

Mattos-Massey

How To Be a Spiritual Being, a Mensch

Today we read two *Torah* portions, *Mattos* and *Massey*. They are composed of many disparate elements, but there is a common theme which runs through them, and that theme is, what is required of us in order to become a mensch? Or, how can we become a spiritual people?

The *Torah* portion *Mattos* opens by teaching us about vows. It tells us that if a person takes a vow, he should not desecrate his word. In Judaism we are to keep our word. Our word is something not to be taken lightly. If we make a promise, we should keep it. The *Torah* portion *Mattos* speaks specifically about vows. We know that vows can be annulled in special circumstances, but not by the person himself. We know that if a person makes a vow, and he realizes afterwards that it was a rash vow, he can go before a rabbinical court and the court can annul that vow. That is based upon a sentence in the *Book of Vayikra*, chapter 5, verse 4, which says that "if a person shall utter with his lips either to do good or to do bad, all which *Ha'Adam*, a man, should utter." By saying *Ha'Adam*, the rabbis explain the text means that only when a person acts like a man can he really be held to keep his oath. For example, if someone, because he did not like certain policies of the Jewish Community Center, would say, "From now on I vow that I am never going to enter the JCC," but later he remembers that he has several business appointments there which are crucial for his livelihood, he has made a rash oath. He acknowledges to himself that if he would have remembered that he had these meetings at the JCC, he would not have made this oath. Therefore, he came before a rabbinic court, and the court can say that, since at the time you made this oath you did not take into account these crucial business meetings, you can now enter the JCC because at the time you made this oath, you did not act as *Ha'Adam*. You did not act as a whole man because a whole man knows the consequences of his acts. Therefore, you are free now from this vow. No person, however, can unilaterally get himself out of a vow. Either he has to go before a court or get the person to whom he made this vow to release him. No one can get himself out of a business contract unless his business partners want to let him out of the contract. In Judaism, we are all supposed to be

Ha'Adam, a mentsch. A *mentsch* is not somebody who just satisfies his physical nature. He is also a spiritual being and to be a spiritual being, this requires certain characteristics and if a person does not have these characteristics, he cannot be *Ha'Adam, a mentsch*. One of these characteristics is that a person always realizes that his acts have consequences, but there are other requirements to be *Ha'Adam*, to be a spiritual human being. Another of them is to realize that we are unique and special and that only we can provide certain input and achieve certain goals in this world, that G-d is counting on each of us to do certain things, and we count because we are counted on.

In the *Torah* portion *Massey* we learn about the Jewish people's journey. They made 42 stops from the time they left Egypt to the time they entered the land of Israel 40 years later. The most important requirement listed in this *Torah* portion in order to be a *mentsch* is to realize that we are on a spiritual journey, that we have to continually improve. We do not live just in the here and now. People who live just in the present usually are miserable. They cannot deal and cope with life because they have no vision of where they are going. They have no goals to work for. We all need goals to work for, and these goals have to be goals that are just not selfish goals, but goals that are good for our family, our community, and the world generally.

The second most important requirement in order to be a *mentsch* is to realize that our spiritual journey has its ups and downs. We don't just go forward; we sometimes go backwards and when we have fallen backwards, we must redouble our efforts to go forward. For example, on the journey the Jewish people took when they left Egypt 'til they entered the land of Israel, they fell back eight stops before they were able to go forward again. A spiritual journey is never-ending, and it has many twists and turns. Sometimes it falters and we fall back, but we should still always get up and persist.

In order to be a spiritual being, to be a *mentsch*, we have to assume responsibility for ourselves and for others. If we do not assume responsibility for ourselves and for others, we cannot be a *mentsch*. When we shirk our responsibilities, we become ashamed as Adam and Eve did after they sinned, and we cannot function then as proper human beings. We lose our

spirituality. In Judaism, we say that in order to become complete, we have to assume responsibility. That's why a wedding is such a happy and joyous event in Judaism because the man and the woman are assuming responsibility for each other. This is what is required of us if we want to be a mensch. We have to assume responsibility and realize that acts have consequences.

In the *Torah* portion *Mattos* we learn about war with Midion. We learn about this war primarily because Bilam was killed in this war. Bilam, who tried to curse the Jewish people but couldn't give that terrible advice to Balak to enslave the Jewish people in the sin of licentious idol worship. He thought that he could entrap them and cause the Jewish people to destroy themselves. He almost succeeded. Now he suffered the consequences of this act. We have to realize that we are responsible for what we do. We have to realize that if we want to be happy, we have to assume responsibility for ourselves and for others. This does not mean that G-d does not forgive us if sometimes we slip and do not do the right thing. As long as we recognize that we have not done the right thing, G-d will forgive us. A spiritual being also knows that G-d counts on us and G-d cares for us and, also, forgives us. G-d looks at all the circumstances. That is why we learn in the *Torah* portion *Massei* about the cities of refuge. If a person killed somebody, whether or not he was punished depended upon how he killed someone. If he killed with complete malice aforethought or if it were just an accident but contributory negligence was involved or it was not at all his fault had to be determined. G-d is compassionate, Who looks at all the circumstances. In order to be a spiritual being, we have to believe in a compassionate G-d Who believes that we can improve. We must assume responsibility for our self-improvement. Self-improvement is something that we know we have to do and can do.

In the *Torah* portion *Mattos* we learn, too, how the Tribes of Gad and Reuven did not want to go into Israel, but wanted to stay in Transjordan. Moshe only agreed to this if they would be willing to assume responsibility for the rest of the Jewish people by providing the shock troops for the land of Canaan for all the tribes of Israel. They were also told that they had to improve themselves by providing proper facilities for their children, not just for their flocks.

In these two *Torah* portions we learn that in order to be a *mentsch*, we, also, have to realize that we are not chained by biology, that our biology is not our fate, that we can overcome our biological urges to live decent and good lives. We are not supposed to squash our biological urges but what we are supposed is to use them in the right way. The *Torah* portion *Massei* emphasizes this by teaching us that, although the daughters of Tzafchad could inherit land in the land of Israel, they had to marry within their own tribe; otherwise, the land would be alienated from their tribe and would go over to another tribe. This could cause terrible conflict between the tribes. It was right that they should get married and fulfill their biological urges, but they couldn't marry anybody they wanted. They had to stay within their own tribe. We can control our biological urges by fulfilling them in the proper way. This is the reason why we have the *kosher* laws, *Shabbos*, *Taharas mishpocha*, etc. The idea of holiness starts with the idea that we can limit our urges, that we do not have to give in to them in a limitless way. We are not animals. We are human beings. Yes, we should use our biological urges, but we should use them in the right way. That is what *Halacha* means, the right way. To be a *mentsch*, we must want to be holy. Our spiritual nature demands it. Of course, Judaism always recognizes that life comes first. Life is even ahead of holiness, and we must break *Shabbos* or the *kosher* laws or *Yom Kippur* for the sake of saving it.

This *Torah* portion teaches us what it is that is required of us to be a spiritual being, a *mentsch*. First of all, each of us must realize that we are special and unique and that G-d is counting on us to do the tasks only we can do. Secondly, we also have to realize that we have to assume responsibility for others and for ourselves if we are to fulfill our potential. Judaism says that the only way we can truly fulfill our potential is by assuming responsibility for ourselves or for others. We also constantly have to improve ourselves and always realize that acts have consequences. We also must know that we can limit our biological urges, that we are not chained by them, that they have not power to compel us to violate moral norms. If we realize these things, then we can truly live as a *mentsch*, a spiritual being. Life for all of us is a spiritual journey. This spiritual journey is going to have its ups and downs, but if we will always realize that we are spiritual beings because G-d counts on us and always assume responsibil-

ity and try to improve ourselves and realize that acts have consequences, and that we can control our biological urges, we will be able successfully to navigate this spiritual journey to become menschen.

I am reminded of the story they tell about a cowboy who was herding some cattle. He had a baseball cap on. A man came over and said, "How can you have a baseball cap on? Why don't you have on a cowboy hat?" The guy said, "Because I don't want people to think I'm a truck driver. People should not be looked at as stereotypes. We are not interchangeable. Each of us has a special mission to perform and each of us is on a spiritual journey. We can all, by assuming responsibility for ourselves and others, by realizing that we can improve, by realizing that we can control our biological urges, can become a *mensch*. And if we all become a *mensch*, then we can create a just society so the *Mashiach* will come quickly in our day. Amen.