**S.A.L.T. PARASHAT MATOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

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**This week's SALT shiurim are dedicated in memory of my grandfather   
Rav Yehuda Leib Silverberg z"l, whose yahrzeit is  
Thursday 22 Tamuz, July 28**.

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Motzaei Shabbat

The Torah in Parashat Matot tells of the battle *Benei Yisrael* waged against Midyan to avenge that nation’s role in the tragic incident of *Ba’al Pe’or*, sending their women to lure *Benei Yisrael* to immorality and idolatry. The Midrash, in a startling passage (*Shir Hashirim Rabba* 6), describes the special piety of the 12,000 soldiers chosen to wage this war. Commenting on the verse in Shir Hashrim (6:6), “Your teeth are like a herd of sheep,” the Midrash writes:

Just as a sheep is humble, so were *Yisrael* humble and innocent during the war with Midyan. Rav Huna said in the name of Rabbi Acha: Not one of them [placed] the *tefillin shel rosh* before the *tefillin shel yad*, for if one of them had [placed] the *tefillin shel rosh* before the *tefillin shel yad*, Moshe would not have praised them, and they would not returned from there safely.

The war against Midyan was unique, in that it was waged not in self-defense or for the purpose of conquering *Eretz Yisrael*, but rather to avenge Midyan’s successful attempt to lure *Benei Yisrael* to sin. This campaign would therefore have lost its validity if *Benei Yisrael* were spiritually deficient at the time. The fighters’ religious credentials had to be impeccable, because they were fighting a “holy war” against those who spiritually threatened them. Waging a war against this threat is legitimate only if the warriors adhere to the most rigorous standards of piety, such that they can place the blame squarely on Midyan for their previous failures. This is likely the meaning of the analogy to sheep drawn by the Midrash. Sheep are often used as a symbol of innocence and helplessness. The battle against Midyan was valid only if *Benei Yisrael* were truly like “sheep” – helpless victims of Midyan’s scheme. If they had not been otherwise innocent and pure, then they would not have had the right to avenge the successful plot of seduction.

It is easy and convenient to blame our shortcomings on other people and external factors, such as our upbringing and education, our society, our community and our life’s circumstances. *Chazal* here teach us that such blame is legitimate only if our record is otherwise flawless. If we can honestly attest to having done all we could to live righteously, that we are inherently innocent as sheep, but helplessly victimized by external, spiritually hostile influences, then we can absolve ourselves of responsibility for our failings and blame other people and our life’s circumstances. More often than not, however, blaming external factors is merely an excuse, a way to clear our consciences and excuse ourselves from guilt. The Midrash reminds us to first thoroughly examine ourselves to ensure we are doing the best we can in our situation before blaming other people and external factors for our shortcomings.

Sunday

We read in Parashat Matot that following the war against Midyan, the officers who led the troops in the battle came forward to offer a donation to the *Mishkan*. Specifically, they collected the gold jewelry of the Midyanite women which they seized during battle, and brought it as a gift for the purpose of achieving atonement (“*le-khaper al nafshoteinu lifnei Hashem*” – 31:50). Rashi explains that they sought atonement for “*hirhur ha-leiv*” – inappropriate thoughts about the women of Midyan. Although the soldiers did not repeat the sins they committed with the women of Moav and Midyan during the incident of *Ba’al Pe’or*, they were guilty of inappropriate thoughts, for which they sought atonement.

The Rebbe of Kotzk associated this donation with the laws of *kashering* utensils which were taught to the soldiers upon their return from battle. As they had brought with them the Midyanites’ utensils as spoils of war, they were told that these utensils, which had been used with non-kosher food, needed to be purged of the taste of that food before they could be used. The Kotzker Rebbe explained that the concept of *kashering* symbolically alludes to the nature of the process of self-improvement. Even though a utensil used with non-kosher food has since been thoroughly cleaned, and no particles of non-kosher food are visible on the surface, it nevertheless may not be used, because the taste of the non-kosher food is still embedded within the utensil’s walls. Correspondingly, the Kotzker Rebbe explained, even after we have changed our conduct, the tendencies and character flaws that led to our mistake remain beneath the surface. The military officers thus understood that the fact that no soldiers repeated the sins of *Ba’al Pe’or* was not good enough. They detected that they were still plagued by weakness, by “*hirhur ha-leiv*,” which they needed to purge.

This characteristically clever insight of the Kotzker Rebbe reminds us that growth and improvement is a long, complex process that cannot be expected to occur quickly or easily. Even after we complete the first and most vital stage, of “cleaning the surface,” we must be mindful of the “taste” embedded in the “walls” of our characters, the flaws that remain beneath the surface, the negative tendencies within us that we must try, as best we can, to eliminate. Introspection and change require us to carefully examine ourselves both outwardly and inwardly, to assess our speech and conduct, as well as our thoughts and attitudes, as part of the lifelong process of self-improvement and spiritual growth.

Monday

The final section of Parashat Matot tells of the distribution of the region east of the Jordan River which *Benei Yisrael* had captured from the Emorites, as well as the conquest of new territory by members of the tribe of Menashe. In the last verse of the parasha, we read, “Novach went ahead and captured Kenat and its surrounding cities, and he called it Novach, in his name.”

Rashi observes that the word לה (“it”) in this verse is grammatically peculiar. The possessive word *לה* normally ends with a “*mapik hei*” – a *hei* with a dot, such that it is pronounced “*lah*” (with an “h” sound at the end). Here, however, the dot is mysteriously missing. Rashi cites Rabbi Moshe Ha’darshan as explaining that the Torah omitted the dot from the *hei* so that the word would sound like the word לא (“no”). It thus alludes to the fact that although Novach sought to make an eternal name for himself by giving the newly-captured territory the name “Novach,” his efforts failed, as the name did not endure. (See Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s Torah commentary where he explains the significance of this point.)

It has been suggested that Rashi’s comments may perhaps shed light on the authentic pronunciation of the *kamatz* vowel, which appears under the *lamed* in the word לה, as well as the pronunciation of the *cholam* vowel, which is used in the word *לא*. Among contemporary Jewish communities, we find different pronunciations of these vowels. Sepharadim, generally, make no distinction, or a very subtle distinction, between the *kamatz* and the *patach*, pronouncing both as a short “o” sound (as in the word “top”), and they pronounce the *cholam* vowel as a long “o” (as in “go”). Most Chassidic groups, as well as many followers of Polish and Hungarian pronunciation, pronounce the *kamatz* in a manner resembling the pronunciation of the *shuruk* sound by other groups (the “oo” sound, as in “too”), and the *cholam* as “oy.” Among adherents of the Lithuanian tradition, it is common to pronounce the *kamatz* as a short “u” sound, such as in the words “sun” and “under,” and to pronounce the *cholam* as “oy,” like the common Chassidic tradition (or as a long “a” sound, as in “ate”). According to all these customs, there is little resemblance between the *kamatz* sound and the *cholam* sound, such that the word *לה –* which is spelled with a *kamatz* – could sound like *לא* – which is spelled with *cholam*. As Rabbi Moshe Ha’darshan assumed a resemblance between the sounds of these two vowels, his remark would seem to prove that he did not follow any of the aforementioned traditions.

Such a resemblance does exist, however, according to the tradition of many German and other Western European communities, who pronounce the *kamatz* as a short “u” (as in “sun”) and the *cholam* as a long “o” (as in “go”). Adherents of this tradition pronounce the word *לה* as *luh* and *לא* as *lo*, which sound somewhat similar. Rashi’s comment, then, might lend support to this tradition regarding the pronunciation of these two vowels. This observation was made by Rav Menachem Chaim Galitzky, in a letter to the periodical [*Neizer Ha-Torah* (Tevet, 5768)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36024&st=&pgnum=332).

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted Rashi’s comments to the final verse of Parashat Matot, where he observes that the word *לה* in this verse is punctuated unusually, without the dot that normally appears in the *hei* of this word, such that it would be pronounced *lah* (with an audible “h” sound at the end). Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, as Rashi cites, suggested that the Torah removed the dot from the *hei* so that this word, *לה*, would sound like the word *לא* (“no”). This verse speaks of Novach, who captured a city and then named it after him, and the allusion to the word *לא*, according to Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, indicates that this name did not endure. As we saw, it has been suggested that the phonetic resemblance which Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan assumes to exist between *לה* and *לא* may prove that the *kamatz* vowel (which is used in the word *לה*) and the *cholam* vowel (which is used in the word *לא*) sound somewhat similar. This would thus lend support to the custom to pronounce the *kamatz* as a short “u” sound (as in “sun”), and the *cholam* as a long “o” sound (as in “so”), such that לה is pronounced “*luh*” and לא is pronounced “*lo*.”

This proof was suggested by Rav Menachem Chaim Galitzky, in a letter to the periodical [*Neizer Ha-Torah* (Tevet, 5768)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36024&st=&pgnum=332), though he concedes that it can be refuted. The Mishna in Masekhet Nedarim (13a) addresses the case of one who says to his fellow, “*Le-korban lo okhal lakh*” (literally, “As a sacrifice – I shall not eat your food”), this qualifies as a vow, and he may not eat his fellow’s food. The Gemara (13b) initially explains that the statement “*le-korban*” may have meant “*lo korban*” – “not a sacrifice,” such that the statement means, “What I do not eat of your food will not be sacrifice,” implying that he declares that his fellow’s food should be treated as a sacrifice, and thus forbidden for his personal benefit. Although the Gemara dismisses this reading, the fact remains that it considered the possibility that “*le-korban*” was said in place of “*lo korban*.” This might suggest that when *Chazal* speak of vowel sounds resembling one another, the two sounds do not necessarily have to be very similar. Thus, the resemblance indicated by Rav Moshe Ha-darshan between לה and לא does not necessarily prove the authentic pronunciation of these vowels.

It should also be noted that Rashi himself, at least according to one later scholar, did not follow the tradition of pronouncing a *kamatz* as a short “u” sound. Rav Yaakov Emden, in his notes to Masekhet Berakhot (47a), observes that Rashi in numerous contexts refers to the *kamatz* vowel as a *patach*. On this basis, Rav Yaakov Emden suggests proving that Rashi accepted what later became the Sephardic tradition, of pronouncing the *kamatz* similar (or identical) to a *patach*. If so, then we certainly cannot draw proof to the Western European pronunciation of the *kamatz* from Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan’s comment, which Rashi himself cites. (Rashi in fact disagrees with Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan’s interpretation of the word לה in this verse, but not because of the phonetic gap between לה and לא.)

(See [Aharon Gabbai’s article in *Neizer Ha-Torah*, Sivan, 5767](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=36030&st=&pgnum=231))

Wednesday

We read in Parashat Matot of the instructions given to the Israelite soldiers upon their return from battle against Midyan concerning the utensils which they had seized as spoils of war. Specifically, they were told by Elazar, the *kohen gadol*,that utensils which had been used with non-kosher food must first be purged of the taste of non-kosher food before they may be used. In this context, Elazar also instructs, “*akh be-mei nida yitchata*” (31:23), which appears to refer to the requirement to have the *para aduma* waters sprinkled on the utensils to purify them. As these utensils had come in contact with human corpses over the course of battle, they became *tamei* (ritually impure), and the *para aduma* waters are needed to restore their status of purity.

The Gemara, however, in Masekhet Avoda Zara (75b), interprets this phrase as a reference to what is commonly called “*tevilat keilim*” – the requirement to immerse in a *mikveh* food utensils acquired from a non-Jew. Irrespective of whether the utensil had ever been used with non-kosher food, the fact that it was owned by a gentile necessitates its immersion in a *mikveh* upon its acquisition by a Jew. The implication of the Gemara is that this requirement constitutes a Torah obligation, though according to many *Rishonim*, the Gemara made this inference as an *asmakhta* (allusion to a rabbinic enactment in the Biblical text), and in truth this requirement was enacted by *Chazal*.

The *Tur* (Y.D. 120) cites the ruling of the *Semak* that the immersion of a utensil obtained from a gentile must be performed in a body of water consisting of at least forty *se’a* (approximately 330 liters) of water, regardless of what kind of body of water it is. When it comes to purifying an impure utensil, one must immerse the utensil in either a *mikveh* consisting of forty *se’a* of water, or in a *ma’ayan* (natural body of water) consisting of any amount of water (as long as there is enough water for the utensil to be submerged). The obligation of *tevilat keilim*, however, in the view of the *Semak*, differs in this regard, and requires a quantity of forty *se’a* even if the immersion takes place in a *ma’ayan*.

The *Tur* dismisses this ruling, arguing that the laws of *tevilat keilim* are modeled after the laws of purification. Therefore, since a *ma’ayan* is capable of purifying regardless of the quantity of water it contains, one may likewise fulfill the requirement of *tevilat keilim* by immersing a utensil in a *ma’ayan* even if it does not contain forty *se’a* of water.

As noted by the *Perisha*, a slight discrepancy exists between different editions of the *Tur*, one which directly affects the way we understand his objection to the *Semak*’s ruling. In some editions, the *Tur* writes that the laws of *tevilat keilim* are modeled after “*tevilat temei’a*” – “the immersion of an impure woman.” As the *Beit Yosef* explains, this refers to the immersion of a *nidda* after the cessation of her menstrual flow. According to this version of the text, the *Tur* refers here to the fact that the Gemara inferred the obligation of *tevilat keilim* from the verse, “*akh be-mei nidda yitchata*,” which the Gemara explains to mean that a utensil must be immersed in a manner similar to the immersion of a *nidda*. The *Tur* thus establishes that just as a *nidda* may immerse in a *ma’ayan* that does not contain forty *se’a* of water, similarly, one may fulfill the requirement of *tevilat keilim* by immersing the utensil in this kind of *ma’ayan*. The *Beit Yosef* proceeds to question this reasoning of the *Tur*, noting that in discussing the laws of *nidda* (Y.D. 201), the *Tur* cites the ruling of his father, the Rosh – whose rulings he generally follows – that a *nidda*’s immersion requires forty *se’a* of water even if it is done in a *ma’ayan*. Therefore, even if we accept the premise that the requirement of *tevilat keilim* is modeled after the immersion of a *nidda*, forty *se’a* would be required even if the immersion is done in a *ma’ayan* instead of a *mikveh*. Indeed, based on this contention, the *Beit Yosef* rules in *Shulchan Arukh* that forty *se’a* is required for *tevilat keilim* regardless of whether it is done in a *mikveh* or in a natural body of water.

In other editions, however, the *Tur* claims that the law of *tevilat keilim* is modeled after “*tevilat tum’a*” – “the immersion of impurity.” The *Perisha* explains that according to this version of the text, the *Tur* refers to the immersion of impure utensils, and it is upon this immersion that *tevilat keilim* is modeled. Meaning, just as a utensil which had become impure must be immersed to return to its state of purity, similarly, a utensil obtained from a gentile must be immersed to be deemed suitable for use by Jews. Therefore, the *Tur* understandably disputed the *Semak*’s ruling, and maintained that a *ma’ayan* may be used for *tevilat keilim* even if it does not contain forty *se’a*, just as such a *ma’ayan* may be used for the purification of impure utensils. (See also *Taz*, Y.D. 120:2).

In any event, the *Shulchan Arukh*, as mentioned, ruled that forty *se’a* of water are required for *tevilat keilim* even if the immersion is done in a natural body of water. It should be noted, however, that in the case of a running stream or river, the immersion may be done in a place without forty *se’a* of water, as long as all the water in the stream amounts to forty *se’a* (see *Shakh*, Y.D. 201:2).

Thursday

We read in Parashat Matot of the instructions given to the soldiers after *Benei Yisrael*’s successful battle against Midyan concerning the food utensils that they brought back as spoils of war. The people were instructed as to how they needed to purge the utensils of all taste of the forbidden food with they were used in order for them to become permissible for use.

The Ramban (31:23) famously raises the question of why these commands were issued only now, and not earlier, after the war againt Sichon and Og, which also resulted in *Benei Yisrael*’s seizing the possessions of the defeated gentile nations. Seemingly, there was as much of a need to *kasher* the utensils of those nations before using them as there was to *kasher* the utensils of Midyan. Why, then, were these instructions given only after the war with Midyan?

The Ramban gives a surprising answer, claiming that the war against Sichon and Og marked the beginning of the campaign to conquer *Eretz Yisrael*. Since this territory was destined to be permanently settled by the tribes of Reuven and Gad, this battle was considered part of the war to capture the Land of Israel. And, as the Ramban cites from the Gemara in Masekhet Chulin (17a), the Israelite soldiers fighting the war of *kibbush ha-aretz* (capturing the land) were permitted to partake of the non-kosher food found among the land’s inhabitants. Therefore, the utensils of the Emorites of which *Benei Yisrael* took possession after this war did not require *kashering*.

The Ramban’s approach does not seem to answer a similar question that arises, namely, why the obligation of *tevilat keilim* was not presented after the battle against Sichon and Og. The soldiers returning from the war with Midyan were told to “purify” the utensils in “*mei nidda*” (31:23), which the Gemara (Avoda Zara 75b) interprets as referring to the immersion of the utensils obtained from gentiles in a *mikveh*, even if they were never used with food. Some *Rishonim* maintained that this law was actually enacted by *Chazal*, and the Gemara merely found an allusion for this law in the text (as indicated by the Rambam’s formulation in Hilkhot Ma’akhalot Assurot (17:5), but others claimed that this constitutes a Torah obligation. The Ramban himself, earlier in this passage, expresses some uncertainty in this regard, writing that “my heart considers” (“*libi meharher*”) that the obligation of *tevilat keilim* was enacted by *Chazal*. We might wonder why, according to the view that *tevilat keilim* constitutes a Biblical requirement, this law was presented only after the war with Midyan, and not after the war with Sichon and Og. After all, this requirement has nothing to do with the presence of forbidden food or the taste of forbidden food in the utensils, and thus the Ramban’s approach regarding the laws of *kashering* is not relevant to the issue of *tevilat keilim*. Seemingly, then, the fact that this obligation was not presented after the war with Sichon and Og proves that it does not constitute a Torah requirement, and was enacted by *Chazal*. We must therefore ask how the *Rishonim* who consider *tevilat keilim* a Biblical obligation refute this proof, and why the Ramban himself expressed some ambivalence in this regard.

Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, in one of his responsa (*Har Tzevi*, Y.D. 109), notes the answer given to this question by Rav Avraham Landau – the “Gaon of Tchechnov” – as cited by Rav Meir Dan Platzky in *Keli Chemda* (Parashat Ki-Teitzei). The Gaon asserted that the obligation of *tevilat keilim* applies only if the utensil was transferred directly from the ownership of a gentile to the ownership of a Jew. If a utensil was owned by a gentile and then became ownerless, whereupon a Jew took possession of it, it does not require immersion. On this basis, the Gaon of Tchechnov explained the difference between the utensils seized from the Emorites and those seized from Midyan. In the beginning of Sefer Devarim, Moshe describes how *Benei Yisrael* left no survivors from the kingdoms of Sichon and Og. All the property of these nations thus became ownerless – as all the owners and their inheritors died – such that the people’s utensils did not transfer directly from the possession of gentiles to the possession of Jews. By contrast, in the war against Midyan, *Benei Yisrael* killed the men, but captured the women and children alive. As such, when they seized the Midyanites’ utensils, the utensils transferred directly from the possession of their Midyanite owners to the possession of *Benei Yisrael*, and they therefore required immersion. For this reason, the obligation of *tevilat keilim* was relevant after the war with Midyan, but not after the war against Sichon and Og.

We will *iy”H* discuss this topic further tomorrow.

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the famous question posed by the Ramban (Bamidbar 31:23) as to why the guidelines for *kashering* utensils obtained from non-Jews were first given only after *Benei Yisrael*’s war with Midyan. Already earlier, after their conquest of the territory of the kingdoms of Sichon and Og, *Benei Yisrael* presumably took possession of the defeated nation’s utensils, and were thus required to perform *kashering*. Yet, these laws were not given until after the soldiers returned from the battle against Midyan with the Midyanites’ utensils. The Ramban answered that the war against Sichon and Og had the status of *kibbush ha-aretz* – capturing the Land of Israel – which is subject to special rules, including the permissibility of the indigenous population’s non-kosher food. As such, the laws of *kashering* were not relevant after that war. As we saw, however, some later writers noted that, according to the simple reading of the Gemara (Avoda Zara 75b), after the war against Midyan, *Benei Yisrael* were presented with not only the laws of *kashering*, but also the requirement of *tevilat keilim* – immersing utensils obtained from gentiles. This obligation is not dependent upon the presence of non-kosher food particles or taste in the utensil; it applies regardless of whether or not the utensil had been used with non-kosher food. As such, the Ramban’s answer is not relevant to *tevilat keilim*. Why, then, was this requirement introduced only now, and not after the war against the kingdoms of Sichon and Og?

Yesterday, we saw an answer cited by Rav Tzvi Pesach Frank, in his [*Har Tzevi* (Y.D. 109)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=22460&st=&pgnum=125), explaining that in the war against Sichon and Og, the entire populations were killed, such that their property was left ownerless. Hence, the food utensils did not transfer directly from gentile ownership to Israelite ownership, and for this reason, they did not require immersion.

Rav Tzvi Pesach mentioned this theory in reference to the question that arose after Israel’s War of Independence concerning utensils left behind by Arabs who fled from their homes during the war. These utensils certainly required *kashering*, but it was uncertain whether they also required immersion. Rav Tzvi Pesach noted that according to the theory mentioned above (which he cited from the *Keli Chemda*), these utensils would likely not require immersion. Since they had been abandoned, they were implicitly declared ownerless before they were seized by the Israelis. Therefore, they came into Jewish possession not directly from gentile possession, but rather from an interim state of ownerlessness. As such, according to the theory presented above, these utensils would not require immersion.

Rav Tzvi Pesach, however, was reluctant to rely on this line of reasoning without further evidence. He claimed that more clear-cut proof is needed to establish that a utensil left ownerless by a gentile and subsequently obtained by a Jew does not require immersion. As for the question regarding the utensils seized from the kingdoms of Sichon and Og, Rav Tzvi Pesach offered a much different answer, asserting that we should not ask why God chose to present any given *mitzva* at one point in time and not at another time. Rav Tzvi Pesach writes that these kinds of questions fall under the category of “*ha-nistarot le-Hashem Elokeinu*” (Devarim 29:28) – divine wisdom which we cannot access. Just as, for example, some *mitzvot* were commanded before *Matan Torah*, at the time when *Benei Yisrael* encamped in Mara (Shemot 15:25), similarly, God decided that some *mitzvot* should be issued on certain occasions, and other *mitzvot* at different times. The Ramban posed his question concerning the utensils of the Midyan because the requirement of *kashering* constitutes not a separate halakhic obligation, but rather the means of avoiding the prohibition of eating non-kosher food. God had already presented the laws concerning *kashrut* earlier, in Sefer Vayikra (11). Thus, the laws of *kashering* should have, seemingly, been presented after *Benei Yisrael* seized the possessions of the nations of Sichon and Og, so they would know how to use those utensils without violating the dietary code they had received many years earlier. This is why the Ramban raised the question of why the laws of *kashering* were presented only later, after the war with Midyan. *Tevilat keilim*, however, constitutes a separate obligation that has nothing at all to do with the laws of forbidden foods, and therefore there is no purpose in asking why it was presented at one point and not at another point.

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