

# 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?

### 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 that their inheritance be on the east bank of the Jordan River. They wanted to ensure that they had sufficient grazing land for their abundant livestock. 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 settle on 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 does notice that Reuven and Gad mention building pens for their livestock before building cities for their children<sup>1</sup>. Moshe interprets this Freudian slip as revealing the skewed priorities of Reuven and Gad, being more focused on their possessions and their businesses than their families. Therefore, Moshe paraphrases their words back to them, but he reverses the order of these two building projects in order to rebuke them and teach them a better 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)

Some time ago, 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,<sup>2</sup> 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 place<sup>3</sup>:

*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.*

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

<sup>2</sup> Names have been changed to protect identities.

<sup>3</sup> This is a true story.

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

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 our spiritual lives.

The Chofetz Chaim explains the error of this skewed value system with a brilliant analogy:<sup>4</sup>

*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 the Chofetz Chaim's analogy a little further. The process of adding extra taps to the barrel of wine is not free. One would be required 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. And some of the wine might spoil more quickly when removed from the barrel and exposed to the air. To take it to the extreme, one may even need to expend money on renovations to extend their house in order to make room to store all of these extra vessels of wine! However, it is all an illusion. There would be no net gain in the amount of wine obtained overall. So such extra hishtadlut is not just superfluous, it is totally counterproductive.

The Gemara<sup>5</sup> scoffs at the foolish Babylonians who "eat their bread with bread". The commentaries explain that the Babylonians were caught in a vicious circle – they ate bread in order to obtain energy so that they could work, and they worked in order to earn money so that they could buy more bread. This cycle is 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 better serve Hashem.

Let's rise above the depressing existence of the Babylonians by cutting down on our hours at work where possible, and instead working hard to get our priorities right and building up our spiritual lives!

Let's try something this week:

1. Spend time contemplating our true values and the underlying motivation behind why we work.
2. Notice how much effort and time 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

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted in "Trust Me! An anthology of Emunah and Bitachon" by Eliezer Parkoff, page 47.

<sup>5</sup> Beitza 16a.