

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

Hey! Ya Never Know!

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

After forty years of traveling in the desert, the Israelites were preparing to inherit the Land of Canaan (Israel).

How would the land be divided? There were millions of people, members of thirteen tribes, (Joseph's descendants were divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh) and they all needed somewhere to live. Two and a half tribes were staying on the East Bank of the Jordan. (See "First Things First!") The Levites weren't going to inherit land, living instead among the various tribes, and in special Levitical Cities. (See "Say A Little Prayer For Me") That still left 9½ "homeless" tribes, waiting to determine who was to go where.

Moses commanded the Israelites saying, "This is the Land that you will inherit by lottery, which G-d has commanded to give to the nine and a half tribes." Numbers, 34:13)

By lottery? Was it all going to be left to chance? What if a particular tribe had special needs? Are you going to simply pull a piece of paper out of a hat and tell me where my family has to live forever?

We don't see any reference in the Torah to anyone challenging the lottery system. It does, however, come up in the Book of Joshua.

As the song goes, "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumblin' down."

Joshua gave orders that no one was to take any spoils of war from Jericho. The entire city, captured by miracle, was to be devoted to G-d. The precious metals were to be given to the Temple treasury, and everything else was to be burnt.

Achan, son of Carmi, son of Zabdi, son of Zerach, of the Tribe of Judah (Joshua, 7:1) had other ideas. He came across a gold bar, two hundred shekels of silver, and a Babylonian coat. Thinking no one would be the wiser, he hid them in his tent.

G-d took this crime very seriously, blaming the entire nation (for not guarding the spoils of Jericho):

****Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My Covenant which I commanded them; and they have also taken of the consecrated thing...because he has perpetrated an immoral act in Israel” (Verses 11 and 15)*

Achan was not a wonderful fellow. The Talmud (Sanhedrin, 44a) interprets the above verses as indicating that he had committed several sins. He was among the early advocates of circumcision reversal. (I won't elaborate. Those of us in my line of work prefer to view the Covenant as permanent.) He had committed adultery. He is considered to have violated the entire Five Books of the Torah.

Joshua needed to get to the bottom of this. All he knew was that SOMEONE had violated the ban; he needed to find out who the criminal was. Until that happened, G-d would withhold His protection from the nation. Using a lottery, Joshua narrowed down the list of “candidates” from the Tribe of Judah, to the descendants of Zerach, to the descendants of Zabdi, and finally, to Achan himself.

Joshua confronted Achan directly: *“My son, please give honor to the G-d of Israel, and confess to Him. Tell me what you have done; don't hide anything from me.”* (Verse 19)

The Talmud tells us that Achan did not cooperate in the interrogation. “Are you accusing me based upon a LOTTERY? Is this how you search for criminals? By coincidence?! Why don't you try drawing lots between yourself and Elazar the High Priest? One of YOU will come out guilty!

Achan seems to have had a good point. It appears that Joshua himself wasn't sure. After all, he asked Achan to confess: *“My son, please give honor to the G-d of Israel, and confess to Him.”*

In reality, Joshua had no doubts as to who the guilty party was. He knew that the lottery was accurate. He had a different concern. “Please,” he begged. “Don't cast aspersions on the lottery system. The Land of Israel is going to be divided by lottery!”

Joshua feared that if THIS lottery were put into question, people would begin to write off lotteries as nothing more than mere coincidence. If that were to happen, there would be discord over the distribution of land as well.

Achan still wouldn't cooperate. It was only when some of his relatives rallied to his defense, threatening a civil war, that he came clean. He wasn't all bad. He didn't want to see innocent people killed on his account.

Did you ever notice that lottery winners tend to be obscure cleaning ladies and out-of-work janitors? It's always somebody else! Why can't it be me? Why do THEY benefit from the coincidence?

It's because G-d wants them to.

The New York Lottery tries to attract customers with the slogan, "Hey! Ya Never Know!" And they're right. You never do know. But G-d? He knows!

[By the way, I have always had a personal policy when it comes to lottery tickets; I never buy more than one. My reasoning is simple. If, for example, the odds of winning a particular lottery are one in sixty million, it will take a miracle for me to win. If I buy TWO tickets, increasing my odds to one in thirty million, it will still take a miracle for me to win. I can't afford to buy enough tickets to take the odds out of the realm of miracle. If and when G-d is prepared to do a miracle and make me a millionaire, why should I spend two dollars for the miracle instead of one?]

Have a great Shabbos.

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