

Discourse 32

*“Vayedaber Moshe el Roshei HaMatot...
Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes...”*

Delivered on Shabbat Parshat Matot-Masei,
Shabbat Mevarchim Menachem-Av, 5723
By the grace of *HaShem*, blessed is He,

1.

The verse states,¹³⁵⁸ “Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes (*Roshei HaMatot*-ראשי המטות) of the children of Israel, saying: This is the thing that *HaShem*-יהו"ה has commanded: If a man makes a vow to *HaShem*-יהו"ה etc.” The Alter Rebbe (whose hundred and fiftieth *Hilulah* from the day of his [physical] passing from this world is this year), questions the precise wording of this verse, in his discourse¹³⁵⁹ (found in the manuscript of the Mittler Rebbe, which includes the glosses of the Tzemach Tzedek).¹³⁶⁰ Namely, that we must understand the difference between the word “tribes-*Shevatim*-שבטים” and the word “tribes-*Matot*-מטות” and why here, in the Torah

¹³⁵⁸ Numbers 30:2-3

¹³⁵⁹ The discourse by the same title as this from the year 5562 (subsequently printed in Maamarei Admor HaZaken 5562 Vol. 1, p. 237 and on), and with additional glosses in Ohr HaTorah, Matot, p. 1,294 and on (and with additions p. 41 and on); Also see the discourse by the same title of the year 5676 (Sefer HaMaamarim 5676 p. 131 and on).

¹³⁶⁰ See the opening words (*Petach Davar*) to the book Maamarei Admor HaZaken there.

portion about vows, they specifically are called “tribes-*Matot*-מטות.”

He explains that both (“*Shevatim*-שבטים” and “*Matot*-מטות”) mean the branches of a tree.¹³⁶¹ However, the difference is that when the branches are attached to the body of the tree, derive vitality from it, are soft and extend upward in their growth from below toward the head of the tree, they are called “*Shevatim*-שבטים.”

In contrast, the word “*Matot*-מטות” refers to after the branch has been severed from the tree and no longer derives vitality from it, at which time it is harder, denser, and coarser than a [living] branch. It then is made into a staff upon which to lean, through its head being below upon the earth.

The same is so of the Jewish people. That is, the “tribes-*Shevatim*-שבטים” are compared to branches that are attached to the body of the tree, [the tree] being the matter of our forefathers, who are the Supernal Chariot (*Merkavah*)¹³⁶² for the emotional qualities (*Midot*) of the world of Emanation (*Atzilut*). [Avraham is called],¹³⁶³ “Avraham who loved me,” and is the Chariot (*Merkavah*) for Kindness-*Chessed* of the world of Emanation (*Atzilut*) and Yitzchak is the Chariot (*Merkavah*) for Might-*Gevurah* etc.¹³⁶⁴

Now, just as a “branch-*Shevet*-שבט” is soft and grows upward, this likewise is so of the love and fear of *HaShem*-יהוה of the twelve tribes-*Shevatim*-שבטים, which is in a way of

¹³⁶¹ The root “*Shevet*-שבט” and “*Mateh*-מטה” both mean a “staff” (of wood).

¹³⁶² Midrash Bereishit Rabba 47:6; 82:6

¹³⁶³ Isaiah 41:8

¹³⁶⁴ See Shaarei Orah of Rabbi Yosef Gikatilla, translated as Gates of Light, Gate Five (*Tiferet*).

divestment from physicality and coarseness etc., being that they derive vitality from the qualities of our forefathers. Thus, their growth is upward to their root in the qualities of our forefathers. In contrast, after the twelve tribes divide into many particular souls, each soul is then called a “staff-*Mateh*-מטה,” and is analogous to a physical [wooden] staff (*Mateh*-מטה) that is very physical and [hard] etc.

Within each soul as it is individually, this is the difference between how the soul is above in the Garden of Eden (*Gan Eden*) and how it is below once it has descended to manifest in the body, at which time it becomes more physical etc., to the point that even its love and fear of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, is coarse and dense etc. This being so, we must understand what the ultimate intent of this descent is, which is for the sake of ascent.

2.

However, as known, our sages, of blessed memory, stated,¹³⁶⁵ “One hour in repentance and good deeds in this world is more precious than all the life of the coming world (*Olam HaBa*).” That is, the repentant (*Baalei Teshuvah*) are greater than the perfectly righteous (*Tzaddikim Gemurim*).¹³⁶⁶

However, at first glance, this is not understood. For, based on the above, when the soul was first in its root above, it was in the aspect of a “*Shevet*-שבט,” meaning, a branch of the Supernal Tree, in which all the souls are on the level of the

¹³⁶⁵ Mishnah Avot 4:17

¹³⁶⁶ Talmud Bavli, Brachot 34b; Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:4

perfectly righteous (*Tzaddikim Gemurim*), but upon its descent to manifest in the material body and come into the aspect of a “*Mateh*-מטה,” it then is on the level of the repentant (*Baalei Teshuvah*). However, how can it be that through repentance (*Teshuvah*) it ascends to a level that is higher than its previous level?

The explanation is as Zohar states,¹³⁶⁷ that the superiority of the repentant (*Baalei Teshuvah*), over and above the perfectly righteous (*Tzaddikim Gemurim*), is that they “are drawn to Him with greater strength.” This is the meaning of the verse,¹³⁶⁸ “They cried out to *HaShem*-יהו"ה in their distress.”

That is, this crying out stems from the bitterness of something standing in opposition. This refers to the bitterness of the Godly soul, which cannot tolerate the dark coarseness of the body, which is drawn to worldly pleasures, such as the lust in eating etc. It is because of this cry etc., that “the repentant (*Baalei Teshuvah*) are drawn to Him with greater strength.”

The explanation is that even though there is a negative element to physical food, in that it brings about darkness by causing a person to become gross and physical etc., there nevertheless is also good mingled into it. The good in it adds strength to the Godly soul, to be embittered by the darkness and return with a great cry to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He. Through this, the Godly soul ascends even higher than it was before its descent to below.

(That is, the Alter Rebbe’s intention here is to explain how [the soul] comes to ascend even higher than the aspect of

¹³⁶⁷ Zohar I 129b

¹³⁶⁸ Psalms 107:6; 107:28

a “branch-*Shevet* שבט.”) This is because the good in the food (before it fell in the shattering [of the vessels (*Shevirat HaKeilim*)] is rooted much higher than the soul of man, as known about the matter of [the kings of Edom (*Tohu*) who reigned] “before a king reigned over the children of Israel.”¹³⁶⁹ It is for this reason that the food enlivens man.¹³⁷⁰ This is why additional adhesion to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, comes about through the cry from the darkness, which specifically is caused by the negative element in the food.

This is also the meaning of the teaching,¹³⁷¹ “Sanctify yourself in what is permissible to you,” for which there are two explanations. The first explanation¹³⁷² is as understood literally, that one must remove his desire for physical food and not eat to satisfy his lust etc., which also applies to all other worldly lusts. Rather, his desire should be solely for *HaShem*-יהו"ה alone.

This is the matter of repentance (*Teshuvah*), the matter of which is returning to a state of “face to face” (*Panim b’Panim*). This is analogous to two people, who though they are standing close to each other, but since they are standing back-to-back (*Achor b’Achor*), one facing east and the other facing west, they are in the ultimate state of distance from each other. However if they then turn to face each other face to face

¹³⁶⁹ Genesis 36:31; See Zohar III (Idra Rabbaa) 128a; Etz Chayim, Shaar HaKlallim, Ch. 1; Shaar 8 (Shaar Drushei Nekudot), Ch. 4; Likkutei Torah of the Arizal to Genesis 36:31 (Vayishlach); Also see Shaar HaYichud of the Mittler Rebbe, translated as The Gate of Unity, Ch. 20 & Ch. 46.

¹³⁷⁰ See Likkutei Torah of the Arizal, Deuteronomy 8:3 (Eikev); Likkutei Torah, Matot 81b and on.

¹³⁷¹ See Sifrei to Deuteronomy 14:21; Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 20a; Tanya, Likkutei Amarim, Ch. 27 & Ch. 30.

¹³⁷² The second explanation will be stated later, at the end of chapter three.

(*Panim b'Panim*), they come to be in the ultimate state of closeness.

The same is understood [here], that when the innerness of the desire (*Pnimityut HaRatzon*) is invested in something, which is why he does it with great desire and speaks about it with much strength and vitality, so much so, that it is recognizable that the innerness of his heart is invested in it, [and to pointed out, the discourse is precise in mentioning all three garments of the soul, these being action (*Ma'aseh*), speech (*Dibur*), and thought (*Machshavah*)], then this is called the “face” (*Panim*-פנים).

However, if he does not desire it with the innerness of his heart (*Pnimityut HaLev*), but only in a cold way, in that he speaks about it in a weak voice [without vitality], it is recognizable that he only desires it with the externality of his heart (*Chitzoniyut HaLev*). [Here too the Alter Rebbe mentions all three garments of thought (*Machshavah*), speech (*Dibur*), and action (*Ma'aseh*).] This is called the “backside” (*Achorayim*).

Now, as this relates to our service of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, when one's desires are invested in worldly matters, but matters of Torah and prayer are only done in a cold way, “like the commandments of men done by rote,”¹³⁷³ about this the verse states,¹³⁷⁴ “They have turned the back of their necks-Oreph-עורף to Me, and not their faces.” In other words, even when they turn to *HaShem*-יהו"ה in prayer, this only is in a secondary way, and only is the backside (*Achorayim*) (“the

¹³⁷³ Isaiah 29:13; See Tanya, Likkutei Amarim, Ch. 39 (53b).

¹³⁷⁴ Jeremiah 2:27

back of the neck-*Oreph*-עורף) of their soul. In contrast, in regard to worldly matters they [turn and invest] the aspect of their “faces” (*Panim*-פנים).

Nevertheless, when they turn the aspect of their “face” (*Panim*-פנים) to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, the verse states,¹³⁷⁵ “Return to Me and I will return to you, says *HaShem*-יהו"ה.” That is, the aspect of the Supernal “face” (*Panim*-פנים) is drawn down to them, this being the revelation of the Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה, which, in general, is the aspect of the limitless light of the Unlimited One, *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, that surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*).

This then, is the meaning of the verse,¹³⁷⁶ “They cried out to *HaShem*-יהו"ה etc.” That is, through the cry [brought about by one’s anguish when he contemplates that physical things cause him to become gross and physical etc., he removes his desire for physical food and no longer eats to satisfy his lust etc., [but instead] turns his face to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, so that his desire is fully directed to *HaShem*-יהו"ה alone etc.]

Through this he thereby draws down the revelation of the Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, this being the aspect of the Supernal Face (*Panim HaElyonim*), which is the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה that surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*).

¹³⁷⁵ Malachi 3:7

¹³⁷⁶ Psalms 107:6; 107:28

Now, all the above applies when the Godly soul is in a state of anguish because of the darkness and concealment, causing him to cry out etc. However, if he has become so gross and physical that his Godly soul has become even darker, to the point that he does not even sense his distance, which should cause him to cry out, the Torah has another Godly solution for this, by which he can leave the darkness. This is the matter of vows, about which the verse states, “If a man makes a vow to *HaShem*-יהו"ה.” That is, through vows one also can come to the revelation of the Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He.

The explanation is that the matter of vows, is that one hinges the matter that he swore on, to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, by stating, “I take an oath that this meat is considered for me to be like a burnt offering, like a peace offering, like [sacrificial] fires etc.”¹³⁷⁷ meaning that “just as a burnt offering is consecrated to *Hashem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, and is forbidden to be eaten by a non-priest, like the fat portions of the peace offerings etc., so likewise, this meat shall be consecrated to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, and will be removed and separated from me, in that I will not consume it.” That is, he elevates it to be holy and separate from himself etc. However, we must understand how this could be, that he takes something mundane and make it holy, just by saying so.

The explanation is that this is because the root of the meat is higher than himself, (as mentioned in chapter two). Thus, the matter of the oath is that he mentions the praise of the

¹³⁷⁷ See Talmud Bavli, Nedarim 13a

thing, as it is above in its root, to the point that relative to himself, it is considered holy.

Therefore, by elevating the food he thereby lowers and humbles himself. For, in the order of the chaining down of the worlds (*Seder Hishtalshelut*), man is much higher than the food, being that [a human being, who is a] speaker (*Medaber*) is incomparably greater and separately elevated from plants (*Tzome'ach*) and animals (*Chai*).

This being so, when he elevates the food, in that relative to him it is holy and is forbidden for him to derive benefit from, for him this is a very great lowering and humbling. However, through this lowering he reaches an even higher level. This is as our sages, of blessed memory, stated,¹³⁷⁸ “Whosoever humbles himself, the Holy One, blessed is He, elevates him.”

That is, he reaches the aspect of the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, that surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*), in which the spiritual and the physical are equal before Him. For, the matter of the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה that surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*) is the aspect of the Circles-*Iggulim*, and from the perspective of the Circles-*Iggulim*, there is no “above” and “below.”

Thus, to the degree that one is in the utmost state of humility, to that degree he comes close to the base of the Circle-*Iggul*, which transcends the parameters of the chaining down (*Hishtalshelut*) of “above” and “below.” This is the meaning of “the Holy One, blessed is He elevates him,” (referring to the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, that surrounds and

¹³⁷⁸ Talmud Bavli, Eruvin 13b

transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*), that is, the Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה).

This is as the verse states,¹³⁷⁹ “For though *HaShem*-יהו"ה is exalted, He sees the lowly,” and,¹³⁸⁰ “I abide in exaltedness and holiness, but I am with the despondent and lowly of spirit.” In other words, He sees the lowly specifically because He is high and exalted in the aspect of Circles-*Iggulim* etc.

This then, is the second explanation of [the teaching],¹³⁸¹ “Sanctify yourself in what is permissible to you.” This is unlike the first explanation, in which he has the ability to elevate the food by **eating it** (not to satisfy his lusts, but) for the sake of Heaven etc., (being that he perceives the goodness in it etc.).

Rather, this is in a way that he sees himself as being on the lowest level, such that he is incapable of elevating the food, even by eating it in the proper way. On the contrary, the food causes him to become gross and physical etc. He therefore must separate himself from it and **not eat it**. That is, he elevates the food to be holy and separately transcendent from himself, and being that in doing so, he lowers and humbles himself etc., therefore, through this, “the Holy One, blessed is He, elevates him.”

¹³⁷⁹ Psalms 138:6

¹³⁸⁰ Isaiah 57:15

¹³⁸¹ See Sifrei to Deuteronomy 14:21; Talmud Bavli, Yevamot 20a; Tanya, Likkutei Amarim, Ch. 27 & Ch. 30.

4.

With the above in mind, we can understand why the Torah portion about vows is specifically in the Torah portion of “*Matot*-מטות,” (rather than “*Shevatim*-שבטים”). For, the matter of vows specifically applies upon the descent of the soul to below, and in this itself, when it is in the lowest level, where it is not capable of refining (*Birur*) the physical food, so that it will not cause him to become gross and physical etc. He therefore must remove and separate it from himself, through the matter of vows.

When the souls of Jewish people are in this state they are called “staffs-*Matot*-מטות.” In contrast, this is not so when the souls are above, in a way of being unified in a state of adhesion to the limitless light of the Unlimited One, *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, at which time they are called “a branch-*Shevet*-שבט.” They similarly are called this when they are below, but in a state and level of having the ability to refine the physical food, in which case the matter of vows is unnecessary.

5.

This then, is the meaning of the verse,¹³⁸² “Moshe spoke to the heads of the tribes (*Roshei HaMatot*-ראשי המטות) of the children of Israel, saying: This is the thing that *HaShem*-יהו"ה has commanded.” The explanation is that as known, our sages, of blessed memory, taught¹³⁸³ that the primary difference

¹³⁸² Numbers 30:2-3

¹³⁸³ See Sifri and Rashi to Numbers 30:2; See Likkutei Torah, Matot 82a

between Moshe and the other prophets, is that they prophesied with the word “Like this-*Koh*-כה,” whereas Moshe prophesied with the word “This-*Zeh*-זה.”

The word “Like this-*Koh*-כה” is only the matter of likeness and similarity. By way of analogy, this is like a wondrous matter that transcends grasp, but since he wants his fellow to understand it, he shows him something similar by which to understand the wondrous matter, and says, “Like this-*Koh*-כה,” meaning that the wondrous matter is somewhat like and comparable to this thing. However, if he shows him the wondrous thing itself, then he will not say, “Like this-*Koh*-כה,” but instead says “This-*Zeh*-זה thing,” without any need for analogy.

This is also the difference between the prophecy of the other prophets, which was in the aspect of “Like this-*Koh*-כה,” as the verse states,¹³⁸⁴ “Through the prophets I am likened,” and similarly,¹³⁸⁵ “I will speak with him in a dream,” compared to the prophecy of Moshe, who prophesied all his prophesies with the word “This-*Zeh*-זה is the thing etc.,” as the verse states,¹³⁸⁶ “Mouth to mouth do I speak to him, in clear vision and not in riddles.”

Therefore, when Moshe wanted to show all the souls of the Jewish people the Essential Self of *HaShem*’s-יהו"ה Godliness, called “This is the thing-*Zeh HaDavar*-זה הדבר,” as it essentially is, he said, “This is the thing (*Zeh HaDavar*- זה הדבר) that *HaShem*-יהו"ה has commanded,” specifying the

¹³⁸⁴ Hosea 12:11

¹³⁸⁵ Numbers 12:6

¹³⁸⁶ Numbers 12:8

Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה, rather than His titles God-*Elohi*"m-אלהי"ם or Lord-*Adona*"y-אדנ"י, which are called "Like this-*Koh*-כה," are only in a way of likeness and similarity, and are the aspect of the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, that fills all worlds (*Memaleh Kol Almin*), but specifically the Name *HaShem*-יהו"ה, this being the Essential Self of the Singular Preexistent Intrinsic and Unlimited One, blessed is He, which is called "This-*Zeh*-זה," and is the aspect of the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, that surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*), and he then specifically called them "staffs-*Matot*-מטות."

For, it specifically is upon the descent of the soul to below, into the darkness and concealment of the body, to the point that the matter of vows is necessary etc., that we thereby reach the aspect of the limitless light of the Unlimited One, *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, which surrounds and transcends all worlds (*Sovev Kol Almin*).

In contrast, this is not so when they are in the aspect of "branches-*Shevatim*-שבטים." For, even though the forefathers are the Supernal Chariot (*Merkavah*), nonetheless, they only are the Chariot (*Merkavah*) for the light of *HaShem*-יהו"ה that fills all worlds (*Memaleh Kol Almin*).

Now, this matter is also drawn down through the study of Torah. That is, when the Jewish people study the laws in the Mishnah, that this is forbidden and this is permissible etc., it is in regard to them too that Moshe speaks of (as he received the Torah from Sinai),¹³⁸⁷ and in a way of "This is the thing-*Zeh HaDavar*-זה הדבר," and in a manner in which,¹³⁸⁸ "Whosoever

¹³⁸⁷ Avot 1:1

¹³⁸⁸ Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu Rabba, Ch. 18; Yalkut Shimoni Eichah, Remez 1,034

reads and studies [Torah], the Holy One, blessed is He, reads and studies opposite him,” as it states,¹³⁸⁹ “I have placed My words in your mouth,” and,¹³⁹⁰ “Let my tongue repeat Your word,” in that the Torah is “Your word,” only that my tongue should repeat “like a person who repeats after the one who reads,”¹³⁹¹ and like the matter of “the Indwelling Presence of *HaShem*-יהו"ה, the *Shechinah*, speaks through the throat of Moshe.”¹³⁹² This will suffice for the understanding.¹³⁹³

6.

Now, we should add that even though it was explained above, that the elevation caused below when the Jewish people specifically are in a state of being “staffs-*Matot*-מטות,” is the matter of repentance (*Teshuvah*), this should not be in a way that,¹³⁹⁴ “They cried out to *HaShem*-יהו"ה in their distress.” Rather, the repentance and return (*Teshuvah*) to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He, is with joy, just as fulfilling all *mitzvot* must be with joy (as Rambam states).¹³⁹⁵ How much more is this certainly so of the *mitzvah* of repenting and returning to *HaShem*-יהו"ה, blessed is He. This refers to the matter of Upper

¹³⁸⁹ Isaiah 51:16

¹³⁹⁰ Psalms 119:172

¹³⁹¹ See Talmud Bavli, Sukkah 38b; See Torah Ohr Yitro 67b; Likkutei Torah, Shir HaShirim 44b, and elsewhere.

¹³⁹² See Zohar III 232a (Ra'aya Mehemna); 7a; 265a; Midrash Shemot Rabba 3:15; Vayikra Rabba 2:3; Mechilta Yitro 18:19; Ohr Torah of the Rav, the Maggid of Mezhritch, Section 123; Tanya, Likkutei Amarim, Ch. 34.

¹³⁹³ This concludes the content of the discourse of the Alter Rebbe mentioned earlier.

¹³⁹⁴ Psalms 107:6; 107:28

¹³⁹⁵ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Lulav 8:15

Repentance (*Teshuvah Ila'ah*) which is specifically with joy (*Simchah*).¹³⁹⁶

This likewise is the matter of the repentance (*Teshuvah*) of Shabbat-שבת, which shares the same letters as the word “return-*Tasheiv*-תשב,”¹³⁹⁷ and on Shabbat, there must be the matter of joy (*Simchah*), as Sifri states on the verse,¹³⁹⁸ “On your joyous occasions” that “This refers to the days of Shabbat.”

This is because, in truth, we already are on the level and state of righteous *Tzaddikim*, being that, as the verse states,¹³⁹⁹ “Your nation is all righteous *Tzaddikim*.” Thus, the matter of the repentance (*Teshuvah*) is [only] in a way of “bringing the righteous to return in *Teshuvah*,”¹⁴⁰⁰ this being the matter of Moshiach, whose coming is brought about by being preceded by serving *HaShem*-יהוה, blessed is He, in repentance and returning (*Teshuvah*) to Him, as the Torah promises,¹⁴⁰¹ “The Jewish people will repent and will be immediately redeemed!”

¹³⁹⁶ Tanya, Iggeret HaTeshuvah, Ch. 11 (110b and on).

¹³⁹⁷ Torat Nathan of Rabbi Nathan Shapiro (Tzfat 5645; Yerushalayim 5731 (52a)), toward the end; Tanya, Iggeret HaTeshuvah, Ch. 10.

¹³⁹⁸ Numbers 10:10

¹³⁹⁹ Isaiah 60:21; See Talmud Bavli, Sanhedrin, 10:1

¹⁴⁰⁰ See Zohar III (Ra'aya Mehemna) 143b; Likkutei Torah, Shmini Atzeret 92b; Shir HaShirim 50b; *Hemshech* 5672 Ch. 222 (Vol. 2 p. 618); Discourse entitled “*v'Heinif*” and discourse entitled “*Vayomer Lo Yohonatan*” 5711, translated in The Teachings of The Rebbe 5711, Discourse 7 and Discourse 8 (Sefer HaMaamarim 5711, p., 63 and on; p. 65 and on).

¹⁴⁰¹ Mishneh Torah, Hilchot Teshuvah 7:5