



*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Matot

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Matot

What Can We Do For Israel?



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

A thunderstorm of unceasing rockets is raining down upon the Land of Israel, slamming into its holy earth. Striking Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa, these projectiles of death are no longer limited to the border cities but are hitting the very heart of Israel itself.

Perhaps the ultimate question for us is: How do we, in the Diaspora, support our brothers and sisters in the Holy Land? What can we, living in the United States, Canada, Australia, Europe, do for our fellow Jews in Israel?

The answer lies in the words Moses spoke to the tribes of Reuven and Gad, who desired to settle outside of Israel, east of the Jordan River. And it is based on a fascinating Talmud Yerushalami on what it means to fulfill our obligation to God and to mankind.

We, who dwell across the globe, east of the Jordan, must fulfill our obligation – we must connect to Israel, stand one with Israel, in such a way that is clear before God, and is clear before man.

One way to do that is to be living examples of what Israel is all about -- walking, talking holiness.

This is how we turn rockets of hate into offers of peace. This is how we turn the destruction of the Temple, into the building the Third Eternal Temple speedily in our days.

WHAT CAN WE DO FOR ISRAEL?

1. Known Cure (Joke)

Moshe went to see his doctor because he was suffering from a miserable ailment that just wouldn't go away. Moshe's doctor prescribed some pills, but they didn't help.

On his next visit, the doctor gave Moshe an injection, but that didn't do any good, either. A few months later the doctor suggested that Moshe move to a different part of town. That didn't help either.

After countless visits and numerous attempts to solve the problem, the doctor told Moshe, "Moshe, go home and take a long hot bath. Then, as soon as you get out the bath, turn on all the air-conditioners full blast and stand stark naked in front of the ice-cold draft.

"But doctor," Moshe protest. "If I stand dripping wet in the cold, I'll surely get pneumonia."

"Exactly," says his doctor. "But I know how to cure pneumonia."

2. The Metaphor

It is a joke, sure, but in many ways it isn't funny – especially when viewed as a metaphor for the current situation in Israel.

A thunderstorm of unceasing rockets is raining down upon the land, striking Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, Haifa. These projectiles of death, which have been raining on Israel for a number of years off and on, are no longer limited to the border cities (never mentioned in the global media) but are now hitting the very heart of Israel itself.

Our brothers and sisters are under attack in the Holy Land, a land that is meant to flow with milk and honey, but now flows with rockets and blood. The people of Israel aren't merely surrounded by enemies,

but a very real enemy lives within their midst. The situation is literally comparable to two million people living in the Bronx raining down dozens of missiles a day upon the people in Manhattan or Brooklyn.

When we come to the world's doctor – the so-called peace-brokering nations – they first say to take a pill, then an injection, then they say to move to a different part of town. When all of that doesn't work, they tell us to stand dripping wet in front of the air conditioner until we contract a disease they know how to cure.

In other words: Instead of uprooting the evil that is Hamas (because they seemingly don't know how) the peace-keeping nations prefer to label Israel as the oppressor and aggressor, because they know how to shut down its efforts to protect its citizens in the court of world opinion.

Ah, but what about the original problem, the incurable fact that Hamas and the citizens of Gaza desire to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the face of the earth? Nah, that's a gross exaggeration: All they want is to be left alone and live in peace. But they can't because Israel is the oppressor.

Well, I do not wish to focus on (and even cure) guilt-induced pneumonia. I wish to focus on and cure the original illness. And I wish to talk about what we can do to cure it from our midst.

And perhaps this cure is just as dependent upon us who live outside of Israel as those of our family who presently reside within Israel proper.

3. Talking About Israel

One of the laws of physics is that whenever Jews talk about Israel, their discussion, without fail, desolves into a yelling match. As you well know, when you have two Jews, you have three opinions. But when you have two Jews talking about Israel, you have about twenty-six opinions, and each one thinks the others' opinions are wrong.

So, talking about Israel doesn't solve anything, but only creates animosity between Jews. Let us, therefore, try a different approach, one where instead of talking about Israel we talk about ourselves. Instead of discussing what Israel is doing, should be doing, or will be doing, let us ask: What can we do to help Israel?

Perhaps by discovering what we can do for Israel, we can come to understand what Israel is all about and address the root cause of the conflict and cure it once and for all.

4. Parshat Matot

Some 3,286 years ago, the Jewish people stood at the Jordan River, poised to cross over and conquer the Land of Israel. This is what we read about in this week's Torah portion, *Parshat Matot*.

Bnei Yisrael, the Children of Israel, were one unified family, composed of the descendants of the twelve tribes. They were set to conquer and settle the land, with each tribe assigned a piece of real estate to call home.

But suddenly, just as the Jews get ready to cross the river, two of the largest, most successful, affluent and ambitious tribes – that of Reuven and Gad – decide they do not want to come along. Instead, they tell Moses they would rather remain on the east bank of the Jordan. As the Torah relates:

*The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an abundance of livestock very numerous and they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock...They said, "If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage. Do not take us across the Jordan."*¹

After seeing how fertile the lands east of the river were, the tribes of Reuven and Gad (and, incidentally, half of Menashe) approached Moses and asked to swap it for their ancestral portion within Israel proper.

¹ Numbers 32:1,5.

To put it into context: The entire Jewish people were on the threshold of the Promised Land, everything they have strived for and dreamed of. They were unified, one, dedicated and inspired. Then, suddenly, two of the most powerful tribes said, “You know what, on second thought, we don’t really want to go into the Promised Land; we would rather stay right here.”

This had to have been absolutely demoralizing for everyone. And what made it even worse was the fact that Reuven and Gad were supreme warriors, highly trained fighters. Perhaps, to offer an analogy, the tribes of Reuven and Gad were the equivalent to the Israeli Air Force today. Imagine if, God forbid, right before the biggest war in Israel’s history the Air Force declined to participate!

It was just as devastating then. Worse than the loss of firepower was the breakdown of confidence, passion, and inspiration. How could a people go to war when they were broken within? How could a nation ever hope to be victorious against their adversary when they were lost within themselves? How could a people fight an enemy when they were struggling with their own brothers?

Upon hearing of Reuven and Gad’s desire to remain outside of Israel, Moses responded harshly:

Moses said to the descendants of Gad and the descendants of Reuben, “Shall your brethren go to war while you stay here? Why do you discourage the Children of Israel from crossing over to the land which the Lord has given them ... And behold, you have now risen in place of your fathers as a society of sinful people, to add to the wrathful anger of the Lord against Israel. If you turn away from following Him, He will leave you in the desert again, and you will destroy this entire people.”²

“Your brothers are about to go out into war to conquer the Holy Land and you wish to stay here?” asked Moses. “Why do you discourage the children of Israel from crossing over to the land that the Lord has given them? The Jewish family is finally about to enter their home, and you have other plans? This is demoralizing! It will break the spirit of the people and do terrible damage to their confidence!”

² Numbers 32:6-7, 14-15.

This was some pretty harsh language, but Moses, as the leader he was, had to tell it like it is. If two tribes of the Jewish people, effectively a sixth of the entire population and a powerful force at that, decide to abandon their people and go AWOL, the inevitable result will be destruction!

5. Reuven and Gad Respond

To this Reuven and Gad responded as follows:

“You misunderstand our intentions. We will leave our families and wealth here, and we will join our brothers in the war to conquer the Land. Even more, we will be on the front lines, the vanguard that will lead the charge into the Promised Land. Only once the entire land is conquered, allocated and settled will we return and settle across the Jordan. We are one people, one family, and we will do whatever it takes to ensure that our home is secure. Only after our stated goal is met will we move back east of the Jordan and settle across the river from Israel.”

To this Moses agreed, but he held the two tribes accountable. These were his exact words:

“If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves for battle before the Lord, and your armed force crosses the Jordan before the Lord until He has driven out His enemies before Him, and the Land will be conquered before the Lord, afterwards you may return, and you shall be cleared [of any obligation] before the Lord and before Israel, and this land will become your heritage before the Lord. But, if you do not do so, behold, you will have sinned against the Lord, and be aware of your sin which will find you.”³

Moses said that, if the tribes of Reuven and Gad take up arms to fight as the vanguard for the Holy Land of Israel, then they will have fulfilled their obligation to their brothers and sisters, and they could settle east of the Jordan.

³ Numbers 32:21-23.

But in absolving them, Moses uses interesting language: *“and you shall be cleared [of any obligation] before the Lord and before Israel ...”*⁴

These few words teach us an essential lesson in how we can help Israel today, as we sit across the globe while rockets rain down upon the Land.

6. Talmud Yerushalmi

The Talmud Yerushalmi⁵ states:

When a person goes into the treasury chamber where the communal funds are kept [even if it is to contribute], he should not wear certain garments, such as containing large hems or pleats, or even while wearing *tefillin*.

Why? Because someone watching a person dressed this way walking into the communal vault may assume that the person could use the pocketed clothing to conceal money and steal from the fund. Says the Talmud Yerushalmi that a person should think ahead, not wear such clothing, and thus preempt even a potential whisper of suspicion.

From which Torah verse does the Talmud Yerushalmi know this? From the very words of Moses we have just quoted. And so it states:

A person is required to fulfill his obligation to mankind just as he is required to fulfill his obligation to God. As it is written [in Numbers 32:22]: *And you shall be cleared [of obligation] before the Lord and before Israel. And as it says [in Proverbs 3:4]: And find favor and good understanding in the sight of God and man.*⁶

⁴ Vhyitem n'kiyim m'Hashem u'mYisrael.

⁵ Shekalim 3:2. See also Bavli Yuma 38a.

⁶ Indeed, so important is this idea that the Talmud Yerushalmi actually brings scriptural proof from all three sections of the Tanach. The two quoted from the Torah (Numbers) and Writings (Proverbs) and also a verse from the Prophets (Joshua 22:22) is: God, God, the Lord, He knows, and Israel, he shall know.

From here we see that a person is not only obliged to do the right thing in the eyes of God (in this case, contribute to the communal fund), but he is even obliged to do so properly in the eyes of others, so that he fulfills not only God's will but also does so in a way that fulfills his own obligation to mankind.

This is an invaluable lesson for all things in life. You must *fulfill your obligation to God*, meaning you must do everything as if you are standing before God, and you must *fulfill your obligation to mankind*, meaning you must inspire others and remove all potential suspicion from yourself. And this lesson is derived from this Torah portion, *Parshat Matot*.

Here Moses tells Reuven and Gad that it's not enough to fulfill your obligation to God to enter the Promised Land, you must also fulfill your obligation to all of the people of Israel. And it's not enough to fulfill your obligation to the people of Israel, you must also fulfill your obligation to God. Only then do you have the blessing to settle outside of Israel, to the east of the Jordan.

7. The Lesson for Us

What does this mean for us?

There are three kinds of relationships we can have with Israel (and anything holy, as the Talmud Yerushalmi teaches):

1) We can do the right thing in the eyes of God, but if it is only right in the eyes of God and not in the eyes of people, it could turn them off completely - to the extent that they could even think we are stealing when really we are contributing to the communal fund.

In the context of Israel, we can yell from now until Sunday about the situation. But if our behavior alienates everyone around, we may succeed in fulfilling our obligation to God but not in fulfilling our obligation to our fellow man.

Or:

2) We may forget about God, and do and say what will make people around us happy. We may dismiss what the God, the Creator of the Land of Israel, has to say about it in His Torah. All we care about is what people will think about us, what the world will think, what the UN will think.

Or:

3) And this is what our Torah portion and the Talmud Yerushalmi advises: We can relate to Israel in such a way that our obligations to both man and God are fulfilled simultaneously. For our connection to Israel has to be a Divine connection, a Godly connection, a Holy connection, and it has to take mankind into consideration as well.

8. Path to Victory

Wars are fought on many fronts. And make no mistake about it – this is war. Wars are fought on the military level, on the public relations level, on the political level. The foundation and strength of Israel is the *spiritual* level. Understanding what we, the Children of Israel, represent is halfway to victory.

Imagine a family. A strong family can withstand anything – be it illness, threats, or challenges. A weak family cannot withstand even the slightest of threats. We, as members of the House of Israel, must ensure that our family is strong and our bonds unwavering. And from our Torah portion we learn how.

As we sit here on this Shabbat outside of Israel, on the proverbial east bank of the Jordan, we must be *cleared [of obligation] before the Lord and before Israel* – we must fulfill our obligation to God, and also to mankind.

Our obligation to God is stated clearly and comprehensively in the Torah. To help our brothers and sisters in Israel, we have to live like Divine human beings, like lights unto nations, like examples of what it means to be a proud, unabashed, unwavering, eternal Jew.

We are obliged to God and no enemy of ours can stand in our way. We are obliged to God and any enemy of ours is an enemy of God's.

No, we don't blow ourselves up while shouting *Allah-u-Akbar*, "God is great." We simply demonstrate how great God truly is by being great and holy people.

This is how we fulfill our obligation to God.

And we fulfill our obligation to mankind by communicating, teaching, inspiring the world what unity is all about. We, the House of Israel, stand one and strong. We act in such a way that no one can assume anything negative about us. Sure there are those that try to misconstrue even holiness itself. We combat it by showing all of mankind what an example of true holiness really looks like. We may disagree with our brothers and argue with our sisters, but the world must know that we enter the Promised Land as one family with one goal – to make this a home for the Divine.

Don't just conquer Israel for God; educate mankind what Israel is all about. Don't just relate to the Land in a way that satisfies your obligation to man; but show how Israel is also about your obligation to God.

By living as proud, unabashed, righteous Jews we can demonstrate to the world that we are one House of Israel, one Jewish Family, no matter where we may physically live.

Yes, wars are fought on many fronts. We stand at the forefront of the spiritual war. By fulfilling our obligation to God (doing good deeds, studying Torah, being good Jews) and by fulfilling our obligation to mankind (educating, inspiring, teaching the world what is right and what is true), we can literally assist our very family in Israel – our flesh and blood – in this war, in this attack on the soul of the Jewish people.

Practically speaking: We should increase in Torah and mitzvahs, with a special emphasis placed on those that demonstrate and emphasize Jewish pride – such as:

- putting on *tefillin*, an exemplifier of unity
- lighting Shabbat candles, bringing more light into this dark world
- increasing in Torah study

By understanding the unity of the Jewish people and the wholesomeness of the land, we can protect Israel and stand as one with our family, Beit Yisrael, in the Holy Land.

9. Conclusion: Unsafe Bet

An archaeologist was digging in the Negev Desert in Israel and came upon a casket containing a mummy, a rather rare occurrence in Israel, to say the least. After examining it, he called Abe, the curator of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem.

"I've just discovered a 3,000 year old mummy of a man who died of heart failure!" the excited scientist exclaimed.

Abe replied, "Bring him in. We'll check it out."

A week later, the amazed Abe called the archaeologist. "You were right about both the mummy's age and cause of death. How in the world did you know?"

"Easy. There was a piece of paper in his hand that said, *10,000 SHEKELS ON GOLIATH.*"

Before David slew the mighty Philistine warrior, Goliath, with a mere slingshot, the world had bet against Israel. And nothing has changed. Every generation since has bet against Israel.

But David's grandchildren stand here today, alive and proud. Where are the offspring of Goliath? Of Pharaoh? Of Nebuchadnezzar? Of Haman? Of Antiochus? Of Titus? Of Hitler?

Yes, we stand now in the "Three Weeks," the saddest point in the Jewish calendar, when we mourn the destruction of Jerusalem and its Holy Temple.

But the point here is that we are still standing! Sure, we remember the destruction, but we dedicate ourselves to the rebuilding. We mourn the Temple, but the very essence of our lives is dedicated to rebuilding it.

The world can bet against David, but it is just a way to lose a lot of money. We, the Jewish people, are not going anywhere.

While there are those who will launch rockets at our homes and families, we will launch a thousand campaigns of goodness and kindness. While there are those who will try to uproot us, we will plant magnificent roots and produce divine fruit. While there are those who desire to wipe Israel and the Jewish people off the map, we will turn the entire map of the earth into a home for God, a home where evil will be forever wiped out from every corner of the universe.

As we each do our jobs to ensure the physical and spiritual safety of the House of Israel, we pray for the safety of our brothers and sisters who are literally standing now on the physical front lines, their lives *al Kiddush Hashem*.

May God, our Father in Heaven, the Father of the entire House of Israel, protect His holy children and His Holy Land.

And may the *Musaf* prayer which we are about to begin be offered in the Third and Eternal Temple, built in its proper and everlasting place, the Holy City of Jerusalem.

(Not to mention the Kiddush after *Musaf*...)

Shabbat Shalom!