



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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MATOT- MASEI / מטות מסעי

SERMON TITLE:

Don't be a nudnik

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman ז"ל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס ז"ל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

Matot - Masei

Don't be a nudnik

Good Shabbos!

There was once a Rabbi that loved to talk. (Not uncommon! :)

To his defense, he used to say that he's so involved in his sermon that he doesn't realize how much time passes. So his wife came up with a great idea. She gave him a small sucking candy and told him that when the candy dissolves, it's a sign that he should stop.

The new plan took effect and was quite successful until one week he returned to his old habits and talked on and on and on... A little bit of research uncovered that the "candy" didn't dissolve because it was a button.

Did you ever hear of a Rabbi who is willing to give up his pulpit for another rabbi?

In this week's Torah portion, we find an unusual occurrence. In the Parshah, we learn about the laws of Tevilas Keilim, the ritual immersion of vessels in water to render them pure for usage.

The way this works in Judaism is when you buy a new glass or metal utensil or item that was never before used—on sale at Wal-Mart, of course—you have to immerse it in a mikvah, a ritual pool (which could be a river, lake or the ocean, too), to make it spiritually clean. As a matter of fact, there are many places today—mostly in large Orthodox Jewish communities—where there is a mikvah keilim: a mikvah, usually on the premises of a store, that looks like a tiny cistern or wishing well. Shoppers will use this mikvah to immerse their newly-bought pots, pans, cutlery, glassware or metallic kitchen utensils, and, of course, chinaware, and render them fit for use.

So now we come back to this week's Torah portion.

At the beginning of Matos, the verse states: "And Elazer the Kohen said to the men of the army, 'This is the Torah law that G-d commanded Moshe.'" The Torah (Bamidbar 31:23) then proceeds to detail the laws of immersing vessels: "It must, however, [also] be cleansed with sprinkling water"—which Rashi explains to mean, "Waters fit for immersion by a woman in a certain state of ritual impurity; and how much water? Forty se'ah."

(For those of you wondering, a se'ah is a biblical unit of measure, and forty se'ah of water equals about 100 gallons.)

But this immediately raises a question: What's going on here? This story happened at the end of the 40 years during which the Jews lived in the desert. Aaron the High Priest was no longer with them. His son Elazar inherited his place and was currently serving as Kohen Gadol. And here, instead of Moshe Rabbeinu, Elazar the son of Aharon and the nephew of Moshe is teaching Torah laws!

We're accustomed to Moshe always being the one who teaches the laws to the Jewish Nation: "And Moshe said," "And Moshe spoke"—how is it, then, that Elazar the High Priest suddenly becomes the teacher of the Jewish Nation?

Not only that, but the verse itself says that Elazar said to the Jewish Nation, "This is the law of the Torah which G-d commanded Moshe"—so why does Moshe himself not teach the law to the Jewish Nation?

But Rashi comes along to answer this question: "Since Moshe had arrived at a state of anger, he arrived at a state of error."

Several verses before that, we read in the Torah about the "war of Midyan"—how the Jewish Nation battled against the Midyanites and how when they returned from battle, they brought with them a lot of spoils: "The Children of Israel took the Midyanite women and their small children captive, and they plundered all their beasts, livestock, and all their possessions" (Bamidbar 31:9).

And when Moshe saw that they had brought the Midyanite womenfolk with them, he got very angry: "And Moshe became angry with the officers... Moshe said to them, 'Did you allow all the females to live? They were the same ones who were involved with the children of Israel on Bilam's advice to betray G-d over the incident of Peor, resulting in an epidemic among G-d's community!' "

Translation: These are the same women who seduced our people to worship idols—and now you bring them here again?!

On this, Rashi says that since Moshe had gotten angry, it caused him to forget the very laws of immersing vessels that he had taught Elazar himself—and so Elazar, having no choice, had to teach the Jewish Nation these laws.

And Rashi continues and says that this was not the first time this happened to Moshe Rabbeinu.

Everyone knows the famous story of Moshe hitting the rock, in which G-d commanded Moshe to speak to the rock so that it produces water—and Moshe, instead of speaking to it, hit it instead. There, Rashi comments that the same thing happened—Moshe got angry at the Jewish Nation, saying, "Listen, you rebels!" And so, "he hit the rock"—on which Rashi comments, "because of anger, he erred." Only like that can one err. (And there is one more example that Rashi brings, that happened 40 years before that, during the eight days of dedicating the Mishkan.)

Now, every Shabbos, we have the custom of reading the Haftarah after the reading of the Torah. And when it comes to reading the Haftarah, there are different customs between the Ashkenazim and the Sephardim, Jews from Europe and the Middle East. Sometimes the Ashkenazic Haftarah is shorter and the Sephardic one longer, meaning that the Sephardim read a larger portion of the story, and sometimes they read a different Haftarah altogether.

But Chabad also has different Haftarah customs, as you'll find in the Chumashim we have here.

The Rebbe had the custom of reading the Haftarah himself each Shabbos. And the story is told that the Rebbe once read a Haftarah that was different than the one printed in the Chumash. And, of course, obviously no one even thought of pointing it out to the Rebbe. The Rebbe surely knew what he was doing.

In those days, the custom was that the central Chabad yeshivah's administration, which was comprised of several elder Chasidim, would get an audience with the Rebbe once a month to give the Rebbe a report on the students.

At one such occasion, the Rebbe suddenly asked them why no one had spoken up when he had recited a different Haftarah. One of those present said that among Chasidim, it was unheard of to "correct" a Rebbe—that what the Rebbe does is how it's supposed to be.

To which the Rebbe replied: How can you say that when even Moshe Rabbeinu made an error?

So one of the Chasidim wisely replied: With Moshe Rabbeinu, it's written that the reason he erred was because he had gotten angry, but the Rebbe wasn't angry at all...

And now we come to the main point. As you know, for whatever reason, Jews have always greatly loved correcting other people, especially other Jews. There are those who look forward to catching someone else making a mistake, just so they could correct them. In every synagogue, there's always at least one person who just loves correcting the chazzan or the Torah reader.

And it doesn't matter what level of knowledge the Jewish corrector has—all of them, from the most religious to the most secular, love correcting the other and proving to him or her that they know better. Even the age doesn't matter—this behavior is recognized in little Jewish children and full-grown adults alike. Apparently, it's a "contagious disease."

The problem, however, is that it often occurs that when a person enters the synagogue for the first time, and his or her first experience is that someone approaches him and demonstrates why he is wrong, (put on tallis wrong, holding the wrong book etc.) what often happens is that the newcomer feels very embarrassed and thinks twice about coming to shul again—because no one wants to be caught in a situation in which he or she is shown to not know basic Judaism.

So if you want to correct someone in synagogue, wait until after the prayers are over, invite him or her over to your house for lunch, and when they see that you really care for them, then you can be concerned for their spiritual welfare and point out to them gently that they made a mistake.

But to jump on them right there in synagogue and point out to them in front of everyone else what they're doing wrong is a proven prescription to distance them from Judaism.

On the other hand, when a Jewish person walks into a synagogue for the first time, walk over, give him a hearty welcome, give him a seat right next to you, ask him how he's doing, offer him a prayer book and politely help him put on a tallis. Give him the feeling that he's your personal guest who came to honor you at the synagogue with his presence. Recognize him among all the other Jews in shul—and then there's a good chance that he'll come again, and this Jewish soul will be to your credit.

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