

Notes for Parsha Mattot: Numbers 30:2 – 32:42

This parsha contains information about the vows that men or women could take that entailed special obligation above and beyond those required under the law. We also see war occurring between the Midianites and Israelites and afterward, the division of the war spoils. The parsha ends with the details of the Israelite tribes that chose to settle east of the Jordan River.

This text opens with verse 2 of Chapter 30. It might seem strange to tack the first verse of this chapter onto the last parsha but one has to remember that chapter and verse divisions do not date back to the Masoretic text – these divisions were created by Medieval Christians as a way to organize the text and they remain in both Christian and Jewish texts today.

Our text opens with rules for vows that were made voluntarily by either men or women before God. Whereas when a man makes such a vow, the vow stands; when a woman makes a vow it has the chance to be annulled by either her father or her husband. Vows of women that are either divorced or widowed can't be annulled.

Chapter 31 begins the avenging of the Israelites against the Midianites. The Israelites slew every Midianite male as well as Balaam, son of Beor and the five kings of Midian. The women, children and possessions were taken as booty. Upon their return to the camp though, Moses is angry that the troops allowed the women to live as it was the women who sexually enticed the Israelite men. Moses orders all women who have carnally known a man to be killed as well as all the boys. Only the young girls are to live. This is followed by instructions to remain outside the camp for seven days for purification purposes.

Then an accounting is taken of the booty and divided among the tribes. As we have seen elsewhere, this accounting reads like an archival record with very little narrative and no legislation contained within it.

The Gadites and the Reubenites discuss the possibility of settling their tribes right where they are and not crossing over the Jordan with the others. When Moses takes them to task for their request, they point out that they could be “shock-troops” for the other tribes and they would not return to their lands until all the Israelite tribes were settled in their portions of the land. The discussion ends with Moses agreeing and giving instructions concerning these two tribes to Eleazar the priest, Joshua and the family heads of the Israelite tribes.

The parsha ends with another archival record that assigns various portions of the land to each tribe.