

FIRST THINGS FIRST

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Learning and Livelihood - First Things First

While the destiny of most of the fledgling Jewish nation awaited them on the west banks of the Jordan River (i.e. Israel), the tribes of Reuven and Gad (who were later joined by part of Menashe) were shepherds, for whom the green pastures captured east of the Jordan were just too good to pass up. They approached Moshe with their request (32:5-16):

If we have found favour in your eyes, let this land [east of the Jordan] be given to your servants as an inheritance; do not force us to cross the Jordan... We will build stables for [our] livestock, and cities for our young...

After some lengthy negotiations, during which they agree to accompany their brethren into Canaan, and return only after having captured the land, a settlement is reached. They are granted the lush marshlands they so desire (32:20-24):

Moshe said to them... build for yourselves cities for your small children, and stables for your livestock - that which you have spoken you shall do!

One who is attuned to the nuances of the Torah which are the bread- and-butter of Scriptural exegesis might have already noticed the small discrepancy: In their request, the tribes spoke of building the stables first, then the cities. In Moshe's response, he mentions first cities for the children, and then stables for the livestock. Even more puzzling, thus, is his conclusion: "That which you have spoken you shall do," considering that according to Moshe's instructions (i.e. the order reversal), they are not to do as they had spoken!

In Pirkei Avos (The Ethics of the Fathers 3:17), Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya delineates the inescapable relationship between Torah study and earning a living: If there is no flour, there is no Torah - if there is no Torah there is no flour. It's the old which-came-first-the-chicken-or-the-egg paradox: You can't learn Torah on an empty stomach, yet if you don't study Torah, perhaps you will not merit ample sustenance from Hashem. So where is one to start: learning or livelihood?

A wealthy financier was vacationing at the pier of a small European coastal village when a small boat with a lone fisherman docked. Inside were several large fish. He asked the fisherman how long it took to catch them. "Only a short while," he replied. The financier then asked why didn't he stay out longer, and catch more fish? The fisherman replied, "I have already made enough to support my

family for today."

"So what do you do the rest of the time?" asked the financier. "I say Tehillim, I study Torah with my children, I have a nap in the afternoon, and every evening we eat supper as a family. After that, I study Gemara and Chumash with a friend, my children review what they learned that day, and we go to bed early in order to be fresh and alert for tomorrow."

"Listen," said the financier, "I'm a successful businessman, and I could help you turn your fishing skills into a booming business. You should spend more time fishing, and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat on which you could catch far more fish. Then you could buy several boats, and eventually have a fleet. You will move to the big city and open your own cannery..."

"How long will all this take?" asked the fisherman. "About 15 years," replied the tourist.

"Then what?" "Then you would announce an IPO and sell stock in your company to the public! You'd make millions!"

"Then what?" asked the fisherman. "Don't you see?" said the magnate. "Then you could retire - move to a small coastal village, where you could fish a little, learn with your kids, take a nap each afternoon, and spend the evenings with your friends and family!..."

There is another Mishnah in Pirkei Avos (2:4): "Rabban Gamliel used to say: Do not say, 'When I will be free, I will learn,' - perhaps you will not be free." There are times when we all play the role of the financier. We really, really want to learn, and work on the things that are important to us; tefilah (prayer), tikkun ha-midos (character refinement), and avodas Hashem (serving G-d). There are just a few more things to take care of, and then... We fail to seize the present, preferring, instead, to push things off just a little - in hope of a rosier future. After we manage to settle all the little, insignificant details, then, we tell ourselves, we will be able to devote ourselves fully to the real purpose of life - becoming a better Jew.

As prudent as this approach may seem, says the Bobover Rebbe zt"l (whose first yurtzeit is this Shabbos, Rosh Chodesh Av - zechuso yagen aleinu), if we hearken back to the very infancy of our nation, its fallacy becomes apparent. After being offered the Torah, we replied, "Na'aseh ve-nishmah, We will do and we will hear!" We did not ask for time to think things over, to check our appointment books (or Palm Pilots (tm)) and figure out if we can fit the Torah into our schedules. We did not say: Tell us first what we must do, and then we'll see how and if we can accommodate the Torah.

The Talmud (Shabbos 88a) cites the criticism of a certain heretic: "Overhasty nation - your mouths speak before your ears listen! You should have responded, 'We will hear and [then] we will do,' - if [your lifestyle] could accommodate the Torah, good, and if not, not." Our nation did not come into existence by dint of its cautious deliberation and forethought. We will do - our obligation to Torah and mitzvos will be our priority and our focus, even before we will hear - and figure out just how

we'll manage it.

If there is no bread, no doubt, there can be no Torah. But do not make the mistake of thinking this means one should push off Torah study until he has, so to speak, more than enough "bread." (And is there ever really enough?) For if there is no Torah there is no bread - even if we succeed in amassing wealth and comfort, what is it all worth if we lose sight of what should really be the focus of our lives?

This, says the Rebbe zt"l zy"a, was the error of the tribes of Gad and Reuven. Their first concern was to build stables for their livestock - to make sure their professional lives were in order, and there would be ample bread on the table. Only then would they begin thinking about cities (which according to the Midrash [Koheles Rabbah 9:7] refers to houses of prayer and study) for their children.

While in principle Moshe conceded to their plan, he took issue with their motus operandi. First, he said, make sure the children are looked after. They, after all, are the future of our nation. Only then should you look into taking care of your flocks. And as your mouths have spoken you shall do - just like you spoke at Har Sinai, when you said "Na'aseh ve-nishmah, We will do (first!) and [then] we will hear."

The Rebbe zt"l zy"a arrived in America in the wake of the devastation of WWII. By any count, the notion of rebuilding the Bobov dynasty to even a whisper of its previous glory was unthinkable. Any rational person would have said (and there were many who did!): How can we even consider rebuilding institutions of Torah and chassidus NOW - when everyone is simply wondering how to make it to tomorrow?! First let us reestablish ourselves on the new frontier, let us find our footing and settle down - then we can consider how to go about rebuilding Torah.

One Erev Shabbos, the Rebbe zt"l used to tell, he was accompanied to the mikvah (ritual bath) by a close acquaintance. As they walked, the Rebbe dreamed aloud about how one day - soon - he would build a Talmud Torah, a girl's school, a Mesivta. Money was scarce, manpower was even scarcer - but there was no time to wait. As they reached the mikvah, the Rebbe turned to his companion. "By the way - could you lend me a quarter for the mikvah?"

The words Na'aseh ve-nishmah, as the Rebbe zt"l zy"a so eloquently explained their message, were no doubt emblazoned in his prophetic vision. The Torah will not wait for us - we must do all we can to seize the moment. May the merit of his holy neshama protect us.

Have a good Shabbos.

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