SUMMARY OF MATTOT-MAS'E

This Shabbat we read two Torah portions: Mattot and Mas'e.

Mattot covers several important subjects. First, it stresses the seriousness of vows, and how to annul them in cases where they cannot be kept. Then the Torah recounts what happened with the Midianites, who had sought to harm Israel: the war against them, the taking of captives, and the division of the spoils. Every tribe grew richer, and the number of animals grew.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad owned a great deal of cattle, and they asked Moshe to settle east of the Jordan instead of entering the land of Israel with the rest of the people. At first Moshe refused. The Jewish people had to face the powerful Canaanite nations living in the land, and needed a strong, united army. He feared that the desertion of these tribes would demoralize the people and weaken their unity. But Reuben and Gad assured Moshe that they would take an active part in the war of conquest – they even offered to march at the front of the battle – and would return across the Jordan only once the war was won.

In Mas'e, the Torah details the stages of the Jewish people's journey through the desert during the forty years after leaving Egypt. It lists the places where the Israelites camped and the routes they took.

HaShem commands Moshe to tell the children of Israel about the borders of the future land of Israel, and the portion each tribe will receive. Every tribe must give some of its cities to the Levites: forty-eight cities in all. Among them, six will be cities of refuge – three on this side of the Jordan and three in Canaan – for someone who kills without intent.

Moshe conveys HaShem's laws on homicide. One who kills deliberately is put to death, but only if at least two

witnesses confirm his guilt. No one may be condemned on the testimony of a single witness. One who causes a death by accident, without intent, flees to a city of refuge, where he stays protected until the death of the Cohen Gadol.

HaShem asks that they not turn the Promised Land into a place of sin, falsehood, and injustice. Keep the land pure, because HaShem dwells among the children of Israel.

The parasha closes with the case of the daughters of Tzelofchad. It had already been established that, with no male heirs, the land would pass to the daughters. Now a condition is added: they must marry within their own tribe, so that their portion does not pass to another tribe and the tribal borders stay intact.