

MONEY AND THE KIDS

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Matos & Masei

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Mattos--Masei

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Money and the Kids

And they said, "We will build sheep pens for our livestock here and cities for our children." (32:16)

The Jewish people reached the plains of Moav, the jumping-off point for the invasion of Canaan, which was imminent. But the tribes of Gad and Reuven, rich in livestock, preferred the lush pasturelands of the Trans-Jordan to shares in Eretz Yisrael proper. They asked Moshe for permission to take their share in the Trans-Jordan.

Moshe berated them for letting the others fight to conquer Canaan while they settled down in their ranches. Furthermore, their reluctance to cross would have a demoralizing effect on the others, just as the report of the Meraglim had demoralized the people thirty-eight years earlier.

"This is what we want to do," they said to Moshe. "We want to build sheep pens for our livestock here and towns for our children. Then we will go quickly at the head of the army and fight until the land is conquered and apportioned. Only then will we return to our homes."

"All right," said Moshe (32:24), "build towns for your children and pens for your sheep. And make sure you keep your word."

Notice that Moshe reversed the order of their priorities. They wanted to "build sheep pens for our livestock here and towns for our children." First let us take care of the livestock. Let us make sure we have pens in which to keep them so they don't wander off into the hills and get lost or stolen.

Cows and sheep are valuable assets, and we have to take good care of them. Then they spoke about building "towns for our children." Then we will provide our children with a place to live while we are at war.

Oh no, Moshe replied. You have it backwards. First of all, "build towns for your children." Make sure you have attended to the needs of your children. Afterwards, you can also build "pens for your sheep." First you take care of your children, then you worry about your cattle.

The Midrash sums up the exchange with the verse (Koheles 10:2), "The heart of the wise man is on his right, and the heart of the fool is on his left." Moshe's heart was on the right. He had his priorities right. Their hearts were on the left. They gave precedence to secondary considerations. They were more worried about their money than their children.

When we look at this incident, we say to ourselves, "How foolish can people be? How warped can their values be? How can anyone put the welfare of his cattle before the welfare of his children?"

Unfortunately, this is not an isolated incident, something bizarre that happened thousands of years ago. It is an everyday phenomenon. People become focused on their livelihood, on developing a business, on advancing professionally, on building a practice, and their kids get lost in the shuffle. They don't realize that they are making the exact same mistake as the tribes of Gad and Reuven. But it is true. It happens all too often.

Rashi writes (32:24) that the tribes of Gad and Reuven did not return home to the Trans-Jordan until after the seven years of conquest and the seven years of apportionment. They remained in Eretz Yisrael for a full fourteen years. Those little children they left behind -- let's assume they were 3 or 4 years old -- how old were they when their fathers returned home? Teenagers! Practically adults. The Midrash tells us that their fathers were shocked to find that their sons had long hair, that they were indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors.

This is what happens when parents give priority to their wealth over their children.

The Ksav Sofer raises a question with the latter part of Moshe's words. After helping the tribes of Gad and Reuven get their priorities straight, he told them, "Make sure you keep your word." Why was this necessary?

The answer, says the Ksav Sofer, is that Moshe knew with whom he was dealing. People who could even think of protecting their money before they protect their children cannot be trusted. They are so intent on their wealth that they can do anything. Therefore, Moshe had to exhort them to keep their word.

Rav Tzaddok Hakohein explains that the desire for money is greater than any other material drive, since it is the only one that is insatiable. There is a limit to how much a person can eat, to how many times he can commit adultery, but there is no limit to how much money he can accumulate. The quest for wealth can become more obsessive than any other quest. All too often, the children are the price of the wealth.

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