

JULY 1, 2013

## Parashat Matot-Masei

### Taking Responsibility

**But if he shall make them null and void (Numbers 30:16)**

**וְאִם הִפְרִיף אֶתְכֶם (במדבר ל:טז)**

In ancient times, a husband could annul an oath taken by his wife that might end up causing her to sin. Yet, if he learned about her oath and still remained silent, her oath would become binding. The husband could not subsequently change his mind and annul the oath. Even if he did try, it would remain in force. In such a case, if she then violated her oath “then he shall bear her iniquity” (30:16). Why would he bear the sin if she broke the oath? Rashi explains that because he caused her to sin, he would bear responsibility: “from this we learn that if one causes his fellow to stumble, he takes his place for all punishments.”

Rashi reminds us that a party in power must take responsibility for the damage caused on its watch. This lesson is especially relevant to Hamas, which must be held accountable for rockets fired into Israel.

The Israel Air Force (IAF) was recently [forced to retaliate](#) after six rockets landed in southern Israel from the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip. The Iron Dome rocket defense system was able to intercept two of the six rockets, and the other four did not cause any harm. Though Islamic Jihad was behind the attacks, Israel holds Hamas accountable because it controls the Gaza Strip. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu warned the Palestinian leadership in the Gaza Strip that Israel would continue to act in self-defense. “We have acted and will continue to act against threats that are near and far,” Netanyahu said. “I believe that Jews must be able to defend themselves, by themselves, and to act with determination against any enemy that tries to harm us.” In response to the attacks, the IAF struck two storage sites and terrorist training camps associated with the attack. Following the attacks, [The Guardian](#) quoted Israel military spokesman Lt. Col Peter Lerner who said, “Last night’s rocket attack is an intolerable act of aggression against Israel and its civilians. Hamas is held accountable for all acts of terrorism deriving from the Gaza Strip.” For more on Hamas, click [here](#).

Rashi reminds us that the party in power bears responsibility for harm it causes, even indirectly. While Hamas itself did not fire the rockets into Israel, it must be held accountable for all acts of violence against the Jewish state. ■

### Shared Animosity

**The five kings of Midian (Numbers 31:8)**

**חֲמִשַּׁת מְלָכֵי מִדְיָן (במדבר לא:ח)**

The Torah describes the successful battle against the Midianite kings and relates that the Israelites “slew the kings of Midian...Evi, and Rekem, and Zur, and Hur, and Reba, the five kings of Midian” (31:8). The text tells us the number of kings by listing them out and then reiterates that there were five kings. The Midrash (Sifrei 157) explains that by numbering them as a group, “The verse teaches us that just as they were united in one attitude [to destroy the Jewish nation], so too they were all equal in the retribution [that they received].” While the kings struggled for power among each-other, they remained united in their desire to harm the Jewish nation.

Like the Midianite kings who found common cause in their desire to harm the Jewish nation, Hamas and Hezbollah are able to overcome their differences about the Syrian civil war in their shared desire to harm the Jewish state.

Hezbollah recently acknowledged its increasingly active role in the Syrian civil war, having sent militant fighters from Lebanon to fight on behalf of Syrian President Bashar al Assad. This has strained relations with Hamas, which backs the rebels fighting to topple the Assad regime. Yet, despite the obvious tensions between the two groups, they remain devoted to a cause that unites them: their animosity for Israel. A spokesman for the Hamas movement Salah Bardawil acknowledged the strains between Hamas and Iran, Hezbollah's state sponsor, and [told](#) the Saudi-owned daily A-Sharq Al-Awsat that "Hamas is uninterested in declaring war on Iran or Hezbollah. Our only direct war is with Israel." Three days after Hamas publicly lambasted Hezbollah for its military involvement in Syria, Bardawil [denied](#) relations between the two movements were cut and instead categorized them as "good," insisting that, "Hezbollah fights the [Israeli] occupation, and our continuous relations with it are based on that principle." That sentiment was also echoed by Hezbollah, as former Hezbollah MP Hassan Hoballah [insisted](#) that Hamas and Hezbollah remain allied over their mutual hatred for Israel. "What brings us together, in terms of our hostility toward the Zionist entity, is greater than a dispute over the [...] situation in Syria," he said.

Despite the growing rift between the rival radical Islamic regimes in Gaza and Lebanon, they, like the Midianite kings, put aside their differences when they focus on their common desire to destroy the Jewish nation. ■

## Changing the Image of Women

### Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah (Numbers 36:11) (במדבר כז:יז) ומלכה ונעה

In Parashat Pinchas (Numbers 27) the five daughters of Zelophehad successfully argued their case before Moses, claiming their deceased father's portion in the Promised Land. In Parshat Masei (chapter 36), their tribal leaders argued for the women to marry within their tribe, to prevent Zelophehad's portion from falling into the hands of a different tribe through marriage. In each case the names of all five women are listed. Yet, the names of the daughters appear in a different order in each chapter. Why? The Talmud (Baba Batra 120a) explains that while in Matot-Masei their names appear in birth order, in Pinchas they are listed in order of their wisdom. Through the order that they appear in the text, the Torah communicates that these women were valued first and foremost for their intellect.

The order in which the daughters of Zelophehad are listed communicates a critical message about the way we should view women as individuals of substance and wisdom in Jewish society. Today, an Israeli photographer is working hard to make sure we have a healthy image of women in modern society, and saving lives in the process.

In 1997, Israeli fashion photographer Adi Barkan met a 15-year-old aspiring model who came to him for a job. Seeing how skinny she was, he took her straight to the hospital, visiting her every night to make sure she was eating, ultimately saving her life. Ten years later, Barkan's friend, 33-year-old model Hila Elmalich, died in his arms as he rushed her to the hospital. The veteran fashion photographer promised himself that he would try and change the way the industry operates. Barkan [lobbied the Israeli government to enact legislation](#) that would change the way women are portrayed in the Israeli media. According to the so-called Photoshop Law, passed in the Knesset last year and which took effect this year, advertising agencies must disclose whether they've digitally altered pictures to make models look thinner. In addition, the new law says women and men cannot be hired for modeling jobs unless a doctor certifies their body mass index—a measure expressing a ratio of weight to height—as no less than 18.5. That means if you're five feet, seven inches tall, you must weigh at least 118 pounds. "I know this campaign can save girls," says Barkan. "Every day I get 10 new requests from young girls to come to the Israeli Center for Changing Eating Habits. Fifty-percent of these girls' image problems come from the media. We need to show a healthier style."

By changing the order of the listing of the daughters of Zelophehad, the Torah changed the image of Jewish women in our minds. Hopefully, Adi Barkan's campaign to change the image of women in the media will take root, giving young women a healthier image to strive for as they grow up. ■