

TORAHSCOPE: Mattot (Tribes)

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Numbers 30:2[1]-32:42
Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

“Vows, Unity, Brotherly Love”

The Book of Numbers is coming to a close as the Israelites gather on the plains of Moab, overlooking the Dead Sea and the Jordan River valley. Through His servant Moses, the Lord is continuing to prepare Israel for their taking of the Promised Land. *Mattot* or “Tribes” has three chapters that deal with three topics. Typically for calendar purposes, *Mattot* is coupled with the final reading in Numbers, *Masa’ei* or “Journeys,” which has four chapters, but for our purposes in this commentary we will be considering each *parashah* them separately.

The instructions delivered to Ancient Israel in *Mattot* first concern the taking of vows made by men and women.¹ Following this, a record of Israel’s conflict with the Midianites is detailed, including a description of not only a successful campaign, but how the spoils of war were distributed.² The third chapter of *Mattot* covers how the tribes of Reuben and Gad request that they be allowed to settle in land east of the Jordan River.³ In our Torah reading, the significance of honoring one’s word, Israel seeking unity among itself, and the practice of tribal respect—are all critical components to consider as Israel prepares to enter the Promise Land and eject the Canaanites.

After almost forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the “Joshua generation” is being prepared for its journey across the Jordan River to occupy Canaan and establish Israel as a nation within its own territory. This is no easy task, because the land that God has promised Israel is occupied by six pagan nations who must be driven from it. We can remember how Moses gave explicit instructions to the Israelites soon after their departure from Egypt that these peoples were going to be driven out:

“Be sure to observe what I am commanding you this day: behold, I am going to drive out the Amorite before you, and the Canaanite, the Hittite, the Perizzite, the Hivite and the Jebusite. Watch yourself that you make no covenant with the inhabitants of the land into which you are going, or it will become a snare in your midst. But *rather*, you are to tear down their altars and smash their *sacred* pillars and cut down their Asherim—for you shall not worship any other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God—otherwise you might make a covenant with the inhabitants of the land and they would play the harlot with their gods and sacrifice to their gods, and someone might invite you to eat of his sacrifice, and you might take some of his daughters for your sons, and his daughters might play the harlot with their gods and cause your sons *also* to play the harlot with their gods” (Exodus 34:11-16).

We know from our knowledge of Israel’s history witnessed in previous Torah readings that the generation which received this instruction was not a faithful group of people. After over thirty-nine years, most of those of the “Exodus generation”—except Joshua and Caleb—who were twenty years or older at the time of the spies’ bad report had died in the desert (Numbers 32:11). And yet on the plains of Moab, many of those of the “Joshua generation,” as discussed previously in *Balak* and *Pinchas*, had succumbed to the temptations of Moabite prostitutes and their idolatry. Some of the warnings from Israel’s early days of wanderings the desert, had not been obeyed. The Israelites exhibited a tendency to become involved with some of the cultures which surrounded them. This could have devastating, long-term consequences, because the Holy One of Israel does not want a people who are going to be associated with other gods. *He wants a people who are*

¹ Numbers 30:1-16.

² Numbers 31:1-54.

³ Numbers 32:1-42.

totally sold out to Him and Him alone. In *Mattot*, we see some of how the Lord goes about preparing the “Joshua generation” for the task of taking the Promised Land.

Many of the Israelites had just died from a plague, incurred as a result of the entanglement with the Moabite women. Phinehas’ zealous act abruptly stopped the plague and the Lord ordered Moses to conduct a census that would record the number of Israelites by tribe, just prior to crossing the Jordan. As our previous portion concluded, God once again had to reiterate the importance of observing His appointed times and the offerings involved in them:

“You shall present these to the LORD at your appointed times, besides your votive offerings and your freewill offerings, for your burnt offerings and for your grain offerings and for your drink offerings and for your peace offerings. Moses spoke to the sons of Israel in accordance with all that the LORD had commanded Moses. Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the sons of Israel, saying, “This is the word which the LORD has commanded” (Numbers 29:39-30:1)

But while *Pinchas* ended with an understanding that God’s people are to take His sacred seasons very seriously, the instruction that follows it concerns order in the family.

Vows and Oaths, Husbands and Wives

As *Mattot* begins, the Lord has Moses give some instruction to the leaders of the various tribes, about the importance of making vows and swearing oaths:

“Then Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes of the sons of Israel, saying, “This is the word which the LORD has commanded. If a man makes a vow to the LORD, or takes an oath to bind himself with a binding obligation, he shall not violate his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth” (Numbers 30:1-2).

The admonition to honor one’s word is critical when it comes to maintaining cohesiveness among a group of people. The spoken word is something quite serious, as elaborated on throughout the Scriptures. Proverbs 18:20-21 asserts, “With the fruit of a man’s mouth his stomach will be satisfied; he will be satisfied *with* the product of his lips. Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit.” James the Just similarly says, “So also the tongue is a small part of the body, and *yet* it boasts of great things. See how great a forest is set aflame by such a small fire!” (James 3:5).

In many cases, what someone agrees to do involves either family commitments or business agreements, things that sometimes have to be thought through and analyzed very carefully. If persons within the agricultural society of Israel agree to trade crops for animals, or their produce for a certain amount of gold or silver—such agreements should not be easily broken, but neither should they be made on a whim. The Lord did not want His chosen people entering into Canaan, establishing themselves, and then be dishonest with one another. In particular, should agreements or vows have to be broken, they should be broken with some specific guidelines in mind.

Numbers 30:3-15 includes some instruction which modern people admittedly have some difficulty with. The difficulty is not with the recognition that sometimes people speak without thinking, and that an authoritative voice has to come on the scene in protection, and be there to cancel a commitment that might be harmful. 1 Thessalonians 5:14 says, after all, “We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.” *Some people make dumb decisions and they need help.* What some Believers, Christian and Messianic alike, have difficulty with is that the power to annul vows in Numbers 30:3-15 is given to husbands and fathers. This is not to say that husbands and fathers are unimportant or to be disrespected—but it would appear here that men have some power that women do not have. In a time when women work alongside of men in the workplace, and wives often have to provide for their families every bit as much as husbands, these instructions are often viewed as being a bit archaic. And being in Messianic ministry, and having interacted with many Torah observant people over the years, I have personally witnessed a great number of abuses with these instructions.

The instructions in Numbers 30 themselves detail how vows and oaths can be made by husbands, their wives, their daughters, and even widows and divorcees. All readers agree that the Lord places a substantial amount of emphasis for people *to be careful* with the commitments that they make. The husband or father of a wife or daughter, who makes a statement which he believes is in error, has the authority to nullify and cancel such a statement when hearing about it:

“Also if a woman makes a vow to the LORD, and binds herself by an obligation in her father's house in her youth, and her father hears her vow and her obligation by which she has bound herself, and her father says nothing to her, then all her vows shall stand and every obligation by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if her father should forbid her on the day he hears *of it*, none of her vows or her obligations by which she has bound herself shall stand; and the LORD will forgive her because her father had forbidden her. However, if she should marry while under her vows or the rash statement of her lips by which she has bound herself, and her husband hears of it and says nothing to her on the day he hears *it*, then her vows shall stand and her obligations by which she has bound herself shall stand. But if on the day her husband hears *of it*, he forbids her, then he shall annul her vow which she is under and the rash statement of her lips by which she has bound herself; and the LORD will forgive her” (Numbers 30:3-8).

The way a great number of Messianic men have read this is that they need to not only be careful about what their wives and daughters commit themselves to, but that they are the final authority regarding what happens within their families. These commandments are viewed as being some kind of “reserve powers” that women do not have, affirming in their minds, albeit subconsciously, that men are ultimately superior to women—or that women are *inferior* to men.

There is a serious problem with this line of reasoning, which few Messianic people are usually aware of: **What did these instructions mean for the Israelites against the social background(s) of the Ancient Near East?** Too many just read Numbers 30, and totally forget that these instructions regulated a social climate that was not at all the same as the Twenty-First Century West. Many Messianic and Orthodox Jewish men think that these commandments fully affirm the dominance of men over women. Yet, as Ronald B. Allen points out, the issue in Numbers 30 is actually how “In the male-oriented culture of biblical times, there were numerous complications that would arise when a woman would make a religious vow...we should not miss the fact that women did make vows, which shows that they really did participate in the worship patterns of Israel.”⁴ Far from Numbers 30 establishing some kind of male superiority over women, it actually extended some serious rights to women—*by the virtue of them even being allowed to make vows or commitments*—things which were largely unseen in the law codes contemporary to the Torah.

With Israel's Law allowing females the significant right to make commitments on behalf of the family (most likely in trade), it is understandable that within the largely patriarchal Ancient Near East, that some guidelines would need to be in place for husbands and fathers to protect their wives and daughters. A husband or father can cancel a vow made by his wife or daughter, especially if agreements they made would cause some kind of harm to the family. *Such a principle should surely remain in place for today.* Messianic husbands and fathers need to be aware of what their wives or daughters are saying. If they hear something that is going to hurt the family, the effort should be expelled to see that their poor decisions be promptly stopped.

Once in Messianic ministry, I really had an opportunity to see how this instruction could work. When attending a gathering of Believers, I recall how a woman got up and made a declarative statement before a large audience of people, essentially bringing a curse or negative action upon herself and her husband. She said, in the presence of her husband and the crowd gathered, “If such-and-such occurs, then may God strike us dead!” There were some gasps in the audience, but by-and-large nothing was said. The husband let her statement stand and the meeting concluded.

⁴ Ronald B. Allen, “Numbers,” in Frank E. Gaebelin, ed. et. al., *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 2:958.

Then the next day, a Messianic Jewish friend of mine, who grew up in a Conservative Jewish home where the Torah was honored, asked me if I had been at all disturbed by the comments made the previous evening. I said I was disturbed, but I had no control over the statements. At that point, he said that he believed that the husband had the opportunity to annul the statement his wife made and avoid any negative consequences. I encouraged my friend to tell the husband what the Torah said about his responsibility to annul a vow or oath. Unfortunately, the husband was unwilling to annul the remarks of his wife. Was he a bad husband in failing to consider that what his wife said could result in something bad occurring to both his wife *and himself*?

Everyone recognizes that a husband or father should be careful about what his wife or daughter says. **Husbands and fathers need to look out for their families.** Yet Numbers 30:3-8 says nothing about a father canceling a negative word made by a son, although a father as parent clearly does have the authority to nullify this. Likewise, does a mother have the authority to cancel a negative word made by a daughter *or* a son? I think that a mother as a parent surely does have the right to cancel the harmful words of her children, which can negatively affect the entire family.

The real challenge in applying Numbers 30:3-8 for Messianic Believers today is not that a husband should be looking out for the best interests of his wife should she speak without thinking—but **what happens when the husband errs by speaking without thinking.** Who is going to be there when he makes a vow or commitment that will bring harm to the family? Is his bad word just expected to stand because he is a male—or is his wife as his helpmeet and partner going to stand up for his defense, and see that his negative word be canceled?

This is an area that I have admittedly had difficulty with, because before marrying Margaret in 1994 I was married to a woman who was very dominating, and who totally ran our family. I had very little say in what we did, or in how my two natural daughters were raised. Unlike my current marriage, I was unequally yoked, and did not have the benefit of a spouse who really loved me and cared for me, just like I was supposed to love for her and care for her (cf. Ephesians 5:25). When I married Margaret, I admittedly found my second marriage to be quite liberating, as I was able to have a definite say in the affairs of our new family, and in what John, Jane, and Maggie were doing. If Margaret or Jane or Maggie ever make a commitment that was in error, I have—according to the Torah—the right to cancel such a commitment. But it does not seem appropriate at all that female commitments which can be harmful can be nullified, yet male commitments made by John *or even myself* that can be harmful have to stand. I know that if Margaret too were not a co-leader of our family, always counseling me and letting me know about things, that I would have made some serious mistakes during our time together. I know of instances when Margaret has had to step in and nullify or correct remarks I have made that would harm our household. *She has saved me from experiencing negative consequences of some of my actions.*

I know of Messianic husbands today who would prefer that their words remain in force, *even harmful words*, just because it might prove some kind of male superiority or dominance over women. (Yes, a few might actually choose bad things to happen to their families just so their position of “authority” might stand.) Their wives frequently have no say in what goes on in their families. I would submit that their families are the worse because the wife does not have the ability to counsel her husband, and be there to guard him should he be in error.

The instructions of Numbers 30:3-8, far from asserting some kind of male superiority over women, originally extended rights to women that societies contemporary to Ancient Israel did not often have. Allen further describes how we see “a gradual shifting from the patriarchy to a more egalitarian relationship between women and men. The change is very gradual in biblical times, but the change is underway.”⁵ Now in the post-resurrection era, where males and females are definitely equal (Galatians 3:28), should wives and mothers have the authority of Numbers 30:3-8 as originally given to Israelite husbands and fathers, *halachically* extended to them? Many of

⁵ Ibid.

today's Messianic Torah teachers would exclaim a resounding "No!" But much of the Jewish theological tradition itself has already answered this for us, recognizing how time has taken its course changing the applicability of these commandments originally delivered into a social setting that is largely gone. Jacob Milgrim points out, "by the time of the Talmud, the Sages limited the applicability of this law by restricting its time (the year between ages 11 and 12) and circumstances."⁶

In Messianic homes today, the issue is not so much whether the commandments remain relevant—*because they surely do*—the issue is whether a wife can look out for her husband to the same degree as a husband can look out for his wife. Do spouses share authority within the home? While I know many Messianic families will continue in thinking that husbands possess some kind of "reserve powers" in Numbers 30:3-8, I also know that if Margaret had not canceled some of my words in the past, I might not be writing this today, having chosen a different path for my pursuits. I know that not only is she stronger with me as her husband, *but I am stronger with her as my wife!* My position as a husband or father is not nullified or abolished if my wife is a co-leader of the family and an equal partner along with me. On the contrary, **we both look out for each other.** I pray that all husbands and fathers in today's Messianic community learn to value their wives, just as I have, and that some of the misapplication of Numbers 30:3-8 we have seen will come to an end.

Unity Over the Midianites

After the instruction about making vows is delivered, the Israelites are commanded to take up war with the Midianites. The war plans are very explicit, and Israel complies accordingly:

"Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Take full vengeance for the sons of Israel on the Midianites; afterward you will be gathered to your people.' Moses spoke to the people, saying, 'Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian. A thousand from each tribe of all the tribes of Israel you shall send to the war.' So there were furnished from the thousands of Israel, a thousand from each tribe, twelve thousand armed for war. Moses sent them, a thousand from each tribe, to the war, and Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest, to the war with them, and the holy vessels and the trumpets for the alarm in his hand. So they made war against Midian, just as the LORD had commanded Moses, and they killed every male" (Numbers 31:1-7).

Equal squads are taken from each of the twelve tribes, excluding Levi, for this military excursion. With tremendous unity of purpose and accompanied by Phinehas, the son of the high priest, and the holy vessels and the silver trumpets, the soldiers of Israel take on the Midianites and defeat them (Numbers 31:8-12). When the fighting is over, a census is taken of Israel's military force, and no one is found to have been killed in action:

"Then the officers who were over the thousands of the army, the captains of thousands and the captains of hundreds, approached Moses, and they said to Moses, 'Your servants have taken a census of men of war who are in our charge, and no man of us is missing'" (Numbers 31:48-49).

This was exceptionally wonderful news, especially in light of the invasion of Canaan that is seen later in the Book of Joshua. Unity of purpose and resolve is rewarded with an outstanding victory. The confidence level of Israel must have been sky high as the people pondered the humiliation of the Midianites, without losing a single combatant. *The Holy One was definitely preparing Israel for more battles to come.*

Concern for Tribal Brethren

In Numbers 32, a challenge is presented to Moses. The Reubenites and Gadites have decided that they would like to settle on the east side of the Jordan, because the land there appears to be good for grazing their plentiful livestock. This request generates a lengthy tirade

⁶ Milgrim, in *Etz Hayim*, 942.

from Moses, who likens it to the judgment that came upon Israel as a consequence of the bad report from the ten spies:

“But Moses said to the sons of Gad and to the sons of Reuben, ‘Shall your brothers go to war while you yourselves sit here? Now why are you discouraging the sons of Israel from crossing over into the land which the LORD has given them? This is what your fathers did when I sent them from Kadesh-barnea to see the land. For when they went up to the valley of Eshcol and saw the land, they discouraged the sons of Israel so that they did not go into the land which the LORD had given them. So the LORD’s anger burned in that day, and He swore, saying, ‘None of the men who came up from Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob; for they did not follow Me fully, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite and Joshua the son of Nun, for they have followed the LORD fully.’ So the LORD’s anger burned against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness forty years, until the entire generation of those who had done evil in the sight of the LORD was destroyed. Now behold, you have risen up in your fathers’ place, a brood of sinful men, to add still more to the burning anger of the LORD against Israel. For if you turn away from following Him, He will once more abandon them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all these people” (Numbers 32:6-15).

This was a horrible rebuke. Moses tears into the leaders of the tribes of Reuben and Gad. Yet at the end of his chastisement, the Reubenites and Gadites decide that they will indeed be among the Israelites who help secure the Promised Land with the other tribes, fighting alongside them:

“Then they came near to him and said, ‘We will build here sheepfolds for our livestock and cities for our little ones; but we ourselves will be armed ready *to go* before the sons of Israel, until we have brought them to their place, while our little ones live in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every one of the sons of Israel has possessed his inheritance. For we will not have an inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has fallen to us on this side of the Jordan toward the east” (Numbers 32:16-19).

As it turns out, Moses not only places the Reubenites and Gadites on the eastern side of the Jordan, but he also discerns that it is the right place for part of the tribe of Manasseh.⁷ In a great gesture of unity and camaraderie as a part of the polity of Israel, these two-and-a-half tribes commit to securing Canaan with the other tribes, before they return to establish lives for themselves in Gilead and Bashan. Their request for land east of the Jordan is granted, and they have made the decision to stand with the other tribes of Israel to take the land west of the Jordan.

Being Ready for God’s Purpose?

After nearly forty years in the wilderness, you would think that Israel is now ready to enter into God’s purpose, and expel the pagan nations of Canaan, taking its inheritance in the Promised Land. But in reality, the final instructions that come in this Torah portion (and also those seen next week in *Mas’ei*), still indicate that the Israelites need some fine tuning. They are learning the valuable lessons of keeping their vows and oaths to one another. They are learning what it means to fight together. And, they are learning what it means to stand by one another.

Today’s Messianic Believers often have a great amount of zeal for studying the Torah, and for following events in Israel. Sometimes this zeal is unbalanced and unbridled, and people think that the restoration of God’s Kingdom is going to occur at a much faster pace than it actually will. Certainly, to one degree or another, I think Messianic Believers will always be in a mode where we are constantly being trained up in new instructions that are designed to help us become better, obedient servants of the Most High. We will always be challenged to accurately apply Scripture in new circumstances, requiring us to appeal to the Holy Spirit for guidance and discernment.

⁷ Numbers 32:33.

Whether we are learning to take on new responsibilities and approaches as husbands or parents—or we are learning how to watch out for fellow Believers—the benchmark should be that we are maturing in our walk with the Messiah Yeshua. Hopefully, in His time we will be able to attain the unity that will make our victory as God’s people sure and complete. Such a unity begins in the home, and works outwardly into the local congregation, and then the greater Body of Messiah.

Mark Huey (B.A., Vanderbilt University in History and Graduate Studies at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University) is the Director of Outreach Israel Ministries (www.outreachisrael.net). He is the author of several books, including: *TorahScope, Volumes I & II*, and *Counting the Omer: A Daily Devotional Toward Shavuot*. He is also co-author of *Hebraic Roots: An Introductory Study*.

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