

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Matot Masei, July 2017

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How can the Parsha help us grow this week?

Matot Masei – getting our priorities straight

In this week’s double portion of Matot Masei we read about the tribes of Reuven and Gad requesting an inheritance on the east bank of the Jordan River. They had abundant livestock and they wanted to ensure that they had sufficient grazing land. Instead of crossing over the Jordan River and taking their inheritance within the defined borders of the Land, they preferred to stay where Bnei Yisrael were currently camped.

At first Moshe was angry at this request. He was concerned that Reuven and Gad were trying to avoid fighting the battles against the Canaanites, and that this would also discourage the rest of Bnei Yisrael from entering into the land. However, Reuven and Gad assured Moshe that this was not their intention. They were prepared to join their brethren in all of their battles, fighting on the front lines, and only then return to the east bank.

*“They [Reuven and Gad] approached him [Moshe] and said, **“We will build pens for our livestock here and cities for our children.** We shall then arm ourselves quickly and fight in the front of Bnei Yisrael until we have brought them to their place... We shall not return to our homes until each of Bnei Yisrael has taken possession of his inheritance.”* (Bamidbar 32:16-18)

Moshe is reassured with this response. However, he notices that Reuven and Gad mentioned their intention to build pens for their livestock before they mentioned building cities for their children¹. This Freudian slip revealed the skewed priorities of Reuven and Gad, being more focused on their possessions and their businesses than their families. Therefore Moshe repeats their words back to them but he subtly changes the order, so as to rebuke them, and teach them the proper value system.

*“So build yourselves **cities for your children and pens for your flocks**, and what has come from your mouth you shall do.”* (Bamidbar 32:24)

Recently, I was taking part in a conference call with a client and his corporate adviser. They were in the middle of a large transaction to raise a significant amount of money for the client. The adviser, John,² was the driving force behind the whole transaction, but recently he had become very slow to respond to emails and it was clear that something was wrong. The following conversation took place³:

Steve: I’m filling in for John on this call. As some of you may have heard, John suffered a heart attack a couple of weeks ago, and his recovery has been slow so he hasn’t been responding to emails.

Client: I’m so sorry to hear that. As long as we are all healthy, that’s the main thing.

Steve: No, as long as we’re all making money, that’s the main thing!

¹ See Rashi to Bamidbar 32:16, based on Midrash Tanchuma Matot 7.

² Names have been changed to protect identities.

³ This is a true story.

Though Steve obviously intended this comment as a joke, behind every joke there is a bit of truth.

Sadly, many people today are suffering from the same upside-down priorities as Reuven and Gad. Many of us put far too much focus into our businesses and materialistic pursuits, to the detriment of our families and spiritual lives.

The Chofetz Chaim explains the error of this skewed value system with a beautiful analogy:⁴

Imagine a barrel of wine that has one tap and thus allows only a limited flow. If one were to add more taps, the wine would flow out faster, but one would not be increasing the total amount of wine contained in the barrel. The same is true with our livelihood. A person may think that he can increase his income by working longer hours. In reality however, all he will “accomplish” by this is to reduce his spiritual merits. By increasing the time that he devotes to working, he will necessarily decrease the amount of time that he devotes to spiritual pursuits. He will have less time to study Torah, he will speed up his davening, or miss out on davening with a minyan. He may perceive an increase in wealth but this is an illusion. It is not possible to earn more than Hashem has decreed. Hashem will see to it that any extra income is absorbed by expenses that he would not otherwise have incurred. Or worst of all, any increase in income that he does keep will be at the expense of his portion in the World to Come.

Let's develop this analogy of the Chofetz Chaim a little further. The process of adding extra taps to our barrel of wine would require one to expend extra effort and money to drill the new holes and then buy and assemble the new taps. One would also need to purchase new vessels to store all of this 'extra' wine. However there would be no net gain in the amount of wine obtained overall. So such extra hishtadlut is not just superfluous, it is counterproductive.

The Gemara⁵ scoffs at the foolish Babylonians who “eat their bread with bread”. The commentaries explain that the Babylonians were caught in a vicious circle – they eat bread in order to obtain energy so that they can work, and they work in order to earn money so that they can buy more bread. This cycle seems pointless and futile. The Gemara directs this comment at the Babylonians, however it is equally relevant in modern times. We should learn from Moshe's advice to Reuven and Gad and re-order our priorities so that the true purpose of our work endeavours is to support our families and allow us to serve Hashem. Let's rise above the depressing existence of the Babylonians by cutting down on our hours at work, and working hard to get our priorities right!

Let's try something this week:

1. Spend some time sitting and contemplating our true values and the underlying motivation behind why we work.
2. Notice how much effort we put into physical, materialistic and business pursuits.
3. Try to prioritise our family, learning Torah and serving Hashem over material pursuits.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Ledder.

*** **

⁴ Quoted in “Trust Me! An anthology of Emunah and Bitachon” by Eliezer Parkoff, page 47.

⁵ Beitzah 16a.

About Darchai Noam

The pasuk in Mishlei (3:17) describes the Torah as follows: “Its ways are ways of pleasantness (Darchai Noam) and all its paths are peace”. The Torah is our guidebook for life. It is packed full of good advice as to how we should live our lives.

The aim of the Darchai Noam weekly email is to examine an idea from the weekly parashah relating to good middot (character traits). It will focus particularly on treating each other with respect and how to interact with each other in a more peaceful and pleasant manner. It will also suggest some practical tips for implementing these ideas in our daily lives.

By learning together each week, and making an effort to regularly put the ideas into practice, with Hashem’s help we can all gradually improve our character traits and our observance of ‘v’ahavta l’re’echa kamocho’ – loving one’s fellow as oneself.

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