

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Parashat Matot Masei
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Parashat Matot Masei – Getting our priorities in order

In this week's double Parasha of Matot Masei we read about the tribes Reuven and Gad¹ requesting permission from Moshe to stay on the far side of the Jordan and not settle in the Land of Israel proper. With their large flocks, it made economic sense to them to stay there and make use of the ample fields which were suited to pasturing flocks.

Moshe was upset with the request. He feared that these tribes did not want to join in the upcoming battles with the inhabitants of the Land. Such behaviour would threaten to weaken the mettle of the other tribes and potentially risk repeating the fiasco that occurred with the meraglim. However, Reuven and Gad appeased Moshe by assuring him they would cross the Jordan at the vanguard of the troops and help their brethren to conquer the Land. Only after the conquest was complete would they return to this land on the far side of the Jordan river.

Another problem with their request is only revealed with a careful reading of the text. When Reuven and Gad presented their intentions to Moshe, they mentioned building pens for their livestock before they mentioned building cities for their children. Though subtle, this revealed a significant error in their priorities. Rashi explains that they were more concerned about their possessions than their children. Moshe subtly corrected their error by deliberately reversing the order when he replied. Through their Freudian slip, Reuven and Gad had revealed an unhealthy focus on earning livelihood and financial security. This was not the right approach for Jewish people whose focus should be on family rather than finances.

The Gemara² teaches us that everything is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. The fear of Heaven refers to our growth in spiritual matters, such as doing the mitzvot correctly, treating our fellow man with respect and growing in our middot (character traits). That is in our control. In this realm, generally the harder we work, the more we will achieve. However, all other results are out of our control. This includes our livelihood. We need to put in some effort because that is the nature of the world that Hashem created. But the outcome of our effort is already decided and is not in our realm of control.

Let us explore this idea further using a parable, a Mishna, and a true story (with a funny ending).

The "clever" labourer – a parable

The king gathered a group of labourers and gave them an important task. They were to spend the day shlepping heavy rocks from the quarry to a distant building site for an important project. It was hard work, but the stakes were high. The labourers would earn a piece of gold for every stone they successfully carried. And the larger the stone, the larger the piece of gold! It was the middle of summer and the heat was relentless. So the king organised some delicious, icy cold lemonade to keep the labourers refreshed and hydrated. Each labourer would be entitled to one glass of lemonade per hour. One of the labourers, Shmeryl, eyed the sweet and enticing beverage. Of course he wanted to earn some gold, but that was far off in the future and his focus now was on the lemonade. When it was time to start working, he half-heartedly picked up some small stones and carried them to the site. But his mind was not on his work. He was hot and he wanted that lemonade. He thought of different strategies to maximise his lemonade quota. He stood near the drink stand as much as possible. He befriended the officer in charge of handing out the drinks. He made sure that his cup was full to the brim. In short, he didn't get much work done, nor did he get any more lemonade than the others. At the end of the day, the other workers were exhausted and sweaty, and their muscles ached. Shmeryl was feeling a lot better than they were physically. But then he noticed that the other workers were all smiling despite their exhaustion. Shmeryl started to feel a little uneasy...

The meaning of this parable should be clear. What a pity it would be if we devoted most of our efforts to those areas that we cannot affect and ignored those areas where our efforts could make a real difference!

The choosy bride – a Mishna

Kiddushin (betrothal according to Jewish law) can only take place if both the man and the woman agree to it. The man invites the woman to become betrothed to him and the woman demonstrates her acceptance by not rejecting the

¹ Moshe later added half of the tribe of Manasseh to this group. Some commentators have suggested that Moshe deliberately split a tribe in half to ensure that family ties would ensure that the two groups would remain united.

² Brachot 33b.

proposal. The Mishnah³ discusses various cases where the woman agreed to kiddushin based on mistaken information. For example, if the man said: "Become betrothed to me with this silver coin" and it was later found to be a gold coin. Or he said: "become betrothed to me with this gold coin" and it was later found to be a silver coin. The Mishnah then brings another pair of examples. The man said: "become betrothed to me on condition that I am a rich man" but after performing the kiddushin she finds out that he is actually a poor man. Or vice versa, he said: "become betrothed to me on condition that I am a poor man", and it was later found out that he was a rich man. In each of these cases, she is not betrothed because she only agreed to the betrothal based on an unfulfilled condition. Therefore she did not provide real consent and the kiddushin is invalid. However, Rebbe Shimon has a different view. He holds that if the woman was misled to her advantage, then she is still betrothed. We assume that she agreed to the kiddushin even though she didn't get what she expected. For example, if she was expecting a silver coin and she was willing to agree to the kiddushin, then surely if she receives a gold coin, she would be happy to consent too.

We may assume that in the case of the rich man / poor man, if she was willing to agree to the kiddushin on the basis that the man was poor, she would certainly be happy if he is rich. However, the Rosh explains that she might not want a rich husband because he may be too busy with his business affairs to spend time with her! There is a risk that those who are too involved in financial gain may miss out on building up their relationships and spiritual pursuits.

The perfect Dorothy Dix question – a true story (with a humorous postscript)⁴

When we have an important business meeting, we often put in a lot of preparation beforehand. Imagine an important interview with a potential new employer, the annual performance review with your boss, a critical meeting with a client. Most people invest an inordinate amount of time and effort in the lead-up to such meetings.

John⁵ was very nervous. He was due to give a presentation to a group of important clients (and potential clients) about a recent change to an important area of law. He was positioning himself to be seen as "the expert" in the field and it was vital that everything went smoothly. He did a number of dress rehearsals, with the rest of his team pretending to be the audience, so that he could polish his performance. He even prepared a few "Dorothy Dix"⁶ questions so that he would look impressive in front of the clients. A member of staff would be planted in the audience and instructed to ask a tricky question. John, who had already prepared the answer in advance, would be able to dazzle the audience with his "off-the-cuff" response. Hours and hours of effort were invested into this presentation and the junior members of the team had to sit through the rehearsals numerous times. During the presentation, the planted staff member asked the pre-prepared question on cue. John said: "That's a very good question". The staff member replied: "I know, you told me to ask it!" John was mortified but the audience was in stitches.⁷

Did all these hours upon hours of preparation make any difference? Did John's billings for the year go up from all this effort? I can't say for sure. But probably not. But we can learn from John that all our careful planning can come to naught if Hashem so chooses. If we put too much effort into our hishtadlut, beyond what is reasonably required, it suggests that we are forgetting the true source of it all. If we remembered that everything was from Hashem, wouldn't we be investing our maximum time and energy into preparing for our spiritual meetings instead? For instance, how much effort do we put into our meetings with Hashem? Three times a day we stand before the Creator of the universe for an intimate discussion. Do we prepare for these meetings? Do we plan what we are going to say and how to say it⁸? Do we invest effort into understanding the meaning of the words that we recite to Hashem? Or do we ask for other impromptu meetings with Him and try our best to connect with Him? What about our 'meetings' with friends. Before we get on the phone do we read up on the laws of lashon hara and ask Hashem to guard our mouth and ears?

Let's try something this week:

1. Remember the mistake of Reuven and Gad and Moshe's rebuke. Our spiritual and family life should generally come before financial issues. Earning a livelihood is important, but it can't be the focus of our existence.
2. How can we ensure that our priorities are straight? Let's stop for a moment and assess how much effort we invest into fixing our bank account and how much effort we invest into fixing our character traits.

Shabbat Shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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³ Kiddushin 2:2.

⁴ I can vouch for the veracity of this story. I was one of the junior lawyers in John's team. And the humorous postscript which you are about to read did actually happen!

⁵ This may not be his real name. Or perhaps it is.

⁶ Dorothy Dix was the forerunner of today's popular advice columnists. Her reputed practice of framing questions herself to allow her to publish prepared answers gave rise to the Australian term "Dorothy Dix", an expression widely used in Australia to refer to a pre-planned question from a member of Parliament to a minister that enables the minister to make an announcement in the form of a reply.

⁷ More than twenty years later people still remember this presentation!

⁸ Even though the text of our davening is fixed, there is plenty of opportunity to add in our own personal requests, for example, during the bracha of Shema Koleinu during the Shemoneh Esreh.