

# NOT OUR PETS

by Rabbi Yochanan Zweig

*"They approached him and said, 'Pens for the flock shall we build here for our livestock and cities for our small children.'" (32:16)*

After conquering the lands of Sihon and Og on the eastern side of the Jordan River, the children of Gad and the children of Reuvein approached Moshe. They requested this land as their share of Eretz Yisroel to build pens for their animals and cities for their children[1]. When Moshe reviewed their request he transposed the two needs stating "you shall build cities for your children and pens for your animals[2]." Rashi points out that Moshe was criticizing them for their flawed priorities, placing concern for their livestock before their children[3]. How could the generation entering the land of Israel who were taught Torah by Moshe himself have had such distorted values, as to place the concern for their livestock ahead of their own children?

The Talmud records that parents are financially responsible for their children only until the age of six. After children reach that age parental support is deemed a charitable act[4]. The commitment of Jewish parents to their children is legendary. Why does the legal responsibility of the Jewish parent not reflect the value system inculcated within each Jew?

A major pitfall in parenting is the perception that our children are extensions of ourselves, thus overlooking the child's need for independence and self-expression. Another equally problematic situation occurs when a child lacks the necessary gratitude for his parents' efforts to ensure his well-being, viewing their commitment and sacrifice as his right. The Talmud offers the solution to both problems. When a person is legally and fiscally responsible for an item, he feels a sense of ownership over it. Removing parents' financial responsibility for their child enables them to view the child as a separate entity rather than chattel or appendages to them. The Jewish parent innately feels a moral obligation to support his child, ensuring that the child will not be left neglected. The message instilled in children is that their parents are not legally obligated to support them, but do so out of love. This leads children to display gratitude for their parents efforts and concern for their well-being.

The children of Gad and Reuvein had the appropriate sensitivities concerning their legal responsibilities. They owned their livestock and therefore were morally and legally bound to ensure their well-being. Their children, whom they correctly viewed as independent entities, were not their legal concern and therefore not mentioned first. This reflected a positive quality for it indicates that they did not feel compelled to support their children because they viewed them as appendages;

rather, maintaining a healthy relationship with their offspring and recognizing their individual qualities, they supported them out of love. Moshe's argument was that their legal responsibility to care for their animals stems from the responsibility to take care of themselves and those entities that are an extension of them. The reason to ensure that their children are cared for, although only a moral one and not legal, is far more compelling than even their responsibility to take care of themselves.

1.32:16

2.32:24

3.32:16

4.Kesubos

## Well Done

*"Take vengeance for the children of Israel against the Midyanites..."(31:2)*

Since Midyan was responsible for Bnei Yisroel's sins of immorality and idolatry which resulted in the deaths of twenty-four thousand Jewish men, Hashem instructed Moshe to lead the Jewish army into war against the Midyanites[1]. The Midrash asks why Moshe delegated this responsibility to Pinchas if Hashem instructed him to lead the army. The Midrash explains that the Torah is teaching us a fundamental principle: "Bor sheshasisa bo al tizrok bo even" - "Into a well from which you have drunk do not cast a stone[2]." Moshe had sought refuge in Midyan when fleeing from Pharaoh for having killed an Egyptian taskmaster. Having benefited from Midyanite hospitality, it would have been inappropriate for Moshe to lead the effort to annihilate them.

In Parshas Va'eira, Hashem commanded Moshe to defer to Aharon the task of implementing the first plague, transforming the water of the Nile River into blood[3]. Citing the Midrash, Rashi explains that since the Nile had protected Moshe when he was an infant, it would have been a display of ingratitude to act as the conduit through which the river was smitten[4]. This would appear to be an example of "into a well from which you have drunk do not cast a stone". Why does the Torah repeat this principle in Parshas Mattos if it was already relayed in Parshas Va'eira? Why did Hashem instruct Moshe in Parshas Va'eira to display this sensitivity, while, were it not for Moshe's own initiative, this sensitivity would not have been displayed in Parshas Mattos?

The reason that Hashem gave to Moshe for attacking Midyan was "ki tzor'rim heyim lachem" - "for they are your antagonists[5]." The Midrash is sensitive to the usage of the verb "tzor'rim" which is present tense and implies an ongoing state of affairs. If the attack against Midyan was as a result of their role in Ba'al Pe'or, it would have been a solely punitive strike and the verse should have stated "for they were your antagonists", using the past tense[6]. Therefore, concludes the Midrash, the attack against Midyan was a pre-emptive strike, to ensure that they would not endanger Bnei Yisroel in the same manner at a future date[7].

Hashem's instruction to bring the plagues upon the Egyptian people was purely punitive in nature; Bnei Yisroel were no longer in danger. Under these circumstances, Hashem instructed Moshe to defer to Aharon the task of implementing the first plague as a sign of gratitude for having benefited from the river that was to be smitten. The attack against Midyan was a pre-emptive strike to ensure Bnei Yisroel's safety. Under such conditions Moshe was not expected to display sensitivity toward the aggressor. Nevertheless, as a "midas chasidus" - "act of piety", Moshe abstained from acting as the conduit through which a nation unto whom he was indebted would fall.

1.25:9,39:2

2.Bamidbar Rabbah 22:4

3.Shemos 7:19

4.Rashi *ibid*

5.25:17

6.Bamidbar Rabbah 21:5 See *Tiferes Tzion*

7.*Ibid*