

Sermon for Parshat Mattot
July 23, 2011; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA
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Good Shabbos. Or, as they say in the new country, Shabbat Shalom.

So, what was with all that Hebrew a few minutes ago? Well, this week's exciting episode is called Mattot, which is Hebrew for "tribes." And while, like most of the world, we are stuck in summer reruns, there's always some fresh insights and perspectives we can take away from this one. So feel free to look those up after services.

For now forget about the title of the parshah, we'll get back to it. It doesn't talk about anything to do with the tribes until near the end. The first aliyah talks entirely about vows, people taking vows for various things before various other people. In truth, it's mostly about women taking vows. There's just one verse about men taking vows, saying that men must keep any vows they make no matter what. That one verse includes the phrase, "or swears an oath to bind his soul with a bond," which anyone following the baseball steroid saga knows that Greg Anderson, the trainer for Barry Bonds, took a bit too literally.

The rest of the aliyah is about women taking vows, when they count, and when they don't have to. Usually that involves her father or husband overhearing it and letting her off the hook, but this is one of those instances where women actually get more attention in the Torah than men.

In the second aliyah, the Big G tells Moses to have the Israelites avenge themselves against the Midianites. Why? I mean, they might come from a kingdom called Median; but you can't call them average, because that's just mean.

A couple of weeks ago, in parshat Ballak, after the prophet Bilaam wrote his greatest hit "Mah Tov" his fellow Midianites sent women to seduce a bunch of the Israelite men. And it worked, until the Big G sent down a massive punishment on those Israelites who indulged, with special effects that were centuries ahead of their time.

So Moses had Pinchas, the recently introduced son of Elazar, grandson of Aaron, lead 12,000 Israelite men against the Midianites. Pinchas, in impaling an Israelite man and Midianite woman who'd snuck into the Tabernacle to make offerings to each other, had already proved that he was a strong leader, perfectly capable of putting a stake in the ground.

The Israelites wiped out all the Midianite men. They wiped out the five Midianite kings, including Zur who had to be tangled with again in the 1980s by "The Last Starfighter," starring Robert Preston. (If you're wondering what that has to do with anything, I watched that movie one Friday night on cable after pretending to be asleep on the couch when everyone was leaving for services. Ah, to be twenty-five again.)

But here's an interesting tidbit. They also slew Bilaam, the songwriter prophet who betrayed Balak a couple weeks ago by not betraying the Israelites. Why was he killed with the rest of the Midianites? Theories abound, but having grown up with a brother who, not just played, but blasted Barry M*nilow all the time, I can only conclude that Pinchas had gotten sick of hearing Mah Tovuv every single morning on the way to work.

So Pinchas and all the Israelites returned with their victory, setting the precedent for simple get-in, get-out operations like those carried out by the United States in the past decade.

Now, the third aliyah makes things interesting. Remember a bit ago, that there was so much more ado about women and their vows, versus just one verse about men's vows, sponsored by Nike: Just do it.

Perhaps Moses noticed that, too, because here he is enraged that the Israelite army killed only the Midianite men. After all, the women were the ones who did all the seducing, and they were spared? Women seem to be getting some extra treatment in this parshah, which is nice, and rare, to hear. So, does Moses insist that all the women be killed, too? No, just the women who actually did the dirty work.

By the way, for those of you who think I made up the notion of corporate sponsorship in our sacred texts just to be funny, look no further than the proof in the Torah service that automobiles and related product placement existed millennia ago. In Beh Ana Rachetz, you have the phrase "v'tashlin mishalin." I didn't make it up to be funny; whoever wrote the Torah service did. (For extra credit, name the three cowboys in the country-western hit that concludes Musaf, Adon Olam.)

The fourth and fifth aliyahs basically inventory the plunder they brought back from the Midianites, and what they did with it, because something in this book of the Torah beside the first chapter needed to live up to the name "Numbers."

Now with the sixth aliyah it's time to be grateful that it's a long year, because if this week was a double parshah with Massei we'd just be starting the third combined aliyah, not the sixth.

But it's also time to remember the name of the parshah. Mattot. Tribes. Two of the tribes, Reuven and Gad, had a huge amount of cattle. They went to Moses and said that the land right here which was conquered looks great for their flocks, so can they just stay here and not cross the Jordan with everyone else?

Moses asked why their brothers, the other tribes, should have to go to war across the Jordan River without them. And why would they dare, in asking for this, discourage the other tribes from going into the Promised Land? Let's face it, two tribes decide to not get their feet wet and the other ten will think that those guys must know something they don't.

Before the Reuvenites and Gaddites even answered, the Big G got angry. He takes away their GPS and says no men who came out of Egypt, age twenty and up, will go into the Promised Land.

The two tribes said, no problem. We'll settle our families here, but send all our men into the Promised Land with the other tribes, and we won't come home until everyone's settled in there. And all of a sudden, for reasons the Torah doesn't explain, half of the tribe of Menasheh decides to stick with them as well.

The seventh aliyah has Moses go into great detail about this agreement, in the rabbinic tradition of if you can say it in just a sentence or two you're not trying hard enough.

There's many interpretations of why Reuven and Gad asked to not cross over. Were they still afraid because of the bad report that ten of the twelve spies had brought back? Did they figure out that the Promised Land was the only spot in the Middle East without oil? Were they lazy? Did they win the title to the lands of Jordan in a poker game?

Various rabbinic scholars have offered all, well, most, of these theories, and others. The Venetian rabbi Moshe Chafetz, in his 1710 Torah commentary, *Melech Machashevet*, suggests that Reuven and Gad saw a shrewd business opportunity and took it. They started out by saying that the land east of the Jordan is good only for servants, servants of Moses who possess cattle. They were portraying the land as not being appealing to most of the tribes, so that they wouldn't want it. So nobody would question or protest about Reuven and Gad taking this land for themselves.

Of course, then the Big G opened negotiations by getting mad at them, and they agreed to send men in to help the other tribes gain the Promised Land itself. You can almost imagine this happening in a tenth floor conference room somewhere.

(By the way, I'll be giving a talk this November, on Shabbat Yom Turkey, about Moshe Chafetz, for the 300th anniversary of his yahrtzeit, about his various rabbinic works from around 1700 Venice, which I've been slowly translating. So climb out of your turkey comas and come listen.)

On the other end of the spectrum, there's the teaching of the long-lost, recently discovered Mishnah tractate *Bava Gump* – the one that, among other things, teaches us that life is like a box of chocolate macaroons... You always know what you're going to get. For those of you unfamiliar with *Bava Gump*, or who don't remember it from when lightning struck me up here last month, it's a recently revealed fourth tractate in the Mishnah book of Damages that goes along with the better-known tractates *Bava Metziah*, *Bava Batra*, and *Bava Kama*.

Those three tractates represent the First Gate, the Middle Gate, and the Last Gate. *Bava Gump*, more of an everyman's tractate in perspective and origin, represents the Service Entrance.

While you've heard of Rabbi Tarfon, of Pirkei Avot fame, Bava Gump prominently features the wisdom of Rabbi Telfon, the Great Communicator. As for this episode with the tribes of Reuven and Gad, Rabbi Telfon had their number and rang them up for their egos.

Telfon suggests that both tribes were secretly interested in building their own glory, in their own kingdoms separate from the other tribes. Indeed, he believes that the tribe of Gad was interested in building up their own, massive kingdom, the Gad Complex. And, while Telfon doesn't say exactly what the tribe of Reuven would do, he points out a similar intention based on a simple interpretation of their name, which spells out R U Vain?

So, why did Reuven and Gad decide that joining the army crossing the Jordan was a good thing? Just because the Big G got angry? Maybe. But they also realized its importance. After all, army in Hebrew is Tzavah. The preposition Mi means from. So, any man who returns home "from the army" is coming back "Mitzvah." If he was promoted to Lieutenant in the field, he returns with a single rank insignia, a Bar Mitzvah.

Or maybe these two tribes just got caught up in the commonly recurring thread throughout the Torah of sibling revelry – The many instances in the first four books of the Torah where siblings got along so well. Consider the numerous precedents.

Psalm 133 begins with the familiar phrase "Hinei Mah Tov Umanayim," popularized in contemporary song without paying royalties to the estate of King David. As almost several of you know, this simple Jewish classic means, "How good it is and pleasant for brothers to dwell together."

This notion of sibling serenity is based on a recurring theme that goes back to the very start of the Torah. The world's first brothers, Cain and Abel, got along better than any siblings before them. They evenly distributed the chores, with one working the land and the other being the hunter. And Cain killed Abel in a fit of jealousy...

Okay, but then there were Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Yaffet. After the flood, Noah got drunk and fell asleep in his tent and nothing else. Ham saw this, and tattled to his more sympathetic brothers. Noah cursed Ham, driving a wedge between the other brothers and Ham, and dooming all pork products to be unkosher...

However, Abraham had two sons, Isaac from his wife Sarah, and Ishmael from her handmaid Hagar. They got along perfectly well, except for the issues their parents had with each other. And that sending away of Hagar and Ishmael. And the issue of who was Abraham's rightful heir...

It got better with Isaac's two sons, Jacob and Esau. Their relationship was defined before their birth, kicking around inside Rebecca like they're playing for the FA Cup. But after they were born they got along great, so close that when Esau was born first Jacob

wouldn't let go of his ankle. Well, at least Jacob didn't do anything rash like steal the birthright...

Fortunately, the women of the Torah bring some sense to things, as one would expect. Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but was tricked into marrying her sister Leah first instead. The sisters shared Jacob's husbandry with grace, as Leah tried to sway Jacob's heart from Rachel by popping out son after son after son (and a daughter). Rachel gave Jacob her handmaid to provide sons on her behalf. Leah, feeling threatened, did the same, providing her own handmaid so she could keep up her lead...

But what about those twelve sons? Surely they all got along great, setting precedent for the tribes that would descend from them. None of them liked Joseph, but that means that they all had that in common. Good thing that none of them had second thoughts about selling Joseph, or pretending he was dead, or in leaving one of them behind as prisoner in Egypt, or in risking Benjamin during the famine. Still, the law of large numbers says that two of them must have gotten along...

All of that was just in Genesis. There's four more books in which there must have been many examples of siblings who got along. At a minimum, the Torah never documents a single instance of one sibling forcing another to endure the music of Barry M*nilow. So that's something.

Of course, of the Five Books of Moses, the last four actually talk about Moses. Who better to prove the point? His brother Aaron eventually became the Kohen Gadol, whose hand salute made him the patriarch of the Vulcan race. His sister Miriam is a figurehead for Jewish women to this day. And none of them ever threw each other into a pit, sold each other into slavery, stole each others' birthrights, or rooted for the Y*nkees.

Sure, they might have treated baby Moses like a basket case, and sent him up the river. But they were doing it for his own good, so he could survive. At least, that's what they told their mother later when they got caught...

Okay, so maybe Reuven and Gad were up to something after all.

And, by the way, the three cowboys in Adon Olam are Billy Reisheet, Billy Tachlit, and Kid Ruchi. Shabbat Shalom.

*(If you liked this, you'll probably like my monthly Jewish humor column, The Beholder's Eye, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/the.beholders.eye>. If you didn't like this, tell people you hate about the column, because they'll probably like it. Oh, and you shouldn't hate them so much. Save it for the Y*nkees.)*