



# Sermon Tidbits

JULY 17, 2017

## Parashat Matot-Masei

### Benefitting from Lessons Learned in Israel

Shall your brothers go to the war... (Numbers 32:6)

האחיכם יבאו למלחמה (במדבר לב:ו)

The many years of collaboration between the United States and Israel has made both countries safer and more secure. Facing near constant threats of terrorism, Israel has developed great expertise in security, which it shares with the United States. Today, airports across the U.S. [implement security techniques developed](#) in Israel. Israel has also [worked with multiple American agencies](#), including the FBI, the New York City Police Department, and the U.S. Capitol Police, teaching them counter-terrorism techniques. American bioterrorism and emergency management experts have traveled to the Jewish state to train, work and participate in live drills to better prepare for possible disasters. The U.S. and Israel will soon begin to [collaborate in the area of cybersecurity](#). America believes in security cooperation with Israel and sends its officials and civil servants to train with Israeli experts because it recognizes that the threats that Israel faces threaten interests here as well—a lesson we can derive from a question asked by Moses in our parashah.

Parashat Matot describes an unanticipated request from the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Manasseh to settle east of the Jordan River, rather than in the Promised Land, because the fertile lands they had already conquered from Midian provided the necessary nutrition for their growing flocks. Moses reacts angrily and accuses them of harboring a selfish attitude that endangered the entire enterprise: “Shall your brothers go to the war and you sit here? And why will you turn away the heart of the children of Israel from going over into the land which the Lord has given them?” (32:6-7) While the tribes ultimately assuaged Moses and promised to join the fight to settle the Land, Moses’ question still rings in our ears today, demanding that we too do our part even as we “sit here” in a different land. Every Jew shares the burden for our national security and well-being, and when Israel is in danger—as it so often is—we understand our obligation to play our part, even when we do not stand on the front lines.

Seventeenth-century Talmudist and Kabbalist Rabbi Jonathan Eybeschutz offered a different interpretation to Moses’ words. Rather than seeing the request as an attack, Moses was simply predicting what would ultimately happen in the future. According to Eybeshchutz, Moses asked the tribes, “Do you think that when the enemy attacks your brothers to the west of Jordan, that he will leave you sitting in your inheritance in peace and tranquility? That is inconceivable! For if you sit silently and do not help...the enemy is likely to attack you as well...” (See *Parparaot L’Torah* vol. 4 p. 241) You cannot hide from the danger of terror and military threats, because eventually, they will spread to you as well. This interpretation emphasizes the importance of working together to fight a common enemy.

Today, the world recognizes the truth of this maxim. So many of the terrorist tactics that threaten Israel, from airplane hijackings to suicide bombings to car rammings, threaten countries worldwide, including the United States. Thus, the investment Americans make in Israel’s security is also an investment in our own safety. As rogue nations develop ballistic missiles capable of traveling great distances, the Arrow 3, which was built to destroy intercontinental missiles, could soon protect not only Israel from Iran, but the United States homeland as well. In fact, after a request from the United States’ Missile Defense Agency, it was announced that the Arrow 3 intercontinental ballistic missile defense system [will be tested in Alaska](#) in 2018. The U.S. gives Israel the critical support that it needs to protect itself from numerous, daily threats. Because America realizes that we cannot stand idly by, not only because Israel needs

our help, but also because the threats Israel faces today also confront the rest of the world, including the United States. This makes our national investment in Israel's defense a very wise choice. ■

## Female Leadership Building the Jewish State

To give the inheritance of Zelophehad (Numbers 36:2)

לתת את נחלת צלפחד (במדבר לו:ב)

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Last week, a rather remarkable [meeting took place](#) in the Knesset Constitution, Law and Justice Committee. Israel's Minister of Justice Ayelet Shaked argued the practice of junior Supreme Court justices agreeing not to apply for Supreme Court president, leaving the most senior justice as the only nominee, robs the Knesset of its legal right to choose the new president. Incumbent Supreme Court President Miriam Naor disagreed, advocating for maintaining the current practice of seniority and arguing that inserting politics into the judicial branch would only serve to coopt the justices to curry political favor. Interestingly, both agreed that whatever the outcome of the debate, the current nominee, Supreme Court Justice Esther Hayut, should serve as the next president. What made this passionate yet civil debate in the Knesset so remarkable was the fact that it was so commonplace: two major female leaders in the government of Israel agreed that another woman should serve as the next president of Israel's Supreme Court. While they disagreed on the selection process, no one gave their gender a second thought. This is as it should be, as women have been serving in critical roles in the Jewish community since the era of Moses in the desert.

Parashat Masei returns to the story of the daughters of Zelophehad, who demanded and received the right to inherit their father's portion of land in the Holy Land. The final chapter of the book of Numbers deals with their inheritance and the manner in which they ensured that their land remained within their tribe. That these women appear not once, but twice in the Torah highlights the importance and historic significance of their request. Why do these women receive such prominence in the biblical text? Author and photographer Marcelo Bendahan [suggests](#) that the women taught the nation that conquering the Land could be achieved in more than one way. Bendahan explains that the commandment of "conquest of the Land" consists of "the refinement and elevation of [one's] 'portion' of the material world, by developing the material resources which have been placed under [one's] control." Traditionally, this conquest was seen as a masculine task, as it requires one to "go to battle with the material world." However, the daughters of Zelophehad challenged this notion. Bendahan writes, "This is the law of life revealed by the daughters of Zelophehad: Not all conquests are achieved by overpowering one's adversary. At times, receptiveness and empathy are equally effective in overcoming the hostility of the 'enemy' and transforming its very nature."

While Bendahan views the notion of "conquering the Land" allegorically, we can apply his principle literally. Creating and building a Jewish state has forced the Jewish people to become warriors, ready and willing to fight to protect and defend our homeland. In their insistence on receiving a portion of the Land, the daughters of Zelophehad taught Moses, and every subsequent generation, that women too must play a role in acquiring the Holy Land, not only by conquest, but also through receptiveness, compassion and empathy.

Modern-day Israel was certainly built with its share of female warriors. Women serve in numerous combat roles in every branch of the Israel Defense Forces. Israel has also long recognized that female leaders' contributions in society, academia and government have been and continue to be critical to the development of a just, compassionate, ethical nation. The recent Knesset meeting is important primarily because Israelis didn't give it a second thought. A female Minister of Justice, sitting next to the current female President of Israel's Supreme Court, both agreed that a woman should serve as the next President, and then engaged in a lively debate about a critical democratic issue. Not a single person noted that the three major players in this debate were female, for a simple reason: in Israel, the fact that women play leading roles in society isn't news. It's daily life. ■

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