**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT MASEI**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

In loving memory of Yaakov Ben Yitzchak Fred Stone, beloved father and grandfather whose yartzeit is the 25 Tammuz

Stanley & Ellen Stone and their children, Jake & Chaya, Micah & Adline, Zack & Yael, Allie and Issac, Ezra & Talia, Shai, Yoni & Caylay, Azzi, Eliana & Marc, Adina, Emunah, Shira,and Gabi & Talia

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Motzaei Shabbat

Parashat Masei begins with the Torah’s list of the forty-two stations where *Benei Yisrael* encamped over the course of their journey through the wilderness, from the Exodus through their final encampment on the banks of the Jordan River.

Rashi, citing Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan, explains that this list was presented to demonstrate the extent of God’s kindness towards *Benei Yisrael*. After decreeing that they would remain in the wilderness for forty years, He did not force them to travel constantly from place to place, and in fact, for the majority of the time, they were encamped. The Torah lists the nation’s journeys and encampments, Rashi writes, to demonstrated that God did not overburden *Benei Yisrael* even when He punished them for the sin of the spies, as they were not constantly traveling.

*Keli Yakar* adds a possible connection between this listing and the end of the previous *parasha*, Parashat Matot. The final section of Parashat Matot tells of the request made by the tribes of Reuven and Gad to permanently settle the region east of the Jordan River, which *Benei Yisrael* had captured in a defensive battle, but had no intention of settling. Moshe granted their request after securing their promise to join the other tribes in the battle to conquer *Eretz Yisrael*, but initially, Moshe responded by sharply criticizing Reuven and Gad, accusing them of repeating the sin of the spies. Just as the spies dissuaded the nation from proceeding into the Land of Israel, the tribes of Reuven and Gad were similarly discouraging the nation by expressing their preference to remain east of the Jordan River, without entering the land promised by God. In reprimanding Reuven and Gad, Moshe noted the harsh punishment brought upon *Benei Yisrael* because of the sin of the spies: “The Lord’s anger was incensed upon Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness for forty years…” (32:13). Upon reading Moshe’s description of God’s punishment, one might have understood the phrase “*va-yeni’eim ba-midbar*” (“He made them wander in the wilderness”) to mean that God ruthlessly had *Benei Yisrael* journey non-stop throughout these years, or frequently had them encamp and then immediately disembark. For this reason, *Keli Yakar* suggests, the story of Reuven and Gad is followed by the listing of *Benei Yisrael*’s forty-two encampments – to clarify that even during this period, when God punished *Benei Yisrael*, He treated them compassionately and ensured not to overburden them with a grueling travel schedule.

*Keli Yakar*’s comments might instruct that when we recall unfortunate events, we must ensure not to overstate the misfortune or exaggerate. Like *Benei Yisrael* in the wilderness, we at times find ourselves in unpleasant and undesirable conditions. However, even at such times, it is inappropriate to overstate the hardship, to view the experience as something more severe than what it really is. As we reflect upon the times when “*va-yeni’eim ba-midbar*,” when we’ve gone through a challenging period, we must acknowledge and appreciate the positive angles of those events, the hidden blessings that we were granted, rather than focusing our attention exclusively on the hardship.

Sunday

The Torah in Parashat Masei discusses the law of *arei miklat* – the cities of refuge which were assigned for the protection of those who accidentally caused another person’s death. It is clear from the Torah’s presentation that the killer’s relocation in a city of refuge is not merely a means of protection from angry relatives of the victim, but also a punishment for his deadly negligence. The Torah requires him to remain in the *ir miklat* until the *kohen gadol* dies (35:25), and specifically forbids accepting a ransom from the killer in lieu of his relocation in a city of refuge (35:32). Indeed, the Talmid routinely refers to the killer’s relocation with the term “*galut*” – “exile.”

The Torah concludes its discussion by stating that in the case of intentional murder, ransom cannot be accepted in lieu of capital punishment, because “the land shall not be atoned for blood spilled upon it, except with the blood of he who spilled it” (35:33). Murder “defiles” the Land of Israel, and it cannot be cleansed with anything but the killer’s execution.

The Gemara in Masekhet Keritut (26a) cites this verse in reference to its discussion of the law of *egla arufa* – the special atonement ceremony required when a murder victim is found and the murderer’s identity is unknown. As the Torah states in Sefer Devarim (21:8 – “*ve-nikaper lahem ha-dam*”), this ceremony serves to atone for the murder, given the inability to earn atonement by punishing the perpetrator. The Gemara addresses the case where the ceremony was not, for whatever reason, able to be performed until after the next Yom Kippur. One might have assumed that since Yom Kippur brings atonement, once Yom Kippur is observed there is no longer any need to achieve atonement through the *egla arufa* ceremony. The Gemara, however, states that the *egla arufa* must be brought, even in such a case. Rava explains the reason of this *halakha* by citing the aforementioned verse in Parashat Masei: “the land shall not be atoned for blood spilled upon it, except with the blood of he who spilled it.” Rashi writes that this verse establishes that murder differs from other sins in that there is no possibility of atonement – even through the observance of Yom Kippur – without the killer being punished. Therefore, even after Yom Kippur, the *egla arufa* is necessary in order to atone for this crime, in lieu of punishing the killer, who has yet to be identified.

The *Sefat Emet*, however, explains the Gemara’s citation of this verse differently. In his view, the Gemara’s inference is from the verse’s focus on the land: “**the land** shall not be atoned.” When a person commits any other wrongful act, it is the individual himself who requires atonement. But when a murder is perpetrated, the *Sefat Emet* writes, the land itself, in some sense, is defiled. Yom Kippur brings atonement for people, but not for the land. The land’s atonement is achieved only by punishing the perpetrator, or, when the killer cannot be found, through the *egla arufa* atonement ceremony.

We might say that the converse is true in the positive sense, with regard to our acts of goodness. We must strive not only to perform such acts, to observe *mitzvot* and conduct ourselves properly, but also to inject goodness into the “land” itself, so-to-speak. Just as certain crimes are so severe that they in some sense defile the land, contaminating the environment, likewise, we have the capacity to uplift the world around us, to fill it with goodness. While minimally we are called upon to simply satisfy our halakhic requirements, we ought to aspire to do even more – to disseminate goodness and sanctity, to fill our world with kindness, compassion, generosity, and all the other values which the Torah wants us to live by.

Monday

Rashi, commenting to the opening verse of Parashat Masei, cites the following explanation from the *Midrash Tanchuma* for why the Torah lists all of *Benei Yisrael*’s journeys through the wilderness:

This may be compared to a king whose son was ill, and so he brought him to a distant location for treatment. When they were returning, his father started counting all the journeys, saying to him, “Here we slept, here we were cold, here your head hurt…”

According to the *Midrash Tanchuma*, God named the places where *Benei Yisrael* traveled and encamped during their forty-year trek through the wilderness like a father reminiscing with his son about a difficult, tense journey they took to seek treatment for a serious illness.

The *Imrei Emet* (cited in Rav Shmuel Alter’s *Likutei Batar Likutei*) suggested that the three memories mentioned by the Midrash – “Here we slept, here we were cold, here your head hurt” – were not chosen randomly, but rather allude to specific incidents that took place during *Benei Yisrael*’s travels. “Here we slept” refers to the famous tradition that *Benei Yisrael* slept soundly on the morning of *Matan Torah*, when they were expected to arise early and enthusiastically rush to behold God’s revelation. “Here were we cold” alludes to the attack launched by Amalek, whom Moshe later describes as “*karekha ba-derekh*” – making *Benei Yisrael* “cold” (Devarim 25:18), and whose attack came as a result of *Benei Yisrael*’s lack of faith (as Rashi cites from the Midrash in Shemot 17:8). Finally, the *Imrei Emet* understood “here your head hurt” as an allegorical reference to *Benei Yisrael*’s intellectual “ailments” – the times when they questioned God, such as when they worshipped the golden calf.

Significantly, the Midrash speaks of these events as occurring as part of *Benei Yisrael*’s trip for “treatment,” like an ill patient on his or her way to a doctor to be cured. According to the *Imrei Emet*’s reading, the Midrash points to *Benei Yisrael*’s failures as part of the process of “healing.” Growth and improvement cannot be expected to occur instantaneously or smoothly. The process will include many mistakes and failures, which we must view as opportunities to learn and improve. Even serious failings – such as the sin of the golden calf, in *Benei Yisrael*’s case – are part of the “healing” process, and should never discourage us from persisting in our lifelong effort to become better people and better servants of God.

Tuesday

The Torah in Parashat Masei (33:38), amidst its listing of *Benei Yisrael*’s journeys through the wilderness, makes mention of the event that transpired at Hor Ha’hor – the passing of Aharon. As we read earlier, in Parashat Chukat (20:22-29), God instructed Moshe to bring Aharon up to the mountain, together with Aharon’s son and successor, Elazar, and to take Aharon’s priestly garments and place them on Elazar, formally appointing Elazar *kohen gadol* in his father’s place.

The Midrash (*Bamidbar Rabba* 19:19) observes that the instruction given to Moshe on this occasion – “*Kach et Aharon*” (“Take Aharon”) – is reminiscent of a command given to Moshe much earlier. In Sefer Vayikra (8:2), we read that when the time came for Aharon and his sons to be consecrated as *kohanim*, God told Moshe, “*Kach et Aharon*.” The Midrash comments, “In the same words with which he [Moshe] drew him to the priesthood…he told him to ascend the mountain [where he would die].”

What might be the significance of this parallel?

Rashi, commenting to the aforementioned verse in Sefer Vayikra, cites *Torat Kohanim* as explaining the command “*Kach et Aharon*” to mean “take him with words, and draw him.” It appears that it took a degree of persuasion to convince Aharon to accept the role of *kohen gadol*. The likely explanation can be found in Rashi’s comment later in Sefer Vayikra (9:7), where he writes (citing from *Torat Kohanim*) that when Aharon was to serve as *kohen gadol* for the first time, he was ashamed and afraid. Other Midrashic sources indicate that Aharon was hesitant because of the memory of the sin of the golden calf, in which he played a major role. Aharon saw himself wholly unworthy of serving as *kohen*, and so he was reluctant to assume this distinguished position, such Moshe had to persuade him.

In noting the parallel between the two commands of “*Kach et Aharon*,” the Midrash compares two very different challenges: breaking perceived barriers to become somebody whom we felt we could not become, and accepting defeat, recognizing that we cannot become somebody whom we thought we could and were destined to become. There were two occasions when Aharon was reluctant – at the moment of his greatest achievement and glory, when he became then nation’s high priest, and at the moment of his greatest defeat, when he was to die before reaching the Land of Israel. By comparing these two occasions, the Midrash perhaps teaches us that rising to challenges which seem beyond our reach is just as difficult as accepting that challenges we thought were within our reach aren’t. The emotional effort needed to extend beyond our perceived limits resembles that which is needed to surrender, to forego on dreams and aspirations that we now recognize as being impossible.

We all have a certain image of our potential, of who we can be and what we can do, but at various times in life, this image is proven incorrect. On some occasions we recognize that we are capable of far more than we ever imagined, and on other occasions we recognize that we are capable of less. We need to have the courage to both dream and to forego on our dreams, to boldly strive for ambitious goals and to accept defeat when our goals prove to be unattainable.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Masei presents the law of *arei miklat* – the cities that were designated as places where people who accidentally killed somebody can find refuge from the victim’s relative who might seek revenge. It is clear from both the text as well as the discussions of this law in Masekhet Makkot that the killer is required to flee to an *ir miklat*, as his relocation serves not only the purpose of protection, but also as punishment for his irresponsible, negligent behavior which led to the loss of life. The killer is required to remain in the *ir miklat* until the death of the *kohen gadol* (35:28).

The Mishna (Makkot 12b) addresses the case of somebody who accidentally killed inside an *ir miklat*. Rashi explains that the case is one where a person had relocated in an *ir miklat* because he accidentally killed, and while residing there, he accidentally killed a second time. The Mishna rules that the person in this case must relocate from one section of the city to another. The reason, as Rashi explains, is because he is not permitted to leave the city due to his initial accidental murder, but the second accidental murder requires him to relocate. The solution, then, is for him to move from one neighborhood to another.

By contrast, the Mishna states, if a permanent resident of the *ir miklat* (meaning, a Levi who lived in the city, as the *arei miklat* were inhabited by *Leviyim*)accidentally killed within the city, he must relocate to a different *ir miklat*. As he never killed before, he is, obviously, permitted to leave the city, and therefore, now that he accidentally killed and is required to exile to an *ir miklat*, he must relocate in a different city of refuge.

Rav Yaakov Ettlinger, in his *Arukh La-ner*, addresses a different case – that of a person who visits an *ir miklat*, and during his stay in the city he accidentally kills somebody. This case presents the interesting question as to whether it suffices for this individual to simply remain in the city, or if he must flee to a different *ir miklat*. Intuitively, we might assume that since the *ir miklat* is away from his home, he fulfills his exile obligation by remaining there in the city. Alternatively, however, one could contend that there is an obligation to actually go through the process of moving and relocating after committing an accidental murder. The requirement, according to this perspective, is not to reside in an *ir miklat*, but rather to journeyto an *ir miklat* and then live there. If so, then one who visits an *ir miklat* and accidentally kills would be required to move to a different *ir miklat*.

Rav Ettlinger suggests answering this question based on a *berayta* cited by the Gemara (there in Masekhet Makkot), which is understood by the Rambam (*Hilkhot Rotzei’ach* 7:5) as discussing the opposite case – where a permanent resident of an *ir miklat* accidentally kills when he was away from his city. The killer in this case is permitted to simply go home and reside there as usual. The *berayta* infers this *halakha* from the Torah’s command in Parashat Masei (35:28), “*be-ir* ***miklato*** *yeisheiv*” – “he shall reside **in his city of refuge**” – which could be read as referring to the case of a permanent resident of the city. Although such a person must relocate to a different city if he accidentally killed inside his city, he may reside in his hometown if the accidental murder occurred outside the city. This appears to prove that the requirement is to journey to a city of refuge and remain there, and not necessarily to leave one’s home. Rav Ettlinger thus concludes that in the converse case, of a visitor to an *ir miklat* who accidentally kills inside the city, he must leave and journey to a different city, as the requirement is not fulfilled by remaining in the *ir miklat*, even though the city is far from the killer’s home.

Thursday

In the prophecy read as the *haftara* on the second Shabbat of the “Three Weeks,” Yirmiyahu conveys God’s message condemning *Benei Yisrael* for abandoning God in favor of idols. God warns that even if the people “launder” themselves with various cleaning agents, “your iniquity is an indelible stain before Me” (Yirmiyahu 2:22).

The Gemara cites this verse in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (18a) and notes its implication that once a decree against *Benei Yisrael* has been issued and “sealed,” it cannot be revoked. Yirmiyahu speaks of the ineffectiveness of *Benei Yisrael*’s efforts at “cleansing,” seemingly referring to repentance and prayer, indicating that there is no possibility of reversing a sealed decree of punishment. The Gemara notes a verse later in Sefer Yirmiyahu (4:14) in which the prophet urges the people to “launder” themselves (“*Kabesi mei-ra’a libeikh*”), which clearly implies that to the contrary, repentance is effective in annulling decrees. To reconcile these conflicting verses, the Gemara asserts that before a decree is sealed it is subject to revocation, whereas after it is sealed, nothing can be done to reverse the decision.

As noted already by Abarbanel, in his commentary to this verse, this is a jarring statement – that divine decrees cannot be overturned through repentance. Abarbanel writes that this notion appears to undermine the entire purpose of the prophets’ warnings – which are aimed at urging the people to change course and repent. And, if there is a point where repentance is no longer effective, then people have no reason to try and make an effort to improve.

Indeed, the Gemara itself appears to imply that this rule is not absolute. Several lines later, the Gemara cites this verse from Yirmiyahu and then comments, “Even though it is sealed, it can be repealed.” According to this passage, even a decree described by the prophet as an “indelible stain” can still be revoked. And, the Gemara earlier (16a) cites the teaching of Rabbi Yitzchak that prayer is beneficial for a person even after a decree has been issued.

But then the question arises, why is a sin after the decree described as an “indelible stain”? And is there a way of reconciling these conflicting Talmudic passages, or are they to be viewed as representing different traditions?

One possibility emerges from a comment that appears in between these two statements by the Gemara. As an example of a “sealed” decree which cannot be revoked, the Gemara points to the decree issued against the descendants of Eli, the *kohen gadol* who served at the time of the birth and youth of the prophet Shemuel (Shemuel I 2). The Gemara cites *Amoraim* as commenting that although this decree was sealed, it could have been revoked through Torah study and acts of kindness. Quite possibly, these exceptions apply to all “sealed” decrees – they are deemed permanent with the exception that they can be repealed through involvement in study and kindness.

Another possibility, discussed at length by Rav Avraham Yitzchak Sorotzkin, in his *Rinat Yitzchak* (Sefer Yirmiyahu), is that a “sealed” decree can be eased, but not erased a completely. Yirmiyahu compares such a decree to an indelible stain, but very often, even if a stain is permanent, thorough washing with cleaning agents has the effect of causing it to fade. Perhaps, then, this verse should be understood to mean that although prayer and repentance are beneficial in lessening the severity of the decree, they will not eliminate the decree completely. If so, then repentance is always vital and valuable, though in some instances it will not completely erase guilt.

Rav Sorotzkin also considers a different explanation, based on the distinction famously drawn by the Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (86b) between repentance motivated by fear, and repentance motivated by genuine love of God. The Gemara cites Reish Lakish as teaching that repenting out of fear is effective in transforming one’s willful transgressions into accidental transgressions, whereas repentance driven by love of God has the effect of transforming one’s sins into sources of merit. It would stand to reason, then, that repentance motivated by love of God is effective in annulling decrees even after they are “sealed” – because they retroactively reverse the sin or sins completely. It could therefore be suggested that when the Gemara infers from the verse in Yirmiyahu that “sealed” decrees cannot be repealed, this refers to the limited effect of *teshuva mi-yir’a* – repentance motivated by fear. But if a person repents out of love, it transforms his sins to sources of merit, which naturally has the effect of annulling harsh decrees. (This point is developed by Rav Yigal Ariel, in his work *Erpa Meshuvatam*, pp. 581-585.)

Friday

Yesterday, we noted the verse in Sefer Yirmiyahu (2:22), in the section read as the *haftara* for the second Shabbat of the Three Weeks, in which God warns the people that even if they try “laundering” themselves, “your iniquity is an indelible stain before Me.” As we saw, the Gemara in Masekhet Rosh Hashanah (18a) understood from this verse that harsh decrees issued on account of sin, in some instances, cannot be revoked, even through heartfelt repentance. Other sources, as we discussed, imply otherwise, prompting some discussion as to how to interpret the Gemara’s remark.

Leaving the Gemara’s remark aside, the commentators offer other explanations of this verse. Rashi writes that the prophet refers here specifically to the sin of the golden calf. The Gemara (Sanhedrin 102a) teaches that every punishment brought upon us contains an element of punishment for the golden calf, and thus this sin constitutes an “indelible stain” that can never be completely eliminated, and its effects are felt in each and every generation.

The Radak explains this verse based on the concept developed by the Gemara in Masekhet Yoma (86a) that certain transgressions cannot be forgiven through repentance, and demand some punishment. According to the Radak, then, the prophet here tells the people that they could avoid exile by repenting, though their sins were so grievous that they must be punished, albeit in lesser form, without being exiled from their land. In a similar vein, some have noted that the Gemara points to the sin of *chilul Hashem* (defamation of God’s Name) as an especially grievous offense for which atonement cannot be achieved until death. Yirmiyahu in this chapter condemns the people for abandoning the service of God in favor of idol worship, which constituted a grave *chilul Hashem*, and for this reason repentance would not be effective in achieving atonement. (This point was made by Rav David Soloveitchik, in *Shiurei Rabbeinu Meshulam David Ha’levi al Ha-Torah*.)

Others, however, including Abarbanel and *Metzudat David*, explain this verse much differently, as referring to external, insincere repentance. The analogy to somebody rinsing himself with soap, according to these commentators, is intended to criticize the people of the time for thinking it suffices to make “cosmetic” changes to their behavior, outwardly appearing pious, without a real, substantive transformation. The message conveyed in this verse is that spiritual ills are not like filth on one’s skin which can be removed with water and soap. Improper conduct must be changed, not just given a different external appearance. The prophet here excoriates the people for their tepid response to his call for repentance – their making outward changes without fundamentally changing their behavior.

Indeed, in the very next verse, Yirmiyahu cries, “How can you say: ‘I have not been defiled, I have not followed the *Be’alim*’?!” Apparently, the people had falsely responded to his earlier prophecies by claiming that they had changed – but this was not the case. He thus admonishes the people that *teshuva* must take place at the core of a person’s being, and not just in the way he presents himself to other people. It is about not improving our appearance, but improving our essence, and making the real changes that we need to make.

**THE FIRST DECADE OF SALT ARCHIVES CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/salt-archives.html](http://etzion.org.il/en/salt-surf-little-torah-archives)

**MORE RECENT INSTALLMENTS OF SALT DIVREI TORAH CAN BE FOUND AT:**

[www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files](http://www.etzion.org.il/en/topics/salt-surf-little-torah-weekly-files)