

Parsha Ponders

Mattos/Masei | Aug 1, 2024 | 27 Tammuz 5784

*The significant circle dance*¹

זה הדבר אשר-צוה יקוק לבנות צלפחד לאמר לטוב בעיניהם תהיינה לנשים אך למשפחת מטה אביהם
תהיינה לנשים

This is the matter that Hashem commanded the daughters of Tzelophchad, saying: “You shall marry those who are good in your eyes. However, you’ll only marry into the tribe of your father”²

At the end of every *parsha* is a mnemonic device to help remember the number of verses in the *parsha*. A word or several words are chosen whose numerical value is the same as the number of verses. Usually the word should have some sort of connection to the *parsha*, although it’s not always self-evident. One easy example is *parshas Tzav*, (צו in Hebrew), which has 96 verses, the same as the numerical value of the word צו. At the end of *parshas Masei* is a surprising mnemonic device. There are 132 verses in the *parsha*, and the words with that value are מחל”ה (83) חול”ה (49), which equal 132.

What’s surprising is these are both seemingly words for disease or someone sick. Why should these words, with their negative connotations, be the ones chosen as the mnemonic device? Furthermore, this *parsha* is the end of *Sefer Bamidbar*, the Book of Numbers. Are we really going to end our recitation of the book of Numbers on such a negative note?

It would appear then that the intent is not the word חולה for sick or מחלה for illness. Rather, the intent is a different but similar Hebrew word מחול, a circle or a circle dance. This is the Hebrew word for the traditional *Horah* dance. We see it’s usage in the *Mishnah*, when discussing *Tu B’Av*, the festival of matchmaking, where the men would go out to find a wife in the vineyards where the women were dancing in a circle³. What connection does this word have to the *parsha*?

The end of the *parsha* discusses the division of the land of Israel amongst the tribes. After explaining how the laws of ancestral land and inheritance works, the elders of the tribe of Menashe approached Moshe with a concern. The daughters of the late Tzelophchad, of the tribe of Menashe, were previously told they would inherit his portion of land. The elders were concerned if these women married into another tribe, the land belonging to the tribe of Menashe will be transferred through inheritance to their husband’s tribe.

Moshe responded that they spoke correctly. Moshe instituted a temporary law that women would only marry within their tribe. This way, these concerns of land transfer would never come to fruition. The *parsha* ends with the daughters of Tzelophchad marrying their cousins. One of Tzelophchad’s daughter’s names was *Machlah*, מחלה, the same in our mnemonic. The חולה then of the mnemonic refers to the circle dance that must have occurred at *Machlah*’s wedding. This indeed is a positive finish to end the book of Numbers⁴.

Good Shabbos

¹ Based on Ta’amah D’Krah parshas Masei (end)

² Numbers 36:6

³ Ta’anis 26b

⁴ Rav Dovid Feinstein suggested a different approach. חולה means a sick person but מחלה is an expression of מחילה, forgiveness. Meaning, there will be forgiveness for the sick person. This is meant to represent the Jews, after their 42 journeys in the wilderness for their heeding the evil report of the spies, have finally been forgiven