

A Messianic Jewish Commentary on the Parshah

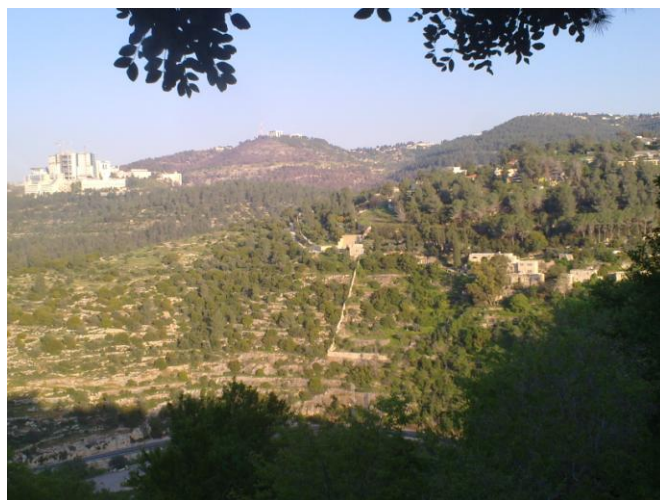
MATOT (Tribes) **מטות**

By Hannah Nesher

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Numbers 30:1(2) – 32:42, Jeremiah 1:1-2:3,
Philippians 3:7-21

Matot **מטות** is the Hebrew word for ‘Tribes’, as in the Tribes (Matot) of Israel. Our family has settled in the Land in an area called ‘Match Yehudah’, which is the ancient territory of the Tribe of Judah. I love living in this beautiful, mountainous region of Israel which belongs to my ancestors, including Yeshua, Lion of the tribe of Judah (Yehudah)!



In this parashah (portion of Scripture), Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes (matot) about the issue of vows. In Hebrew, the word is ‘neder’ **נדר** which denotes a solemn promise to consecrate something to God, or to do something in His service or honor.

Jacob (Yaacov) made such a vow to God when he promised to give back to God a tenth (tithe) of anything God gives to him in exchange for God’s provision and protection on his journey. (Genesis 28:20-22)

We have to be so careful about making promises because God expects us to keep our word. Last night, Liat wanted some time with me, so she asked if I would just sit in the air conditioned room with her today and watch some of her favorite TV shows together. Realizing she needs this special mother-daughter time with me after my accident, and since I’m supposed to be resting anyways, I happily agreed.

“Do you promise??!!” Liat asked. *“No, I won’t promise,”* I replied, *“but I hope we will do this tomorrow as we have planned.”* I know all too well by now to heed my mother’s saying which is so true, *“People plan and God laughs...”*

I would rather not promise than have to break my word. In the end, a mother in distress called and asked Liat to babysit her children today since she was up all night with a sick baby. I’m so glad I didn’t just lightly say, *“Sure, I promise.”* We can plan our way, but God directs our steps.

Oftentimes we make a vow in times of distress or desperation in an attempt to secure Divine help or aid. The challenge is to remember and keep our vow when the trial has passed.

“It is a snare for a man to devote rashly something as holy and afterward to reconsider his vows.” (*nederim*) pl. (Proverbs 20:25)

We must be very careful before uttering a vow:

“Do not be rash with your mouth, and let not your heart utter anything hastily before God...When you make a vow to God, do not delay to pay it; for He has no pleasure in fools. Pay what you have vowed – better not to vow than to vow and not pay.” (Eccl. 5:2, 4,5)

There are many things we can do that classify us as fools; one of them is not keeping our promises. How about keeping our word towards other people? How often do we pledge something and then not follow up? Do we pay what we have promised to pay? Do we do what we have promised to do?

We are instructed in the Bible to keep our word even when it hurts (when it is no longer convenient or pleasant). The person who does so is the one who may abide in God's tabernacle and dwell in His holy hill!

**“Lord, who may abide in your tabernacle?
Who may dwell in Your holy hill?
He who walks uprightly, and works righteousness...**

He who swears (vows, promises) to his own hurt and does not change.” (Psalm 15:4b)

As Believers we should have the best reputation for being people of integrity, people who can be trusted to keep our word. Yeshua said, **‘Let your yes be yes and your no be no.’** (Matthew 5:37)

Moses also instructed the people of Israel in the matter of vows: **“he shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth.”** (Numbers 30:3)

Of course, the reality is that there are times when we simply cannot keep a vow we have vowed, despite our best intentions. We discussed this in the example of Jephtah's vow to sacrifice the first thing that came out of the door of his house when he returned from battle. It turned out to be his one and only daughter! (Judges 11:30-31)¹

Rabbinic consensus is that it is better to break a foolish or dangerous vow than to persist in carrying it out. Interestingly, the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur) which is the holiest day of the Biblical calendar, begins with a prayer, called Kol Nidre (All vows), to break any such vows made over the past year. This prayer began in the time of the Spanish Inquisition when Jews were forced to take on Christian vows against their will.

This shows us that God takes vows seriously and so should we; but we must also be aware and accept that there are exceptions when a wrong vow must unfortunately be broken. In understanding our humanity, God allows us the grace to do so, but this should be the exception rather than the rule.

¹ Haftarat Chukkat www.voiceforisrael.net/parashah

Related to but slightly different than a vow is a bond, called an isur . This is usually a negative vow – a self-imposed pledge to abstain from something normally permissible. An example of this is the Nazarite vow – a pledge to abstain from grape products such as wine. Shimshon (Samson), for instance, was a lifetime Nazarite, as was John the Baptist (Luke 1:15) – men chosen to be completely consecrated to the Lord from birth to death.

The Hebrew word for bond, { isur , אסור } is closely related to the word { asur אסור } which means ‘forbidden’. These words also carry the connotation of being bound, chained, or imprisoned. A prisoner is an ‘asir’. אסיר Therefore, we can see that we are bound by even our voluntary choice to make something permissible as ‘asur’ (forbidden).

There may be things in our lives that other would consider completely allowable but God may put it on our heart to abstain from it for some specific reason. Other things may be permissible but probably not for our greatest good if we want to be fully consecrated to the Lord, such as watching impure movies, playing violent video games, or reading questionable fiction. Our standard must be the word of God, not the world.

We see this in the life of Paul, where he voluntarily abstained from things permitted in order to avoid causing offense to those weaker in faith. Paul also joined four other men who can taken a vow (neder) to prove that he himself walked orderly according to the Jews and faithfully kept the Torah. (Acts 21:23-24)

Waging War with Wise Counsel

In chapter 31:1-4 of Numbers, God commands Moses to war against the Midianites. The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ²“Avenge the people of Israel on the Midianites. Afterwards you shall be gathered to your people.” ³ So Moses spoke to the people, saying, “Arm men from among you for the war, that they may go against Midian to execute the LORD's vengeance on Midian. ⁴ You shall send a thousand from each of the tribes of Israel to the war.”

We have discussed the spiritual warfare necessary to battle against this seducing Midianite spirit in Parashah Balak. The Israelites slew Balaam with a sword in this war with Midian (Numbers 31:8). Obviously, then we can assume that Balaam remained with King Balak and the Midianites as their advisor. Verse 16 confirms that it was the counsel of Balaam that caused Israel to sin.

When making plans, or in the midst of some kind of battle, we so desperately need wise counsel. **“Plans are established by counsel; by wise counsel wage war.”** (Prov. 20:18)

However, we must be very careful from whom we are taking advice. Before I became a Believer, I took advice and sought for guidance with the problems in my life from secular counselors, some of whom probably had even worse problems than me in their lives! Also, like many people in the world today, at times I checked my Zodiac horoscope or went to psychics.

However, after someone pointed out this Scripture from the Book of Psalms (Tehillim), I stopped taking counsel from the ungodly. **“Blessed is the man (or woman) who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly....but his delight is in the Torah of Adonai, and in His Torah he mediates day and night.”** (Psalm 1:1-2)

Once I came to faith, I decided to have the Torah and Holy Spirit as my counselor and guide: **For this God is our God forever and ever: He will be our guide even unto death.”** (Psalm 48:14)

Of course we can receive wise counsel from godly people and there is “safety in a multitude of counselors”, but we must first bring every issue to the Lord.

When battling to obtain our citizenship here in the Land, an intercessor from America phoned me with a strategy. She suggested we perform a prophetic act whereby we would plant copies of our documents in the Land itself next to a young fig tree in the back yard of a Zionist family. Each day, we would water it, quoting God’s promises in the Bible to bring us back to this Land.

This wise counsel brought us to a place of victory in the warfare to possess a place in this Land. Halleluyah. Praise God for wise counsel from Spirit filled people who hear from the Lord. However, the wrong advice can bring a person down quickly! Solomon, son of King David, listened to his peers rather than the elders and caused a civil war. He lost most of the Kingdom of Israel as a result.

Balaam’s counsel brought destruction upon all Israel. Who are we listening to? Some people claim to be loyal to the God of Israel but are they truly undivided in their heart or are they playing both sides of the fence like Balaam? We shall know them by their fruit.

Settling on the East Side of the Jordan

Chapter 32 of the book of Numbers deals with an issue concerning the tribes of Reuben (meaning ‘see – a son’) and Gad. (And by the way, for those who claim that we cannot say the word ‘God’ because Gad was also the name of a false God, here we see that it was also the name of a son of Jacob, a tribe of Israel.) These two tribes desired to settle on the East side of the Jordan.

Moses is sparked to anger: **“Shall your brethren go to war and you just sit here?!”** (Numbers 23:6) Perhaps the Jewish people who choose to remain in exile, could ask themselves the same question. We often hear about terrorist attacks and the threat of war against Israel. These are our brethren, precious Jewish men, women, and children who risk their lives on a daily basis to settle and defend this Land.



Avi with Israeli police and soldiers

And yes, there are problems living in Israel – serious ones! Yes, there are giants in the Land, some from our very own people and leaders – but how can we sit in relative comfort, security, and luxury, while our Jewish brothers and sisters are risking their lives in a daily war with Islamic terrorists and Muslim suicide bombers? It is a question that I believe as fellow Israelites we need to seriously consider!

Moses compared these tribes' request to that of the ten spies who were afraid to possess the Land and who caused all of Israel, save Joshua and Caleb, to lose heart. They brought upon all Israel the judgment of God.

But was this really their true intent? It seems that Moses was just jumping to conclusions; he was pre-judging their motives as being evil and fearing the worst. Why? It seems to me that Reuven & Gad's request just pushed Moses' buttons – it sparked an emotional reaction based on a negative event that had caused Moses trauma in the past.

We can do the same thing. Someone does something or says something that just reminds us of a past trauma or negative event and the association sparks a negative emotion – fear or anger; whereas what the person intended was in no way, shape or form the same thing at all.

Moses says (we can assume with a raised volume of voice tone), *“You're sinful men just like your fathers!”* (paraphrase Numbers 32:14) We need to watch out for these kinds of knee-jerk emotional reactions and give ourselves the time to hear someone out before automatically judging them.

The leaders of these tribes clear themselves by pledging to go over to war with the rest of the tribes and only to return to their inheritance east of the Jordan when the land has been conquered. (Numbers 32:19)

This pledge of Reuven and Gad teaches us an important lesson. They were not only concerned with their own interests, but cared equally about the welfare of the entire nation of Israel. As Believers, we are all different and distinct parts of one Body of which Yeshua is the head. If one part of the Body hurts or is suffering, the whole body feels the pain. So, too, should we care about the needs and well-being of the whole community of Believers, not just our own little group or family!

“Let each of you look out not only for his own interest, but also for the interests of others.”
(Phillipians 2:4)

Male and Female He Created Them...

Another thing I love about this story is how the men insisted on leaving their women and children on the East side of the Jordan, in relative comfort and safety while the men went out to war. They didn't hide behind their apron strings. I believe that by nature, God has made men to be warriors and women nurturers. While we each have distinctive personalities, generally, God has placed in the hearts of men a desire to conquer the enemy along with a desire to protect the weak and vulnerable, especially women and children.

How warped things have become when abusive men instead turn their warrior nature on the very women and children that they are meant to protect. How twisted the original plan of God when women desire to engage in warfare and choose to extinguish life through abortion rather than give birth to life.

One of the ways that we return to healing is just be allowing ourselves to be who God created us to be. If we are men, we can be fully masculine without apology²; if women, fully feminine. We need not apologize for our gender characteristics – that’s why we need each other.

What this story also shows us is that we are all distinct and unique; we are not all carbon copies of one another – cast into one big anonymous mold. Even among the twelve tribes of Israel – here were two tribes that felt they didn’t belong on the West side of the Jordan. Even though criticized and misunderstood, they held their ground in the confidence of knowing what they wanted. They wanted to dwell on the East side of the Jordan.

Some of us are people like that. Everyone else is crossing over one way and we want to go the opposite direction. We seem to be salmon swimming perpetually upstream. Not everyone can be content to follow the crowd and that’s okay. Some people are just meant to live ‘East of Jordan’. We will never succeed until we accept who we are – who God created us to be.

Moses, after hearing them out, agrees to their request, but holds them to their word, that they will **do according to every word that proceeded from their mouth**. (Numbers 32:24) Reuven and Gad promise to keep their word, acknowledging that to break a promise is a serious offense against God.

HAFTARAT MATOT

Jeremiah 1:1-2:3

In searching for a connection between this week’s parashah and haftorah (prophetic) portions, it seems that a common theme emerges - the need to be true to who God created us to be. God created Jeremiah to become a prophet of Israel.

Matot is the first of three **haftorat of rebuke** preceding Tisha B’av, the 9th day of the month of Av, usually occurring some time in August. This day is the memorial of the destruction of the first and second temples as well as many catastrophic events relating to the history of the Jewish people, even including contemporary times. The expulsion of the Israeli settlers from Gaza, for example, also began on Tisha B’av.

I will discuss this day in more detail in the next Torah studies, but this week begins a time period of serious examination of our relationship with God. Traditionally, no simchas (occasions to rejoice such as a wedding or otherwise joyous celebration) are booked at this time. Neither are important decisions to be made until after Tisha B’av. Someone not familiar with Jewish history and culture may consider this foolish superstition; however a close examination of Tisha B’av gives cause to take this ominous day seriously.

² See books *Wild At Heart*, by John Eldredge, *Captivating* by John & Stasi Eldredge.

This week's parashah and haftarah also deal with the issue of 'consecration' unto the Lord. In the parashah, Moses was instructed to teach the people about consecrating themselves to the Lord through vows and bonds. In the haftarah, Jeremiah is consecrated unto the Lord as a prophet.

The word of the Lord יהוה came to Jeremiah (Yirmiyah) saying, "Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee." (Jeremiah 1:5)

The Hebrew word for 'knew' comes from the root yadah ידע . Besides its common meaning, this same word can also denote sexual intimacy in marriage , as in Gen. 4:1 : "***Now Adam knew {yadah ידע } Eve (Chavah), his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain...***"

God also used this word in declaring that He has known ידע Abraham (Gen. 18:19).
God knew Jeremiah and God knew Abraham. But does God know us?

It seems to me that we place an inordinate emphasis on whether or not we and others 'know God' or 'know the Lord Yeshua.' But an equally vital question seems to be,
"*Does He know me?*"

Yeshua said that many would say to Him, "*Lord, Lord,*" These are people who have prophesied in Yeshua's name, cast out demons in His name, and done many wonders in His name. And yet He will declare to them, "***I never knew {yadah ידע } you, depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness (who do not practice Torah).***" (Matthew 7:21-23).

Keep in mind, these are not 'pew sitters'; these are people in active ministry. They believe they 'know the Lord'; and yet He does not know them. And they will not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. We need to know that we know that He knows us. Only those who do the will of our Father in heaven will enter His Kingdom.

Some called Jeremiah 'The Weeping Prophet' because of his terrible grief over the sins of Israel. In the 9th chapter of Jeremiah, he speaks of weeping day and night over his people, adulterers, idolaters and liars.

"For they proceed from evil to evil, and *they do not know Me...Through deceit they refuse to know Me,* says the Lord יהוה. (Jer. 9:3,6)

The highest glory we can experience is to understand and know the Infinite Divine Presence of God: "**But let him who glories glory in this, that *he understands and knows Me.***" (Jer. 9:24)

What a wonderful privilege to know God and be known by Him. Isn't this the deepest cry of our hearts – to be truly 'know and 'be known' by another? Amazingly, we can have this intimate relationship with the Almighty God, creator of the Heavens and the Earth when we come into covenant with Him through His son, Yeshua, consecrating ourselves to Him, striving to walk in truth, and to do His will.

Although Jeremiah was born into a priestly family around 650 B.C.E., God had already called him and set him apart for service as a prophet to the nations even before his development in his mother's womb. In Hebrew, the word for womb is Rechem רחם which is also the root for the word rachem, רחם meaning mercy, pity, or compassion.

The Hebrew reveals that God created the woman's womb to be a place of mercy for the unborn child. Even while we are as yet unformed in our mother's womb, God loves us and has compassion on us. Wow!

Jeremiah was a child of destiny; he didn't go looking for his calling – the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah. To be set apart for special service to the Lord is the true meaning of the word, Kadosh, קדש which is usually translated as 'holy'.

Notice that God didn't look at Jeremiah's childhood or adolescence to see what kind of a track record he had to determine if he was fit to be a prophet or not. This was God's plan for Jeremiah before he was even born – a pre-natal destiny. How sad to think of all the lives God had a destiny for that were aborted instead. Our world has been cheated of the blessing their lives would have been.

Although timid by nature, after his calling Jeremiah proclaimed the Divine message of repentance fearlessly to a nation that did not want to listen. Jeremiah lived a sacrificial life – one man against a nation.

Usually when we think of destiny and calling, we are so eager – *“Here I am, Lord, send me”*. We sing, *“I have a destiny, I know I shall fulfill...”* We long to be used of God in a greater way; but we need to keep in mind that fulfilling our destiny may involve suffering. We can certainly see this in the lives of many that God called and set apart in the Bible.

Jeremiah's message to Israel always held out the promise of restoration after judgment. His message to us as well may be that although our circumstances may look utterly beyond hope, even in our darkest moments, even when we utterly despair of a future for our life, we may still turn to God in faith and trust, calling Him Abba Father, clinging to the promise of His eternal love for us, His people, the sheep of His pasture.

Jeremiah responds to the call as did Moses – with shrinking self-distrust. *“Who am I to do anything for God?”* Jeremiah says, *“I can't speak for You, God, I am a youth.”* (Jer. 1:6)

We could insert our own self-doubts and excuses into the blanks: *“I can't _____, I am a _____.* What would it be that disqualifies us? I am... a woman... a mother... an immigrant... a certain ethnic or racial or socio-economic group...? God does not choose those who are perfectly strong and wise and have it all together; rather He chooses the weak and the foolish to confound the wise – so that He receives the glory; that we may not boast in ourselves.

God says to Jeremiah, *“Don't say that!”* Lately, I hear myself saying this to people when they tell me why they can't _____. *“Don't say that!”* We need to declare *“I can do all things through*

the Messiah who strengthens me. I am well able. I am strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. With God all things are possible!”

God commands Jeremiah to go wherever He sends him and to speak whatever He commands him to speak. Then the Lord touched his mouth. Jeremiah's mouth was purified just as was Isaiah's when the angel touched his mouth with a burning coal. These prophets spoke not from themselves, but of Divine inspiration. The message they would bring would not be their own message, but God's: **Behold, I have put My words in thy mouth;** (Jer. 1:9)



The Lord then gives Jeremiah the vision of an almond tree. We totally miss the meaning of this vision unless we see it in the Hebrew. An almond tree in Hebrew is a 'shaked' שָׁקֵד ; to be watchful and awake is shoked שָׁקֵד . Therefore God is using a clever word play in this vision, of an almond tree {shaked' שָׁקֵד } saying, **"I watch {shoked שָׁקֵד } over My word to perform it.** (Jer. 1:12).

This is a photo of an almond tree in bloom at the Biblical Zoo in Jerusalem.

God exhorts Jeremiah to guard against fear: **"Do not be afraid of them ...for I am with thee to deliver thee..."** (Jeremiah 1:8)

Over and over again in Scripture, God tells us, **"Fear not, for I am with you. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."** (Isaiah 41:10)

One day, while running errands with my children, I said, *"Oh dear, I'm afraid we may be locked out."* To which Avi-ad, then five years old, replied, *"Don't be afraid, Mom, God is with us."* A little later I heard him humming a little tune that God is with us always and so we don't need to be afraid. Out of the mouths of babes! Parenting can be a frustrating, exhausting, and at times totally overwhelming task, but precious moments like these make it all worthwhile – that our children are learning to trust in God. We need not be afraid, even when something (or someone) comes against us, for God promises to be with us to deliver us. The battle is the Lord's. We need only stand firm in faith.

Haftarat Matot ends with the words,

"Israel is the Lord's hallowed שָׁקֵד portion, His first-fruits of the increase. All that devour him shall be held guilty, evil shall come upon them, says the Lord." (Jer. 2:3)

In Hebrew, Israel is kadosh קדש (holy, set apart) to the Lord. This is a word of warning to all the enemies of Israel: in the heavenly courts, they are pronounced guilty and they will be judged accordingly.

Christian or not, people cannot be anti-Semitic in any way, shape or form and still expect to see God's full goodness upon their lives. For God has promised the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Israel), **"I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you."** (Gen. 12:3)

All the nations are God's harvest, but Israel is set apart for God, just as the first-fruits are set apart for the priest (cohen). In Exodus 4:21 Israel is called God's firstborn son. All those who join the commonwealth of Israel through the Jewish Messiah are grafted into the olive tree and share an equal place in the covenants of promise with the God of Israel (Eph. 2:11-13)

The prophet Isaiah also warned the nations regarding their position towards Israel, **"For the nation and kingdom which will not serve you shall perish, and those nations shall be utterly ruined."** (Isa. 60:12)

Just as we must accept ourselves and others as God created us, accepting God's destiny for our lives, we must also accept the destiny of Israel as 'kadosh' – set apart for special service for the Lord.

SHABBAT SHALOM!
Love Hannah

About the Author:

Hannah Nesher grew up in an Orthodox Jewish home and received her education in a religious Hebrew school in Canada. During a crisis pregnancy, she came to know Jesus (Yeshua) as her Messiah and Savior. She now lives in Israel with her children and grandchildren, teaching Christians about the Jewish roots of their faith.



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“For out of Zion shall go forth the Torah, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.” (Isaiah 2:3)

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