

Torah Talk—מאמרי תורה



The Parasha Letter of The Jewish Primary Day School of the Nation's Capital

Parashat Matot-Masei

פרשת מטות-מסעי

August 6, 2016

ב' באב תשע"ו

Torah Reading: *Bemidbar* (Numbers) 30:2-36:13

In *Parashat Matot*, Moshe describes the laws of oaths; the Bnei Yisrael battle the Midianites; and the tribes of Reuven and Gad request to dwell outside of the Land of Israel. In *Masei*, the final *parasha* of the book of *Bemidbar* (Numbers), the Bnei Yisrael stand on the banks of the Jordan River, ready to enter into the Promised Land. First, the path of their journey is reviewed and then the laws pertaining to the division of the Land are given. The boundaries of the Land of Yisrael are described and instructions are given to establish cities for the *Levi'im* (Levites) as well as *Arei Miklat* (Cities of Refuge). The book concludes with an affirmation of the claim on land of the daughters of Tzelophchad.

”וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-רְאשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת, לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לֵאמֹר: זֶה, הַדָּבָר, אֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה'.”
“Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes of Bnei Yisrael saying, ‘This is the thing that Hashem commanded.’”

The Hebrew word for “tribes” in this verse is *מִטּוֹת* – *matot*. Another word that the Torah commonly uses for “tribes” is *שֵׁבֶט* – *shevet*. Why does the Torah contain two words that apparently convey the same meaning? And what do these two words tell us about the tribes?

Both words, *מִטָּה* and *שֵׁבֶט* – *mateh* and *shevet* – mean not only “tribe,” but also “stick,” as in a stick of wood. According to Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th Century German commentator, *matot* are branches that arise from a single root,

although each branch is unique unto itself. They derive sustenance from the trunk, and at the same time, nourish the trunk in return. They also draw strength from the sun and the rain. Branches unconnected to a root cannot endure; branches still connected to the tree affect the entire tree.

In the same way, each tribe has unique characteristics, draws strength from the whole – the Bnei Yisrael – and at the same time affects the entire entity. Each tribe, in addition, draws strength from the proverbial light and life-giving water of the Torah, and once cut off from its roots, as occurred during the Northern Kingdom Exile of the 9th Century BCE which resulted in the “Ten Lost Tribes” [[learn more](#)], they cannot endure.

Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, the first Lubavitcher Rebbe (18th-19th Century Russia) has a different take. He maintains that *shevet* means the slim branch as it is when joined to the tree. It is fresh, but also pliant and soft. *Mateh* means the same slim branch, but detached from the tree. Despite this detachment from its source, or perhaps because of it, the *mateh* becomes hard and strong, and can be used a staff to support someone, or even as a symbol of leadership.

The last Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) builds on his predecessor's idea. He says that the first state, *shevet*, the branch attached to the tree, represents the soul before it enters the world, while it is still directly attached to and part of the Divine. It is fresh, vibrant, and alive. This can also be seen as the pristine period of the history of the Jewish people, when the *Beit HaMikdash*, the Temple, stood in Yerushalayim, populated by the *shevatim*, the young tribes.

The second state, *mateh*, is when the branch has been detached from the tree. The soul has entered the chaotic pressures of human life; or in a further image, the Jewish people have entered a further stage of history; the tribal construct has fractured, the *Beit HaMikdash* is in ruins, and the Jews are scattered around the world.

The paradox of life, says R. Schneerson, is that it is in the second state, that of being cut away from the tree, that the soul and the Jewish people as a whole achieve their strength. We long to be joined to the source, and ultimately the *Beit HaMikdash* will be rebuilt and even in this world our bond with the Divine will become tangible. Yet the sense of being "cut off" from the trunk of the tree is the

very fact which strengthens us, and makes us into a staff which can support and keep us going.

Whether you resonate towards R. Hirsch's explanation of a *mateh* needing to be connected with its roots in order to survive, or the Lubavitcher Rebbe's take that being a *mateh*, a branch broken off of the tree, has hardened us and therefore enabled us to survive, we can each learn something about our own approach to Jewish interconnectedness, continuity, and survival.

As we enter the period of the Nine Days leading up to Tisha B'av, the day we commemorate the destruction of both Temples and a number of other national Jewish tragedies throughout the centuries, may our *matot*, whether living units of a single tree or lopped-off branches strengthened by their amputation, give us renewed strength and hope in a unified, enduring Jewish people.

Shabbat Shalom.

For Discussion:

- Can you think of any other similarities between wooden branches/sticks and tribes that would cause Biblical Hebrew to have the same words for both?
- Which interpretation, Rabbi Hirsch's or the Lubavitcher Rebbes', do you think is correct, given what you know about the tribes and Jewish history?
- How can each of us work towards an *Am Echad* [One Nation], a unified Jewish people when we are all so different from one another?