

Sermon for Parshat Mattot  
July 19, 2014; Congregation Sinai, San Jose, CA  
Doug Brook

Why does it matter? People ask that about many things in life. Some people ask that as they sit through services. Not any of you, of course. Some people's kids certainly ask that – about services, religious school, fasting, religious school – and they look to their parents or grandparents or any of you for answers. If you don't have these answers, they won't get them from you. And the chain is broken.

So, why does it matter?

The first aliyah in today's parshah was about the laws of spoken vows. I know, I lost you at "laws." In short, someone who makes a vow – outside of certain circumstances where it can be repealed – is required to fulfill the vow. Sounds like common sense. Why does it matter? Think about the last time someone told you that they would do something, and didn't. Could be a co-worker, a boss, an employee, a contractor, a politician, a weight loss commercial. What did that person's failure to fulfill do to you? How did you feel? If you're shrugging it off, think of another letdown. I'm sure you have bad letdowns somewhere in your past, some of you are Cubs fans. What did their failure to fulfill do to you?

Now, think about the last time you said you'd do something, and didn't.

<pause>

The second aliyah saw the Israelites – still sitting outside the Promised Land – commanded to seek revenge on the Midianites. See, some Midianite women had seduced some Israelite men to sin a couple Torah readings ago. All adult Midianite men were killed. Why does it matter? Four thousand years ago, for a little flagrante delecto all the men were killed. Today, for weeks (or years) of persistent rocket fire, highly targeted surgical strikes – more meticulous than any such actions in the history of mankind – are conducted to inflict the least possible collateral damage. We do it against a group who hides behind women and children – who hide missiles in United Nations Relief Agency schools – sacrificing their own to gain world sympathy. And the strikes are done not for revenge, but for defense. Why does it matter? Because if you read a lot of the media coverage, apparently it doesn't.

The third aliyah saw Moses enraged that the Midianite women were spared. After all, they were the actual delectable culprits! Why does it matter? Think about the last time you took the brunt of someone else's actions. Pinchas had his soldiers spare the women, a traditional chivalry, even though they were the actual doers. But, then again, how often do we shoot the messenger, instead of punishing the person who pulled the strings? Or who pulled the trigger? Why does it matter? When's the last time you were frustrated by the officials throwing out a player from the Niners game, but it wasn't the guy who started it?

The fourth aliyah divides up the spoils of war. Wow, that's pretty boring. No action. Not even any laws to interpret. Why does it possibly matter? When a million dollars of drug money is seized, what happens to it? Does it go to the government? Which one, local/state/federal? Does it pay for incarceration of the perpetrators? Does it pay legal fees? Does it pay for rehabilitation of the drug users? The spoils of war were divided equally between the soldiers and the greater Israelite community. It wasn't kept exclusively by those who seized it. Why does it matter? It's good to share.

The fifth aliyah tells how the officers determined that not a single man, out of twelve thousand, was lost in the war. Why does it matter? In gratitude to the Big G for this miracle, the officers donate to the Tabernacle all the gold jewelry they themselves got in their portions. Think of the precedents this set. Officers, or board members, donating to their organizations above and beyond the norm (not that it was mandatory, but they did it anyway, which is all the more special). Donating to the house of worship in gratitude for theological things, though in this case instead of a building fund they had a tent fund.

The sixth aliyah tells who two of the twelve tribes – Reuven and Gad – wanted to remain on the eastern bank of the Jordan instead of going all the way in to the Promised Land. Moses thought they were just being wimps who didn't want to get their asses or other cattle kicked by the Canaanites and other giants in the Promised Land. They said they thought the land would be better for their cattle. Why does it matter? Think about the last time you weren't sure of someone's intentions. Did you assume the worst? Did you give the benefit of the doubt? Did you do one and then the other? Did you get burned in the end?

Now, think about the last time someone doubted your intentions. How did you feel?

The seventh aliyah features Moses accepting the two tribes' offer to leave their families there, in fortified cities, while the men went with the rest of the Israelites into the Promised Land, and to return to their families and land only once all their brethren were settled. Why does it matter? Moses, the mighty leader, the great and powerful Mose... was wrong. He assumed the worst, and was wrong. He wasn't infallible. But intentions are small consolation if actions don't carry them through. Why does it matter? Was Moses burned in the end? No. The two tribes fulfilled their vow. For more information on vows, see the first aliyah.

The maftir aliyah is a repetition of the final few verses of the seventh aliyah. Why does it matter? To give me another chance to get those few verses right. Why does that matter? As too many of my bnai mitzvah students lament, "none of them will know the difference anyway." I know some of you know the difference. I know the rest of you, who might not know the difference today, someday could. And to those of you, I issue a challenge. Next time you're sitting during the Torah reading, try. If you can read Hebrew, try to catch a mistake I make. I make enough of them – though only for your educational benefit, of course. If you can't read Hebrew that well but know the letters, try to follow along even for the first few words. (It's okay to try someone who leyns slower than I do.) If you don't know how to even find the reading in the book, listen for the page number, open to

it, and get acquainted with the book. Everyone starts somewhere, no matter how far along they are. Or aren't. Take that next step.

Now, I'll go into territory that most weeks here goes uncharted. The haftarah. What is the haftarah? Someone in here doesn't know. It's not a half Torah, though today I would've slept later if the Torah reading was only twice as long as the haftarah. It's a reading from the Prophets, typically one that relates somehow to the Torah reading. (By the way, if you think it just makes the service needlessly longer, consider yourself lucky. Way back when, there was a *third* reading – from the Writings. You've heard of Tanach? That's your Bible, in three parts: Torah, which is Hebrew for Torah. Nevi'im, which is English for Prophets, and Ketuvim, which is Writings. Why did we stop doing the third reading during services? Maybe we were hungry and the Kiddush was getting cold. Maybe because we're not supposed to write on Shabbat. Maybe writing on Shabbat was banned after the reading of the Writings was stopped. (Now you know how my students feel on their end of the year quiz's multiple choice section.)

Today's haftarah was from the beginning of the book of Jeremiah. Though, contrary to popular belief he was not a bullfrog, he was a good friend of ours. He was a prophet and today's haftarah describes the beginning of his prophecy. Jeremiah was reluctant to be a prophet at first. it was not something he aspired to. Why does it matter? It's a trait sometimes shared by the best leaders, because they serve without agenda and without personal motivations weighing against the responsibilities of leading.

Jeremiah speaks of two visions, both of which forewarn of the Big G punishing the Jews for abandoning His ways. But in the end he also passes on reassurance, that the Big G remembers their earlier days, and that evil will befall those who go after that which is His (including the Israelites). In other words, some others will seize Israel in punishment for sin, but the seizers will themselves be punished in the end as Israel is restored.

If you tuned out of all this Big G speaking through a prophet guy stuff, and even if you didn't, why does it matter? "The Jewish people will suffer at the hands of the people from the north." At the time of the haftarah it meant the Babylonskys. But today, rockets are coming from northern Gaza.

Okay, are we ever really being punished by the Big G for being bad? Are we really ever being rewarded? Don't bad things happen to good people, and good things happen to Y\*nkees fans? I can't tell you what to believe. But is the only reason to do good because of reward? Is the only reason to not do bad to avoid punishment? Are we less inclined to do something good just because we're commanded to, or the law says to, or we read it in Miss Manners? Should we be?

So, what does this haftarah have to do with the Torah reading? Nothing, though in true Talmudic fashion I'm sure we could find some anorexically thin string to pull from each to tie together. This haftarah is the first of the three haftarot of affliction, recited on the three Saturdays between the 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz (last Tuesday) and the Ninth of Av. Of course, the Ninth of Av commemorates the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem, the

Inquisition, Kristalnacht, and the mathematical elimination of the 1962 Mets from playoff contention. The 17<sup>th</sup> of Tammuz was the day Jerusalem was surrounded in advance of the Temple's destruction. It was over two thousand years ago, why does it matter? Read a newspaper.

Earlier this year, Rabbi Berkenwald cited the esteemed 20<sup>th</sup> Century rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who famously said, "preach in order to pray." Heschel – who was educated at Humboldt... no, Humboldt University in Berlin – said, "the test of a true sermon is that it can be converted to prayer." Why does it matter?

We're about to put away the Torah and participate in the Musaf service. Putting away the Torah is pretty important – it's the final act in the weekly re-enactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai that is our Torah Service. But Musaf... That's basically an add-on amidah to stand in for the sacrifice that would be done at this point back in the days of the Temple. Why does it matter?

In putting away the Torah, our processional is basically a Psalm praising the Big G. But then, with the Torah in the ark again, buried in those few lines we say silently, we come full circle. We opened the ark quoting Moses from Numbers who when the ark traveled said "Arise, Big G, and let your enemies scatter." Here, silently, we say the very next verse, "return to the many thousands of Israel." Two verses bookending the entire Torah Service. Why does it matter? That, my friends, is good writing. It gives this entire weekly re-enactment of the giving of the Torah at Sinai – the longest running weekly re-enactment in the world, even longer than The Lion King – a beginning and an end.

But more to the point, why does a prayer substituting for sacrifices we used to offer thousands of years ago matter? The "silent" part of the Musaf amidah has just three unique paragraphs. The first speaks of the establishment of Shabbat. It mentions sacrifices as part of it, but there's more to it – "those who savor it will merit life." Those who savor Shabbat, not the sacrifices specifically. Maybe this just means, those who use Shabbat as intended – as a day of rest – will live longer.

The other two paragraphs talk about the symbiotic relationship between the Big G and His people. "The people who sanctify the seventh day will be satisfied and delighted in Your goodness" – people who observe Shabbat will enjoy it! What a concept! And the next paragraph says "may You be blessed with our rest." What a deal! A win-win. All this extra service does is remind us of the entirety of Shabbat, a bit about the sacrifices that were done at this point once, and the symbiotic benefit when we observe Shabbat. The rest of the amidah is the same as in other services. Why does it matter? You can find your own reasons, but one is that it's a quick reminder that we're almost done with the service, you've got the rest of a day of rest ahead of you, so get ready to go enjoy it.

I just showed you how something different matters – to our world today – in every aliyah in today's Torah reading, and its haftarah, and in the specialness of the haftarah, and in the part of the service we're about to do. And I came up with all this in about an hour last

night. (Before sundown, of course.) It's not hard to find how things matter, unless you don't look at all.

Enough about mattering. "You've preached, now how can I pray?" (Or, more to the point, "how can I pray if you won't stop preaching already?")

You're already here. Think about things. Read something in the service that you don't know, or don't know as well, or haven't looked at as attentively lately. If you don't understand any of it, seek to. It can seem like a mountain, I know. But how do we climb a mountain? One step at a time. The first step is to change "why does it matter" from being a rhetorical resignation, to being a question to which you seek an answer.

*(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also 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>.)*