

## **PARSHAT MATOT [Parshanut]**

The opening pasuk of Parshat Matot is simply a 'gold mine' for those who enjoy the study of "parshanut" [the Hebrew word for biblical commentary].

In this week's shiur, we discuss how the classical commentators grappled with the difficulties that arise when studying Bamidbar 30:2.

### **INTRODUCTION**

There are two classic approaches to the study of "parshanim". The simplest is simply to read the pasuk, and then immediately afterward, to read the commentary; thus enhancing one's understanding and appreciation of what the Torah is telling us.

Another approach is to read each pasuk carefully while considering its context, but before reading any commentary - to attempt on your own to consider any problems that arise, and then to contemplate possible answers. Then, after you have thought through all the various possibilities, to read the various commentaries, noting if they raised the same (or similar) questions and/or answers.

Even though the latter approach is quite tedious, it usually leads to a much better appreciation and understanding of the various commentaries.

In the following shiur, we will employ this method, as we study the opening pasuk of Parshat Matot.

### **LOTS OF QUESTIONS**

Let's begin by taking a look at the first pasuk, and then making a list of questions that arise:

"And MOSHE spoke to the Heads of the Tribes of Bnei Yisrael saying: THIS is the 'DAVAR' [translation unclear] that God has commanded: If a man makes a vow or takes an obligation...." (see 32:2-3)

The first obvious question that catches almost everyone's attention relates to the fact that these laws about "nedarim" [vows] are directed specifically to the "rashei ha'matot" [tribal leaders]. In contrast to most all other laws in the Bible, that are directed to the entire nation - for some reason, these laws are different.

Before we attempt to answer this question, let's note some other related questions that come to our attention:

- When did God inform Moshe about these laws? Were they only given now in the fortieth year, or had God told them to Moshe at an earlier time?  
[Note that this set of laws doesn't begin with the classic 'opening pasuk' of 'va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe lay'mor... daber el Bnei Yisrael...' - And God spoke to Moshe saying...]
- Were these laws supposed to be kept 'secret' from the rest of the nation, i.e. were they intended **only** for the 'leaders'; or was everyone supposed to know them?
- Even if these laws were given to Moshe at an earlier time, why are they recorded specifically at this point in Sefer Bamidbar?
- Why does Moshe introduce these laws with the introductory phrase "ZEH HA'DAVAR"? (see 30:2)

With these additional questions in mind, let's return to our opening question.

### **EXCLUSIVITY**

Let's begin by discussing why Moshe presents these laws directly to the tribal leaders, and not to the entire nation.

In Sefer Vayikra, we find several instances where a set of laws are given to a 'select' group. For example, note how the laws of how to offer a sacrifice in Parshat Tzav are given directly to the "kohanim"

(see Vayikra 6:1-2). However, there the reason is obvious, for only the kohanim need to know those laws.

How about these laws concerning "nedarim" in Parshat Matot? There are two possible directions to we can entertain. Either:

1. They are indeed intended to be heard **ONLY** by the tribal leaders - if so, we must attempt to understand why the laws of "nedarim" are special in this regard.
2. The entire nation is supposed to hear these laws - if so, we must explain why the tribal leaders receive them first.

Let's see how we find these two approaches in the classic commentators. Let's begin with Rashi's commentary on 30:2: "He [Moshe] gave honor to the princes to teach them first, then afterward he taught [these laws] to Bnei Yisrael..."

Note how Rashi, in his opening line, assumes that the reader was already bothered by this question; and he immediately provides an answer. He follows the second approach, i.e. the entire nation heard these laws as well - but explains that the princes were taught first, as an honor to the tribal leaders.

This explanation immediately raises another question: How about when all of the other mitzvot were taught - were they also first taught to the "rashei ha'matot", and to the people later on?

Rashi claims that this was indeed the common practice - and proves his claim from a pasuk in Sefer Shmot, that describes what transpired when Moshe came down from Har Sinai with the second Luchot:

"...And how do we know that all of the other mitzvot were taught in this manner? As the pasuk states [when Moshe descended from Har Sinai with the second luchot]: Then Aharon and all of the PRINCES of the congregation approached him [i.e. Moshe], and Moshe spoke to them [re: the laws]. Then AFTERWARD, ALL of BNEI YISRAEL came forward and Moshe COMMANDED them concerning ALL of the laws that God had instructed him on Har Sinai (see Shmot 34:29-32)."

[Note that we've included the entire quote of 34:32 (even though Rashi only quoted half of it). That's because Rashi takes for granted that you know the continuation (which is key to understand his "pirush"). As a rule of thumb - whenever Rashi (or any commentator) quotes another pasuk - look up that pasuk in its entirety and pay careful attention to its context.]

Even though Rashi has established that ALL of the mitzvot were given in this manner (first to the princes and then to the people), our opening question still remains, but now in a different form. If indeed this was that manner that all the laws were transmitted - why does the Torah emphasize this point specifically in regard to the laws of "nedarim"?

Rashi deals with this question as well, explaining that the Torah does this intentionally in order that we infer a specific halacha:

"...And why is this mentioned here? To TEACH us that a vow can be annulled by a SINGLE judge - if he is an EXPERT, otherwise a group of three "hedyotot" [non-experts] is required to annul a vow."

In other words, by informing us that Moshe first gave these laws to the "rashei ha'matot", we can infer that there is something special about their status in regard to these laws of "nedarim" that follow. This allowed Chazal [the Sages] to conclude the special law that an expert judge ["yachid mumche"] can annul such vow on his own.

To strengthen his interpretation, Rashi then raises the possibility of the first approach (i.e. that these laws were given exclusively to the tribal leaders) - in order to refute it:

"... OR - [possibly] Moshe made have told these laws **ONLY** to the tribal leaders [and hence not to all of Bnei Yisrael] - -- it states here ZEH HA'DAVAR (32:2) and it states in regard to SHCHUTEI CHUTZ [offering a sacrifice outside the Mishkan] the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR (see Vayikra 17:2) - just like those laws were directed not only to the priests, but **ALSO** to the entire nation [as it states "speak to Aharon, his sons, and ALL BNEI YISRAEL" (17:2); so too these laws [of NEDARIM were given not only to the princes but also to ALL of Bnei Yisrael.]"

Rashi completes his commentary by adding two additional points concerning why the Torah records how Moshe introduced these laws with the phrase "zeh ha'dvar..."

"We learn from here that Moshe was prophet of a higher level than other prophets could say only: "KOH amar Hashem" - [thus God said] - but only Moshe could state precisely "ZEH HA'DAVAR..." - THIS was the word of God..."

Finally, Rashi concludes this commentary with another "halacha" that Chazal infer from this pasuk concerning HOW (i.e. in what manner) the judge must pronounce the annulment of a vow.

### PSHAT vs. DRASH

As usual, Rashi's commentary anchors itself on several MIDRASHIM (see Sifri 153, and Nedarim 88a). In other words, he explains the pasuk based on statements made by earlier commentators, as recorded in the Midrash.

In contrast, other commentators such as Ibn Ezra, Rashbam, and Ramban will usually anchor their interpretation in what they feel is the simple understanding ["pshat"] of the pasuk - even if that understanding may contradict a Midrash. Nonetheless, they will usually consider the opinion raised by the Midrash with the utmost respect - but they do not automatically accept it.

Let's see how this will help us understand the interpretations advanced by Rashbam and Ramban, as they relate to the topics discussed by Rashi. Afterward, we will discuss Ibn Ezra, Chizkuni and Seforno.

### RASHBAM

Rashbam, clearly bothered by all of the questions that we raised above, approaches all of them from a very different angle. His first consideration is the juxtaposition of these laws to the laws of Tmidim u'Musafim that were found at the end of Parshat Pinchas.

In essence, Rashbam considers this section of laws concerning "nedarim" as a direct continuation of the laws that concluded Parshat Pinchas; and hence, we no longer have a strangely worded introductory pasuk, since it isn't introductory! Carefully follow how he presents his key points:

"I was asked a question in the city of Loshdon, Aniyob (somewhere in France): 'According to pshat - where else do find such a parshiya that begins in this manner, [where Moshe commands mitzvot] but does not begin with VA'YDABER HASHEM EL MOSHE... [informing us first that God told these laws to Moshe?]' -

and this was my [Rashbam's] answer:

Above [at the end of Parshat Pinchas/ 29:39] it states:

"These [korbanot] you shall bring on your holidays in ADDITION to your VOWS [nedarim & nedavot...]"

[This pasuk teaches us that] you must offer all of your voluntary korbanot [that you had taken upon yourself by a **vow**] during one of the three pilgrimage holidays - in order that you do not transgress the commandment of 'keeping a promise on time ["baal t'acher"/ see Mesechet Rosh Ha'shana 4a.]

Therefore, Rashbam maintains that God told Moshe these laws of "nedarim" at the same time that he told him the laws of the korbanot of the holidays in Bamidbar chapters 28->29. Since those laws began with "va'yadaber Hashem...", there is no need to repeat that phrase once again. Instead, the Torah tells us that after Moshe told the people the laws of the korbanot (see 30:1):

"he [Moshe] went to the tribal leaders - WHO are their JUDGES - to tell them to teach these laws concerning NEDARIM to ALL of Bnei Yisrael. When he did this, Moshe told them: God has just commanded me to tell you that everyone must offer the NEDARIM and NEDAVOT during the holidays (see 29:39), therefore should anyone make a vow [neder]... they should not BE LATE in fulfilling it..."

First of all, note how beautifully Rashbam explains the phrase "LO YACHEL DEVARO". Usually, "yachel" is translated - he should not PROFANE (or break his pledge/ JPS). Based on his interpretation, Rashbam translates "yachel" as DELAY, and brings

excellent examples from Breishit 8:10 and Shoftim 3:25.

[Note also how he boldly states that according to pshat, any other translation of "yachel" here is a MISTAKE!]

In summary, Rashbam claims that chapter 30 is simply direct continuation of chapter 29, for one is obligated to fulfill his vows (chapter 30) on the holidays (chapter 29). By recognizing this point, note how Rashbam manages to answer ALL of the questions raised in our introduction, and adds a brilliant translation for the word "yachel" within this context.

If you don't read him carefully (while paying attention to the opening questions), you won't appreciate how clever his pirush is!

[Note as well how the division of chapters makes a 'futile' attempt to solve Rashbam's opening question, by starting chapter 30 with the last pasuk in Parshat Pinchas. [Did you notice this?!] Note how CHAZAL's division according to parshiyot must be correct, i.e. beginning the new topic in 30:2 - BECAUSE 30:1 forms the completion of 28:1-2, and hence SHOULD be the LAST pasuk in chapter 29 instead of the first pasuk in chapter 30.]

### RAMBAN

Ramban begins his commentary dealing with the same question that bothered Rashbam, but offers a very different answer! [Note also how Ramban also takes for granted that the reader has already been bothered by these questions.]

"The pasuk does not tell us first that God told these laws to Moshe... like it says by SHCHUTEI CHUTZ and most all other parshiyot, INSTEAD we are told this at the END of this parshiya! [There we find a summary:] "These are the laws that GOD COMMANDED MOSHE... (see 30:17)"

Note how clever this Ramban is! He answers the question by paying careful attention to the **conclusion** of this unit. [Again, this is a classic example of the comprehensive nature of Ramban's approach.]

Ramban brings a parallel example from SHCHUTEI CHUTZ (see Vayikra 17:1-2), clearly in reaction to Rashi's pirush (which he will soon argue with), even though he doesn't quote Rashi directly! [Ramban expects that the reader of his commentary is already familiar with Rashi, as he himself was!]

But even without this concluding pasuk (i.e. 30:17) Ramban proves that we need not be bothered by the fact that Moshe's instruction to the "rashei ha'matot" is not prefaced by "va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe...". Ramban brings two other examples where commandments by Moshe that begin with ZEH HA'DAVAR are not prefaced with a "va'yadaber Hashem el Moshe...":

[Furthermore], in Parshat Shmini it states ZEH HA'DAVAR (see Vayikra 9:6 and its context) without a preface that God had commanded this, and in relation to keeping the manna [next to the aron] it states ZEH HA'DAVAR... (see Shmot 16:32)"

Once again, we see the comprehensive nature of Ramban's methodology, always considering parallel occurrences of similar phrases or patterns.

After explaining WHO these tribal leaders are (possibly those leaders mentioned later in Bamidbar 34:17-29), Ramban offers an interpretation which is exactly the opposite of Rashi's, claiming that indeed these laws were given intentionally ONLY to the tribal leaders:

"And the reason for Moshe saying these laws to the "rashei ha'matot" - BECAUSE there is no need to teach all of Bnei Yisrael that a father (or husband) can annul the vow of his daughter (or wife). Maybe these laws need to kept 'hidden' so that people will not take their words lightly (should they know that their promises can be annulled). However, the judges and leaders of Israel MUST know these laws..."

Note how Ramban prefers the 'simple pshat' of the pasuk over Chazal's interpretation (i.e. the Sifri quoted by Rashi) - and provides a very good reason that supports his preference.

On the other hand, Ramban does accept the halacha that Chazal infer from these psukim, relating this to the special style that the Torah uses to record this commandment:

"And this does HINT to the MIDRASH CHAZAL that tribal leaders have special privileges in relation to nedarim that a "yachid mumche" (expert) can annul a vow on his own..."

Ramban concludes his commentary by noting, as Rashbam did, the thematic connection to the laws of Tmidim u'Musafim (based on 29:39), nevertheless reaching a different conclusion.

### IBN EZRA

Ibn Ezra also deals with the thematic connection between these laws of "nedarim" and the 'neighboring' topics in Sefer Bamidbar. However, instead of looking 'backward' to the halachik sections of Parshat Pinchas, he looks forward to what transpires in the stories that are recorded in Parshat Matot, i.e. the war against Midyan and the story of Bnei Gad and Reuven (chapters 31 & 32).

"In my opinion, this parshiya was given AFTER the war against MIDYAN (chapter 31), and that is why THAT story is recorded immediately afterward! [Ibn Ezra then brings an example of this style from Bamidbar chapter 12.]

This interpretation is also very creative, for it claims that these laws were actually given in reaction to an event that took place at that time! As you study this Ibn Ezra, note how he also deals with most all of the above questions, yet offers very different answers. Let's take a look:

"Then, (after that battle) the pasuk tells us that Bnei Gad and Reuven came to Moshe and Elazar and the PRINCES and requested [to keep Transjordan / see 32:1-5]. At the conclusion of their discussion, [when the deal is finalized] it states:

"Then Moshe gave instructions [concerning Bnei Gad] to Elazar and Yehoshua and the RASHEI AVOT HA'MATOT I'BNEI YISRAEL" (see 32:28),

after Moshe had just forewarned Bnei Gad u'Reuven that '**whatever you PROMISE - you must keep**' " (see 32:24)..."

Ibn Ezra prefers both this thematic (making and keeping promises) and textual ("rashei ha'matot") parallel to chapter 30, in order to explain the location of this parshiya at this point in Sefer Bamidbar; over Rashbam's and Ramban's parallel to Parshat Pinchas.

Note also how Ibn Ezra agrees with Rashi that the "rashei ha'matot" were supposed to relay these laws to Bnei Yisrael; however he provides a different proof, based on the LAMED in L'BNEI YISRAEL in 30:2!

### CHIZKUNI

Chizkuni opens with yet another creative answer to our original question. He states:

"K'dei l'hachirach et ha'am" - in order to enforce this upon the people"

Like Rashi, he agrees that these laws were indeed intended to be taught to EVERYONE (arguing with Ramban). However, Chizkuni provides a different reason for why the "rashei ha'matot" are singled out. Unlike Rashi who claims that it is an issue of 'honor', he claims that they are taught first, for it is their responsibility to enforce these laws. Chizkuni understands that the Torah wants the leaders to make sure that unnecessary vows are annulled (by those who can), OR that the leaders should make sure that the people keep their promises.

Afterward, Chizkuni continues by quoting from both Ibn Ezra and Rashi.

### SEFORNO

Finally, Seforno adds a very creative explanation for the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR. He claims as follows:

In the original commandment at Har Sinai - "Do not to make an oath in God's Name (and not fulfill it) lest God's Name be desecrated" (see Vayikra 19:12) - one may conclude that this would refer to anyone making a vow.

Here in Parshat Matot, claims Seforno, the Torah makes an exception. That law applies only to males - for they are 'their own bosses' ["b'rshut atzmo"]. However, a wife or a daughter, because she is under the jurisdiction of her father (or husband), should she not fulfill a vow, it would not be such a terrible desecration of God's Name, for the person hearing this vow being made immediately realizes that she may not be able to fulfill it. As the potential "chillul Hashem" is less, the Torah provides a special avenue through which she can annul her vow.

This original interpretation (even though it may sound a bit chauvinist) takes into consideration the details of these laws in relation to a similar law recorded earlier, and explains both the phrase ZEH HA'DAVAR as well as the nature of the specific details of these laws.

### NEXT TIME

Hopefully, our shiur has highlighted how "parshanut" can be better understood by spending a little time first considering possibilities, instead of just reading right away what each one has to say. In other words, if you study Chumash the same way the commentators themselves did (thinking first), you'll have a better chance of appreciating the treasure that they have left us.

shabbat shalom,  
menachem