

# BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

*"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger ..."* John 6:35

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## NUMBERS 28-32

### CHAPTERS 28 & 29

Once again, the LORD tells Moses to command the children of Israel regarding the daily and Sabbath offerings, New Moon offerings, and the offerings of the seven appointed festivals. These are not to be forgotten when they cross over to the Land of Promise as they are the means of drawing near to the LORD and staying within Covenant relationship with Him.

We won't go into these in any detail here as they have largely been covered before. Of course, the offerings are no longer required, nor are they possible without a Temple, but each continues to have spiritual significance. For example, the daily offering – in the morning and at twilight – can be seen as a call to us to present an offering of praise and thanksgiving morning and evening, daily; and the Feasts are all a vital part of the unfolding plan of the LORD's redemption.

### CHAPTER 30 – Vows & Oaths

We now come to a chapter dedicated to vows and oaths. Why is this here? Moses has already anointed his successor, Joshua, to take his place; what do these laws have to do with this juncture in Israel's history? Let's see if this becomes clear.

First, it should be understood that there is no real English equivalent for the Hebrew word *neder*, which is commonly translated *vow*. A simple pledge is not the subject of this passage.<sup>1</sup>

**The difference between Vows and Oaths** – In a *vow* one dedicates a specific *object* or *creature* to the LORD, and thereby prohibits himself from deriving benefit from it. Therefore a vow changes the status of an object, For example, if a person vows not to eat apples for 30 days, the apple then has the status of a forbidden food to him; whereas an oath places an obligation upon *oneself* to perform or refrain from a certain action. This use of oaths was described by King David: *"I have sworn an oath, and have confirmed it, to observe Your righteous ordinances (Ps. 119:106).*

A vow is always voluntary and once made, must be kept: "If you make a vow to the LORD your God, do not be slow to pay it, for the LORD your God will certainly demand it of you and you will be guilty of sin." (Deut. 23:21) The intention of the vow made to God was to give the individual a sense of fear and reverence before making an important commitment.

Numbers 30:2 plainly states, *"If a man vows a vow to the LORD, or swears an oath to bind himself (his soul) by a pledge, he shall not break his word. He shall do according to all that proceeds out of his mouth"*

Ecclesiastes expands on this: *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. Do not let your mouth lead you into sin. Ecclesiastes calls this the 'sacrifice of fools'. (Eccles. 5:4)*

Moses addresses the heads of tribes, who are the judges of the people, and have a special role in the annulment of vows. Vows and oaths could be annulled by an expert or by a court of three. A court could rule that the vow was made in error or ignorance. An annulment in this case would be retroactive

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<sup>1</sup> See Psalms 116:14; 50:14; 66:13 etc.

and therefore considered never to have had validity. The rules still in place in the Catholic Church regarding annulment of a marriage no doubt come from this foundation. Marriage vows are considered irrevocable except under certain strict conditions.

The well-known story of Jephthah's rash vow to offer the first thing that came out of his house if he succeeded in battle (Judges 11:31) was not actually valid, because the fulfilment of the vow required killing his daughter, which was forbidden by Torah. Conditional vows are often made out of desperation, but they do have a binding force. Jephthah could have gone to the elders and had his vow annulled. However, this story does serve to underline the binding nature of vows made to God.

By the time of Jesus, vows were being completely misused. The examples he cites in Matthew were no doubt common in his day:

Mt. 5:33-37 *...But I say to you, make no oath at all, either by heaven, for it is the throne of God, or by the earth, for it is the footstool of His feet, or by Jerusalem, for it is the city of the great king. Nor shall you make an oath by your head, for you cannot make one hair white or black. "But let your statement be, 'Yes, yes' or 'No, no'; anything beyond these is of evil.*

It is interesting to note that the Talmud (Oral Torah) agrees with Jesus, and frowns upon the practise of vowing, referring to those who vow as 'sinners'. We know that God swore oaths, e.g. to Abraham (Lk.1:73) and David (Ps. 132:11); see also Hebrews 7:20-22. Of course, we have every confidence that He will fulfil every oath He made.

## **The Role of Fathers and Husbands<sup>2</sup>**

It is notable that most of this chapter is taken up with the role of fathers and husbands in relation to a woman's vow. We are therefore led to ask, why this narrow focus on a woman's vow?

We see that a father has the right to annul the vow of his daughter upon first hearing of it, to prevent the consequences of an irresponsible vow by a minor. A wife's vows can also be annulled by her husband on the day that he learns of it. Thereafter her vow or oath *must* be fulfilled.

Num. 30:6-7 *"If indeed she takes a husband, while bound by her vows or by a rash utterance from her lips by which she bound herself, "and her husband hears it, and makes no response to her on the day that he hears, then her vows shall stand, and her agreements by which she bound herself shall stand."*

Note what happens if a husband does not immediately annul His bride's vow, but later does so:

30:14 *"Now if her husband makes no response whatever to her from day to day, then he confirms all her vows or all the agreements that bind her; he confirms them, because he made no response to her on the day that he heard them.<sup>15</sup> "But if he does make them void after he has heard them, then **he shall bear her guilt.**"*

On a deeper level, we can also see Israel, first as a 'minor' and then as a 'bride'. Let's have a look at Exodus 24:3 - "So Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the judgments. And all the people answered with one voice and said, 'All the words which the LORD has said we will do.' Moses then prepared a blood Covenant to make this binding.... 7 "He read the Book of the Covenant to the people. They responded "We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey."

In her first response, Israel was under the protective care of the Father. Did He nullify her vow, knowing that she would not be able to fulfil her words? No! It then deepened to a Covenant relationship—betrothal—as God presented the *ketubah*, Marriage Contract, to her. Again – silence! Her vow was heard and not annulled, even though God no doubt knew she would not be able to fully honour it.

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<sup>2</sup> The following section is taken from the website [yourlivingwaters.com](http://yourlivingwaters.com)

Numbers 30:14 speaks of the *silence* of the husband. There was a time when Yeshua remained silent: “He was oppressed and He was afflicted, Yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, So He opened not His mouth.” (Isaiah 53:7)

Now take another look at Numbers 30:15—*because he made no response to her on the day that he heard them,... he shall bear her guilt*. According to His own law, He willingly suffers the punishment she deserved! The LORD paid the price for His bride! In fact according to Psalm 22:25, a very messianic psalm, we read: “I will pay my vows before those who fear Him” (v.25). The Redeemer Himself had made vows, and in accordance with Numbers 30:15, He willingly paid the price for her iniquity — “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.” (Isaiah. 53:5)

This also brings a deeper poignancy to Jesus weeping over Jerusalem—“If you had known, even you, **especially in this your day**, the things that make for your peace!....”<sup>3</sup> Jesus knew full well that, according to His own Word, if she did not recognize the one who paid the price, she would be required to pay the price herself. How deep the anguish of that weeping must have been.

**Ponder the thoughts of Jesus, as he was led silently to the slaughter.**

## **CHAPTER 31 – Revenge against the Midianites** - Read verses 1-8

The text suddenly changes directions when the LORD calls for a battle against the Midianites. *And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: “Take vengeance on the Midianites...”*

This is a holy war – a unique battle in that it will be the last one to be fought during the life of Moses. It is also the first battle that is referred to as a ‘battle of revenge’. A thousand men from each tribe were assembled to battle the Midianites. The Levites were exempt from battle but Phinehas, the zealous Levite we were introduced to in Numbers 25, was to lead the 12,000 into battle, with the ‘sacred vessels and trumpets for sounding in his hand’. Moses became angry with the officers for letting the females live because they were the ones who had lured Israel into lust and idolatry. At the end, everyone and everything had to be purified – everything that could withstand fire had to be purified by fire, and also with the water of cleansing. After the battle the soldiers were counted, and not one was missing! We saw in our previous study that Phineas was a shadow of the Messiah, so can we see his role here as continuing to be a shadow of the Messiah?

The Midianites allegorically represent our carnal nature. We all grow up in a world where the ‘Midianites’ dwell. The carnal world surrounds us on every side and grows more carnal every day. We have inherited an Adamic nature (original sin), which means we are easily lured into the ways of the carnal world. We saw previously how Israel had intertwined itself with the Midianite pagan culture surrounding them – so it is with us. The Midianites had to be defeated before they could cross the Jordan; and likewise our sin nature needs to be put to death.

When we are born again by the Spirit, He begins to dismantle our carnal nature—but that is not enough. Like Israel, we must also enter into a battle (holy war) against the carnal nature (the Midianites are still out there after Zimri and Cozbi have been speared). Just as Phineas went into battle with Israel against the Midianites, Jesus goes into battle with us against the enemy – in fact he leads the charge – *“having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.”* (Col. 2:15). Nevertheless, we have to play our part: “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires (Gal. 5:24). Paul exhorts us to “be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might” – to put on the full armour of God and take our stand against the devil’s schemes (Eph. 6:10-12). We must do this if we are cross over to the promised land of rest.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 19:41-42

## CHAPTER 32 - Land request from tribes of Reuben & Gad

Having just been victorious in battle, we now find the Israelites encamped on the plains of Moab ready to cross the Jordan River into the Promised Land. After all the obstacles they have encountered in their epic wilderness trek, can anything stop them now? Apparently, for some, yes! This time the obstacle is not physical hardship, hostile foreigners or the discouraging reports of the spies, it is the desire to settle down and be comfortable, rather than forge ahead into unknown territory.

**Read verses 1-9** What reasoning do the Reubenites and Gadites offer Moses to persuade him to let them settle on the east side of the Jordan? They were very polite and reasonable, hoping that Moses might be impressed by the 'cattle' link and suggest they stay behind and settle the land? *"Let this land be given to [us] your servants for a possession; do not make us cross the Jordan"* (32:5)

Moses responded very forcefully and critically. He has no time for their cosy little plans when all their resources as a nation are being mustered to finally accomplish the divine plan! In their proposal he sees the disaster of the spies all over again: He accuses them of forsaking their brethren in times of danger: "For if you turn away from following Him, He will once again leave them in the wilderness, and you will destroy all these people." (32:15).

Despite Moses' fury he negotiates with the Reubenites and Gadites: they will go to war with Israel and secure a victory, only then will they, along with the half tribe of Manasseh, settle in their land of choice, outside the land of Israel. *"But if you do not do so, then take note, you have sinned against the LORD; and be sure your sin will find you out."*<sup>4</sup>

Unlike Moses who is centred on God and the unity of His people, the Reubenites and Gadites are focused on their own material wealth and needs. We see a parallel here with the decision of Lot in Genesis 13, to choose the good land without considering anyone or anything beyond his own prosperity.

This chapter gives fascinating insights into the Jewish scale of values—the responsibility groups and individuals must feel to the community at large, and a leader's role in formulating such values and responsibilities and communicating them to the nation. In this regard, the sages have noticed a revealing subtlety in the order of the nouns in verses 16 & 24:

32:16 *Then they came near to him and said: "We will build sheepfolds here for our livestock, and cities for our little ones,"*

... but Moses declares,

32:24 *"Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep, and do what has proceeded out of your mouth."*

The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people—their flocks before their children; Moses reverses the order. This implied rebuke is seen as a fundamental statement of Jewish priorities; prioritising the building up of their children is an investment in the future of their civilisation. It is their children who will carry the faith and way of life into the next generation; they must come first.

Midrash makes an interesting point using Ecclesiastes 10:2 "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left." They identify "right" with Torah and life, and "left", by contrast, with material goods—we need to have our priorities right!

*Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honor. (Prov. 3:16)*

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<sup>4</sup> Incidentally, because they were separated from their brothers, these tribes were the first ones carried into captivity by the Assyrians in 740bc.