The word for a staff or stick or even the scepter is the same word - MATEH - that is used to describe the tribe or an integrated group of people. As has been often noted the Hebrew language is rather sparse and sparing in its vocabulary. Therefore, often the same word is used with other meanings in different circumstances and usage. But there always is a connection between the various uses of the word in the different circumstances of literary context. Simply put, a tribe or group of people -- no matter how talented and capable they may be individually -- still require a leader, someone who will wield a staff and a scepter over them. The great analogy of this is a symphony orchestra, where each one of the musicians performing in that orchestra is immensely talented. But in order for the orchestra to perform correctly, it requires a conductor to wield a baton. In music and in the performance of philharmonic orchestras, all of the written notes are always the same. But it is the genius of the conductor that transforms the written notes into a soaring performance of the symphony or a concerto. It is the conductor that hears and anticipates the correct moment and instance where the individual musical instruments should be introduced and sounded. It is the baton of the conductor that creates and directs the sound and music of the orchestra as a whole. So, too, it is the tribal leader wields the staff of leadership that creates the identity and definition of the tribe itself.

It is, therefore, perfectly understandable why Moshe should gather the heads of the tribes of Israel together to inform them regarding the laws of vows and verbal commitments. For if the leaders of the tribe are themselves lacking in fulfilling their promises, commitments and sworn oaths, then certainly the tribe that they lead will also not be trustworthy in the long run. Leaders lead not only by thoughts and ideas, but even more so by verbal commitments and action. Deeds certainly speak loudly, but words are of great consequence as well. The words that we use define us and let others know when what we are. Therefore, verbal commitments should be made sparingly and carefully, for they are truly the batons of leadership. This is true for parents and family life as well - never promise children things or items that are beyond one's reach or control - and in the commercial world as well. Unfortunately, we have learned that in the political and diplomatic world, words are not necessarily to be believed or acted upon. However, the standards of Torah do not allow for
such laxity -- no matter how negative the consequences may be -- for fulfilling one's stated commitment. This has to be taught to the people by the leadership of the family, tribe and community. And the Torah does not naively assume that this is something which will be self-understood. Knowing human nature for what it is, the Torah chooses to emphasize this point in its choice of words and subject that constitute the opening section of this week's reading. ¶