

Leadership in Trust **Rabbi Zev-Hayyim Feyer**

ו"ה

Parshat Mattot

Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes, saying, "This is what the Eternal has commanded." (Numbers 30:2)

So begins the Torah portion which we call "*Mattot*," after its first significant word (*mattot* = *tribes*). The text, however, does not speak of the tribes but of the heads of the tribes, the leaders. And what is the first thing which Moses tells them, in G*d's Name? That they must be scrupulous in keeping their vows, in following through on what they have promised. Not only the "common folk," but even the heads of the tribes, even the leaders; nobody is above the law, above the obligation to fulfill what has been spoken.

The text appears to say that Moses spoke only to the tribal elders, but a slight change in one vowel (changing the Hebrew word *el* to *al*), without changing the text, leads us to a different rendering – **Moses spoke of the heads of the tribes.**

What's the difference? If Moses spoke to the tribal elders about the keeping of vows, they might believe that they were being told to enforce the law as regards others but that they, as leaders, were not similarly bound. Or, even if they understood that they were bound to keep their vows, they might have thought that, since the message was being given to them but not to all the people, that, even though they were obligated, there was nobody who knew it and they would therefore not be held to account (at least, not on the human level).

If, however, we understand that Moses was speaking not just *to* the tribal elders but *about* them (speaking to all the people), then we realize that there is a consequent obligation placed upon the people. The leaders are obligated to keep their vows; the people are told that the leaders must keep their vows. The people are therefore responsible for assuring that the leaders behave themselves; the people have the obligation of calling the leaders to task for their failures, including their dishonesty. Not only are the leaders not above the Law; they are also not above the people. Just as we have observed that the Torah's concept of property ("Torahnomics") is based on stewardship rather than ownership, so we are taught here that leadership is not innate but a trust.

All the world is G*d's, and all the power is G*d's, and all the authority is G*d's. When we hold property, power, or authority, we do so only as trustees, and every leader is obligated to remember that fact and exercise his or her leadership accordingly.

Shabbat Shalom.