

PARSHAS MATTOS-MASSEI 5777

This week's parsha is complex with many aspects to it.

One of the most interesting things is after the section of Nedorim, we pick up where the beginning of Parshas Pinchos leaves off. At the beginning of last week's parsha Hashem merely informs Klal Yisroel that there will be a war against Midian with no details provided. Here in our parsha Hashem tells Moshe to take revenge against Midian for Klal Yisroel before you depart from this world. Moshe starts to recruit for the war right away—without delay. Why?

Moshe Rabbeinu is an eved Hashem. A slave's entire identity is serving his master and subjecting his will to the will of his master. That is his entire being. At the end of V'Zos Habrochah, Moshe is given the epithet of "Eved Hashem".

At the beginning of Pirkei Ovos there is a lack of symmetry in the chain of mesorah. Moshe Rabbeinu was mekabel the Torah and then was moser the Torah. Sometimes there is "kibel" and sometimes there is "mosar". The Ruach Chaim explains that Moshe Rabbeinu was a unique individual. Most people, when they talk, have multiple voices and aspects of their personal agenda that are being expressed. Moshe only had one voice. Chazal say the Shechinah spoke from Moshe Rabbeinu's throat. He was a complete eved Hashem with no ego and no sense of self that interfered with the message Hashem was transmitting. He had no other goals and agendas, and that is why Moshe could be the human vehicle to transmit the Torah to the world.

This is why Moshe Rabbeinu started recruiting for the war which would hasten his own death. He was an eved Hashem who only had one agenda—doing the will of Hashem.

After the wars of Sichon, Og and Midian, Klal Yisroel had amassed great wealth and property. Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain ended up with a tremendous amount of sheep and cattle and saw that they were currently in a very fertile area. Like most people who want to maximize their gashmiyus potential at the expense of their ruchniyus, they begin to rationalize: If Hashem gave us all this cattle and such a fertile land, it must be Hashem's rotzon that we stay here and settle instead of going into Eretz Yisroel proper. We are willing to make this sacrifice. They had their own needs and they cloaked in a pious garb of doing Hashem's will. They came to Moshe to obtain permission to settle.

Moshe Rabbeinu protested on two fronts.

He argued that Hashem is giving us an Eretz Chemdoh. It is completely unique in its ability to facilitate avoda and closeness to Hashem. Your desire to remain here is undermining Hashem's plan to give us Eretz Yisroel. You don't really want to go where Hashem wants you to go—just like the meraglim.

Secondly, your action will discourage the rest of Klal Yisroel from crossing over the Yarden to fight and conquer Eretz Yisroel.

When the Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain responded to

Moshe's protest, they only acknowledged the second issue and completely ignored the first. They were undaunted in their decision to settle on this land and not settle in Eretz Yisroel because of their flock. They only offered to postpone settling until they finished fighting the war for the rest of Klal Yisroel.

Moshe Rabbeinu accepted their terms. It is a fait accompli that these shevotim are staying. But Moshe arranged for half of Shevet Menashe to join them. How did this develop and why?

At the end, we have the six cities of refuge - three cities for each bank of the Jordan. But this means three cities will be servicing 9 and ½ shevotim and three will be servicing just 2 and ½! Why do the 2 and ½ shevatim receive such a disproportional amount?

Chazal explain that Eiver Hayarden will have more homicides and require more Orei Miklot. But what does this mean? We are talking about accidental deaths—not actual murder! What is it about this land that makes it more prone to accidents? The roads aren't paved as well? The construction materials aren't as sturdy? Something in the climate or the water supply?

Let us try to understand a little more deeply what Moshe Rabbeinu was telling these shevotim and what the compromise was.

Anyone who learns Zeroim knows that Eretz Yisroel has significant kedushah and that Eiver Hayarden is "half-kodosh" in many ways. Kedushas Ho'oretz is the reason why one wants to live in Eretz Yisroel. The kedushah is what enables one to live his life on a higher level of kedushah and ruchniyus overall. This is why Hashem wants us living in Eretz Yisroel proper. What are Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain telling us. They are claiming that since Hashem gave us so much money, it's obvious that he wants us to settle here and not cross the Yarden. That must be His plan. For if not, why did He give us so much sheep and cattle? It's Hashem's fault—we have to do something with all this money.

Sometimes, when people begin living on an elevated level and then have to enter a more material environment, they feel they need to be practical and make compromises. Moshe Rabbeinu was telling them that living a much higher life is really where you belong. Don't blame Hashem for giving you all this property and making you feel compelled to diminish your level of ruchniyus. You will be able to have all that wealth in Eretz Yisroel and still maintain that higher level.

One response was to go back all the way to Egypt and give up on all kedushah. This was the response after the meraglim. But these people wanted to go down to half-kedushah. Hashem told them that if you are opting for 50% in your yiddishkeit, I guarantee that there will be more accidental murders in your communities. What is a shogeg? He isn't a meizid—he isn't doing anything on purpose. He is sloppy and careless. And because of that, he makes mistakes and ends up killing someone. He is reckless. If he had a true value for human life and appreciated the tzelem Elokim in people, he wouldn't drive recklessly. People

take risks with their lives and others because deep down they don't think that life is valuable. If you understood that what gives our lives value is our connection to Hashem, then naturally you would go for the maximum kedushoh available to you. You wouldn't opt for a second-rate level of connection to Hashem in Eiver Hayarden. But Benei Gad and Reuvain dug in their heels and said we are staying here on this level.

Moshe Rabbeinu acknowledged their insistence on staying where they were, but insisted that at least they shouldn't pull the rest of Klal Yisroel down with them.

Where do half of Shevet Menashe come into the picture? According to the Netziv, Moshe Rabbeinu enlisted Shevet Menashe because they were dedicated to learning Torah and not in commerce. Their job was to function as the "community kollel" in Eiver Hayarden to strengthen limud haTorah and try to do damage control for these two shevotim who were settling for a lower level of ruchniyus.

This was a very commendable task they took upon themselves

On the other hand, who were the first shevotim to go into golus before churbon Bayis Rishon? Shevet Gad and Reuvain and half of shevet Menashe. It is because eventually, after hundreds of years of exposure to avodo zoro, they were the first to crumble.

A 50% commitment means you are going to be sloppy because you don't appreciate what gives value to human life—a connection to Hashem. What gives life value is not our bank account or the awards and prizes we win. A life of kedushoh is what gives life value. Without understanding that, and opting for 50% kedushoh, means you'll be sloppy with the value of life in general and you'll come to do retzichoh beshogeg on a disproportional level.

In Parshas Massei we find, as Rashi points out, the progress towards reaching Eretz Yisroel wasn't linear. There were periods of advancement and periods of regression all along the way. This is what life is about. When you struggle for ruchniyus, you have your successes and failures until you finally reach your goal. But we have to start and stay with a goal and keep it in mind at all times. The goal has to be clear and focused - because if you don't have a clearly defined goal in mind, you just wander around and lose discipline.

If that goal is maximum avodas Hashem then the main question in life is how to reach it and maintain it, and this is a goal of 100% with no compromises. But if you have a goal of mediocre ruchniyus, then you don't have the drive and the ambition for excellence and you probably won't even reach the 50% mark.

Different people have different ambitions. I ask people a basic general question: what they see themselves doing 10-15 years from now. The answers they give are very revealing. Many people respond instinctively that they don't think they can be sitting and learning forever. But I didn't ask them what they don't plan on doing. Apparently, what they want to do, is not learn!

Life is divided into two tracks. Everyone has a prime goal and there are secondary goals. The prime goal is what defines your life. Some people put ruchniyus as their prime goal and their parnossoh becomes an obstacle course that they have to navigate around their prime goal of being a Tamid Chochom/Ben Torah and bringing up a Torah family. So you first establish what your life is going to be about and then you figure out afterwards how to manage practically. For Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain, their prime goal was their sheep and

their cattle—their parnossoh. Then they will figure out once we take care of that wealth, how to work out their ruchniyus. They revealed this prime goal in a sort of Freudian slip. They said to Moshe that "we'll build corrals for our flocks and cities for our children". Moshe Rabbeinu caught them on this slip and reversed the order. Chazal tell us Moshe was giving them a lesson in life priorities. No-one would come out and say openly that they value their money before their family. But that is how most people live their lives. People pursue a career and try to find the most lucrative position—wherever that will lead them—and after they land the position, will start scrambling to find the best chinuch options available in that location. Instead, one should look for the best community to live in first, and then scramble to land the best possible position in that location. That is what Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain were saying.

Moshe Rabbeinu responded that if that's the case, if that's the priority in life, you are going to need a lot of Orei Miklot in your territory. Because if parnossoh is primary and everything else is just an afterthought, then you don't really value life the way the Torah wants you to value it. You are going to be sloppy and careless with other people's life as well as your own.

It's not only Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain. It is the standard way the members of the Orthodox Jewish community live their lives and make their major decisions. It isn't like they want to completely assimilate. But their parnossoh demands that they make serious compromises with their yiddishkeit and they are willing to make them—even at the expense of their family's ruchniyus. Further down the road, without a Moshe Rabbeinu to keep their priorities straight, they and their kiruv professionals will be the first ones whose yiddishkeit starts to fully disintegrate.

This is a powerful message given to us by the parsha. It didn't just happen 3500 years ago. This is an ongoing challenge in everyone's life—struggling with making the right priorities. We all have to struggle with maintaining our ruchniyus and paying our bills and how to strike a balance between these two goals. It is a standard part of life. Many of us might not be feeling this tension now, but when you are juggling number of goals simultaneously, you have to keep your eye on the ball and be clear about what is the ikkar in your life and what is the tofel.

When people come to me for general eitzos, I have some very deflating, uninspiring questions to ask: What is the main priority in your life? Let's take care of that first and worry about the rest as it comes. There is an expression in English: "Does the dog wag the tail or does the tail wag the dog?" When you turn a tofel into an ikkar, then inevitably, the ikkar becomes a tofel. A person has to decide what the ikkar is and not lose sight of it. How you are going to maximize it comes first and the other necessities come later. This is how intelligent, successful, ambitious people live their lives.

That was the tragedy of Benei Gad and Benei Reuvain. When they said they will build corrals for our flocks and cities for our children, they let slip what their real priorities in life really are.

A Ben Torah knows that when he plans out the next 20 years of his life, he needs to make the Torah the center and everything else secondary. There are a lot of other things that also need planning and preparation. But Torah has to be at the center. Too many people place their parnossoh at the center and it is a tragic trap to fall into. They wind up not even reaching that 50% level of ruchniyus for themselves and their families that they hoped for. Make sure that when you are planning out your life, that first things are first and secondary things remain secondary.