

Parasha Matot-Masei (Tribes-Journey)
July 26, 2003/26 Tammuz 5763

Torah: Num. 30:2-36:13

Haftarah: Jer. 2:4-28, 3:1-4(Ash.), 4:1-2(Seph.)

Brit Chadashah: Phil. 3:12-16, James 4:1-12

This week's Parasha is a double portion. Parasha Matot, meaning Tribes, is from Numbers 30:2-32:42, while Masei (Journey) goes from Numbers 33:1-36:13. When Matot and Masei are read together, the Haftarah for Parasha Masei is used, which is Jeremiah 2:4-28, and Jeremiah 3:1-4 for Ashkenazic readers and 4:1-2 for those who are Sephardic. The Brit Chadashah portion is Philippians 3:12-16 and James 4:1-12.

Parasha Matot deals with the making and annulling of vows, the surprise Jewish attack against the Midianites, and the request after the war of the tribes of Reuben and Gad for their portion of the Land of Israel to be east of the Jordan River. Moshe objects to this, but they receive permission after stating that they will be advance troops in case of an attack. Thus, Matot describes part of the Biblical boundaries of Israel, the Land promised by G-d to His Chosen People.

Israel's borders continue to be established in Parasha Masei, which lists each stop along the way on the journey through the desert. G-d commands Moshe to have the people drive out the inhabitants and destroy all of their idols. The final part of the portion deals with Cities of Refuge, where someone who accidentally commits murder can seek asylum. I have chosen to read Numbers 33:52-55 from this Parasha, where G-d is being very clear in his directions to Moshe:

⁵² drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. ⁵³ Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. ⁵⁴ Distribute the land by lot, according to your clans. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one. Whatever falls to them by lot will be theirs. Distribute it according to your ancestral tribes.

NUMBERS 33:55 " `But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. (NIV)

G-d is commanding His people to forsake all other gods but the One True G-d of Israel. In order to do this, they must remove all who are living in the Land, lest there remain the risk that their souls and spirits be contaminated by the idolatry practiced by these people. However, ultimately, the Israelites are not obedient.

As we read in the Haftarah, G-d is speaking about His anger at His people for turning against Him and worshipping the idols of the nations around them.

JEREMIAH 2:7 I brought you into a fertile land
to eat its fruit and rich produce.
But you came and defiled my land
and made my inheritance detestable.

JEREMIAH 2:8 The priests did not ask,
'Where is the LORD?'
Those who deal with the law did not know me;
the leaders rebelled against me.
The prophets prophesied by Baal,
following worthless idols. (NIV)

G-d led His people into Israel, the Promised Land, to thrive. But what did they do when they got there? They rebelled and fell into idolatry, instead of following the G-d who led them there in the first place.

As believers in G-d, we face a choice every day of our lives. We can choose to follow Him, or we can choose to cave in to the world around us. As it says in the Brit Chadashah:

JAMES 4:4 You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God. (NIV)

Following G-d means making a lot of sacrifices. It affects every aspect of our lives: personally, professionally, and socially. We are constantly surrounded by a culture that can be hostile towards our values; where we have to defend our faith against attacks when our viewpoints are not politically correct or when refraining from certain activities casts suspicion and anger upon us.

As Messianic believers, we also have challenges which are unique to our situation of living between two worlds. It causes us to defend our faith to both the Christian and Jewish communities: our Torah lifestyle is often misunderstood by our Christian brothers and sisters as unnecessary legalism, while in the mainstream Jewish community we are chastised for our faith in Messiah.

With all of these sacrifices, why do we still need to put G-d first? Look at the Israelites. Their disobedience may have given them pleasure, but it did not last long. There were consequences. Just like when we indulge in worldly pleasures for short-term benefit or gratification.

Living for G-d first does not mean that we cannot enjoy the life that this world offers us. We don't add commandments to the Bible that are not there, such as avoiding certain kinds of music, and there is nothing wrong with having interests and hobbies, or even finding satisfaction in our earthly jobs. However, putting anything of this world above your personal relationship with G-d is tantamount to

idolatry. To put it simply: if G-d is not at the center of your life, then something else is.

What is number one in your life?