their priests and sacred things with them. The Israelites kill the king of Midian and they kill Balaam the prophet. They take the women and children captive. Moses then demands they kill any women who have been sexually active, because it was women who seduced the Israelite men at Ba'al Peor. They then proceed to do away with sexually active women and all the boys. The girl children and young women who are not sexually active, they take as slaves.

And let us be honest—this is not mercy, this is sex trafficking. The women are listed later as part of a list of spoils of war that includes sheep, cattle and donkeys. We might have the hope that, as the Torah ordains in Deuteronomy (Deut. 21:10-14), these enslaved women will be taken as wives rather than abused, but even if that is the case, they will still have to marry the men who killed their families.

When Jews get to this parashah, we understandably tend to avoid this material. Yet there is a problem with always avoiding the most painful parts of your own story, which is that you begin to feel you are entitled to avoid them. There is too much we are avoiding, including the meltdown of our planet, the plight of refugees and victims of war and catastrophe, the perils of sex trafficking which is still rampant in our world

and continues to be characterized by the most cruel and dehumanizing practices, and lots more. It is our human instinct to avoid painful things, but we need to talk about them. This parashah opens doorways to address things that feel unspeakable. This parashah also teaches us something important, which is that small acts of violence, like annulling your wife's vow because you find it inconvenient, are connected to much larger acts of violence, like enslaving women you've captured during war. Whether our ancestors thousands of years ago can be held to our own moral standards is a complex problem that we may not be able to solve. But we can observe how a relatively non-violent law at the beginning of our parashah, and the extreme violence that occurs right after it, are related. In rabbinic tradition we call that *smikhut parshiyot*—two passages next to one another tend to be connected. And these passages are connected, because once you dehumanize women, there is not necessarily a stopping point. Once you dehumanize people of color or refugees or queer people or disabled people or poor people or Jews or Muslims or children or anyone else, there is not necessarily a stopping point. Things we think are not great but not that bad can lead to things that are really bad. This doesn't mean we can't judge events relative to one another, but it does mean we have to act against oppression when we see it. As we were all taught in school: an object in motion remains in motion unless acted upon by an outside force. Let's not let oppression remain in motion.

I hope some of us will pray this week for the Midianites and the Israelites, and offer a gentle hope that all of the people who may have lived this story find healing from their wounds or from their violence or both. May we extend our prayer to reach their descendants, and all who have lived or are living a story like this. May we include in that prayer the Israelite women and others through the ages who didn't get to make the vows to God that they wanted. May their intentions for the good be fulfilled in us.

Rabbi Jill Hammer, PhD, is the Director of Spiritual Education at AJR. She is the author of several books, including The Hebrew Priestess: Ancient and New Visions of Jewish Women's Spiritual Leadership, Sisters at Sinai: New Tales of Biblical Women, and The Jewish Book of Days: A Companion for All Seasons—as well as the forthcoming Return to the Place: The Magic, Meditation, and Mystery of Sefer Yetzirah.

Yahrtzeits

Lisa Paley remembers her father Leon Lindenbaum on Wednesday August 7th (Av 6).

Shari Mevorah remembers her mother Helen Kirsten on Thursday August 8th (Av 7).