

Parashah 42

Mattot

מטות "Tribes"

Numbers 30:1 – 32:42

Torah Together



This *Torah* portion contains instructions on the importance of keeping vows made before God and then relates some of the history of the Israelites as they prepared to enter the land God had promised to their forefathers. In addition, we learn that we are near the end of Moses' life.

1. Vows - 30:1-16

a) The subject of vows was treated more fully in **Leviticus 27**. What is the special case that is considered in this passage?

b) What were the rules if a woman should take a vow? How did her marital status affect those vows? What were the responsibilities of the father or husband?

c) What can we learn about God's view of authority in the family? Do you think these rules are fair? How does **Matthew 5:37** apply here?

Scripture Link:

A **vow** is a promise **to do something**. A **vow TO God** is generally taken to demonstrate one's **commitment** to God, as a Nazirite vow (**Numbers 6:2-21**). A **vow made before God** is usually a promise to another person, such as wedding a vow. Vows are voluntary and personal. This passage makes it clear that God takes them very seriously. In **Matthew 5:33-37**, *Yeshua* discourages the taking of vows lest you break your commitment to God.

YHWH said to Moses, "Take vengeance on the Midianites for the Israelites. After that, you will be gathered to your people."

Numbers 31:1 - 2

Vengeance on the Midianites

God ordered Moses to "take vengeance on the Midianites" because of the incident described in **Numbers** chapter 25. From **Numbers 31:16**, we learn that it was Balaam who advised the Moabites to use their women to seduce the Israelite men into acts of sexual immorality. So although Balaam was not able to curse the Israelites himself, he was able to have the Israelites effectively curse themselves by committing sinful acts with these Moabite women.

Scripture Link:

In this passage (verses 19-24), Moses tells the soldiers returning from the battle with the Midianites that they must stay outside the camp until they have been cleansed and their garments and belongings purified. This is in obedience to the commands that Moses gave the Israelites in **Numbers 19:11-13** concerning the "water of cleansing" obtained from the ashes of the red heifer.

2. Vengeance on the Midianites - 31:1-24

a) What did God say would happen to Moses after the Israelites had "taken vengeance on the Midianites?" How do you think Moses may have felt about this?

b) How many Israelites went to battle with the Midianites? From which tribes did they come? Who else went along with them? What did he bring with him?

c) How many Midianite men survived the battle with the Israelites? What were the names of the Midianite kings who died? Who else is mentioned that died in this battle?

d) What was done with the Midianite women & children? What about the flocks and the herds? What was done to the towns where the Midianites had settled?

e) Why was Moses angry with the Israelite army when they returned from the battle? What did he order to be done? How do you feel about this?

f) Why weren't the returning soldiers allowed inside the camp? What did they have to do to be allowed back in? What was done with the goods captured with the Midianites?

3. Dividing the Spoils - 31:25-54

a) All the people and livestock that had been captured were to be divided equally between what two groups? Who did the counting and dividing?

b) What was each group commanded to set apart as a tribute to YHWH? To whom were these items given? Why do you think the tributes from the two groups were different?

c) How many Israelite men died in the battle? What did the officers and commanders do with their share of the gold they had plundered? According to verse 50, what was their reason for doing this?

The Spoils of War

From the description of the defeat of the Midianites, we have an idea of what the Israelite soldiers brought back to Moses and Eleazar. After killing all those who had participated in the seduction of the Israelites (**Numbers 25**) and burning their towns and cities, all that was left were the young women (virgins), the livestock, and whatever items of value the Israelites could carry. These were divided into two equal parts with one given to the soldiers themselves and the other given to the rest of the community. From these, each group gave a portion to the Levites as a tribute, or **thanksgiving offering**, to YHWH. In addition, the commanders gave a voluntary offering to YHWH both as a **thanksgiving offering** (because not one Israelite soldier had been killed – verse 49) and as an **atonement offering** (verse 50) for those sins committed during the battle.

A Repeat of History?

Moses was obviously concerned and alarmed when the Reubenites and the Gadites expressed their desire to live on the east side of the Jordan river and not cross into the land that God had promised the Israelites. He remembered the incident of the 12 men sent to spy out the land 40 years earlier (**Numbers 13**). When they returned, they discouraged the Israelites by telling them of the “giants that dwelt in the land.” It was this incident that caused the Israelites to spend the next 40 years wandering in the wilderness and Moses did not want to repeat that!

The solution that the leaders of the Reubenites and the Gadites presented seemed to allay Moses' fears. History shows that the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of the tribe of Manasseh did indeed settle land on the east side of the Jordan river. Reuben and Gad ended up with land northeast of the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee) in what today is northern Jordan and southern Syria. Half the tribe of Manasseh settled in land just east of the Jordan river in Gilead, today's central Jordan.

4. The Transjordan Tribes - 32:1-42

a) As the Israelites prepared to cross the Jordan river to enter Canaan, what did the tribes of Reuben and Gad want to do? Why did they want this?

b) What was Moses' response to the request of the Reubenites and the Gadites? What event in their past did Moses recall? In essence, of what did Moses accuse them?

c) How did the Reubenites and the Gadites respond to Moses' criticism? What was their proposal? How did Moses receive their suggestion? Does this seem like a good solution to you?

d) Which tribes actually received their share of the land on the east side of the Jordan river? Which tribe received which land? Can you locate these areas on a map?

Digging deeper

1. How was the situation with the tribes of Reuben and Gad and their request of Moses different than the situation that occurred with the ten spies as recorded in Numbers 13? Can you see why Moses may have related their request to that situation?

2. When God commanded the Israelites to take vengeance on the Midianites, they ended up killing even some women and children. Do you think this is consistent with God's character? What are your thoughts about this act? Does this change your attitude toward God?

For further study, see
Haftarah : Jeremiah 1:1 – 2:3
Brit Hadashah : Matthew 5:33-37