

THE JOY OF MUSSAR

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Rabbi Frand on Parshas Mattos-Massai

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 645, Women and Bentching. Good Shabbos!

Do We Repeat The Mistake of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain?

This week's parsha contains the story of the Tribes of Gad and Reuvain, who asked to settle on the Eastern bank of the Jordan in lieu of having a portion on the Western part of Eretz Yisrael. They requested their portion in Trans-Jordan because of the abundance of grazing land there and the abundance of cattle that they possessed.

Moshe Rabbeinu's original interpretation of their request was that they were refusing to participate in the conquest of Eretz Yisrael proper. However, they corrected this interpretation and promised him: "Enclosures for the flock we shall build here for our livestock and cities for our children. We shall arm ourselves swiftly before the Children of Israel, until we will have brought them to their place, and our children will dwell in the fortified cities in face of the inhabitants of the land." [Bamidbar 32:17]

Moshe Rabbeinu responded positively to their proposal clarification, however he instructed: "Build for yourselves cities for your children and enclosures for your cattle, and what has come from your mouth you shall do." [Bamidbar 32:24]

If we pay careful attention to these pasukim [verses] we notice a vast difference between their original proposal and the final instructions Moshe issues to them. The Children of Gad and Reuvain proposed that they would first build enclosures for their flocks and only then would they build cities for their children to live in. Moshe Rabbeinu reversed the order and insisted that they first build the cities for their children and only afterwards worry about building enclosures for the flocks.

Moshe sensed that their first preoccupation was their money and property. The first thing that came out of their mouths was "let us build barns and corrals for our cattle!" The children were an

afterthought. He promptly corrected them: "First take care of your children, and then worry about your cattle."

In connection with this incident, the Medrash expounds on the pusuk in Koheles [10:2]: "The heart of the wise man is on his right, the heart of the fool is on his left." The Medrash says that "the heart of the wise man" refers to Moshe and the "heart of the fool" refers to the Children of Gad and Reuvain, who made the primary subordinate and the subordinate primary. They gave priority to their money over their children.

When we consider this incident of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain, we say to ourselves, "How foolish can people be! How can anybody put the welfare of their cattle before the welfare of their children?"

Unfortunately, this is not something that only occurred thousands of years ago with Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain. It re-occurs throughout the centuries of history and up until today. We make sacrifices for earning our livelihood and sometimes our children get lost in the shuffle.

When we put in hours and hours to build a business or establish a practice or whatever it may be, and our children get the short end of the stick we don't see that we are making the same mistake as did Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain. But it is true. It happens all too often.

Chazal say that Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain did not only stay for the seven years of conquest, they stayed for the additional seven years of settling Eretz Yisrael as well. When they came back after 14 years the children who they left as little toddlers were teen-agers, young adults. Chazal say that they found that their children had long hair (which was the custom of the Gentiles) and they were not able to differentiate between the Jewish children and the non-Jewish children. They were shocked. They could not believe it. That is what happens when one put the emphasis on "enclosures for our cattle" before "cities for our children".

Rav Tzadok HaKohen from Lublin notes that there are many pleasures (tayvos) in this world that people continuously seek. The biggest tayvah in the world is the passion for money. Every other tayvah -- for food, for women, for other sensual pleasures -- has a point of satiation. One can only eat so much before he becomes full. Only the tayvah for money has no limit. There is no mechanism in our bodies that says "I have enough money already." As King Solomon wrote: "One who loves money will never be satiated from money." [Koheles 5:9]

Therefore, we should not point the finger at Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain and shout "Idiots! Idiots!" There are times when we all have the problem of putting our children secondary.

The Kesav Sofer focuses in on the last charge of Moshe Rabbeinu to Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain. After reversing the order of their pledge by telling them to build cities for their children and then build enclosures for their cattle, Moshe added "and that which came out of your mouth, you shall do." What is Moshe adding with that last phrase?

The Kesav Sofer answers that Moshe knew whom he was dealing with. People who are so lustful for

their money that they can give priority to it over their children would sell their grandmother down the river. Normally, such people cannot be trusted. They promise, but do not deliver. Therefore Moshe had to warn them explicitly - keep your word!

The Joy Of Mussar

The Sefas Emes' father died when the Sefas Emes was young. The Chiddushei haRim, who was the Sefas Emes' grandfather raised the young orphan, who was a child prodigy. At a very young age, the Sefas Emes once stayed up almost the whole night learning Torah with a study partner.

The Sefas Emes fell asleep right before morning prayers and came into Shacharis late. The Chiddushei haRim approached his grandson after davening and laced into him. He told him, "If the Rebbe's grandson comes late to davening, what type of impression does that make on the people?" He told him his actions were a Desecration of G-d's Name. He went on and on, cutting the young boy to pieces.

The Sefas Emes kept totally quiet. He did not offer the obvious excuse that he was up all night learning. His chavrusa, who was up with him and knew what had happened, approached his young study partner and asked, "Why didn't you just tell your grandfather you were up all night studying?"

The Sefas Emes answered, "To hear mussar from a great person is a wonderful experience. It was worth it to hear the admonitions and chastisement of the 'Zeida' even though I am 100 percent innocent."

We can't relate to this idea. When we are right and someone accuses us falsely, we are the first to jump and correct the misimpression. The Sefas Emes wanted to hear the chastisement.

The Sefas Emes brought a proof to the correctness of his position (of listening silently to the unjustified rebuke of a great person) from the Tribes of Gad and Reuvain.

When they came to Moshe Rabbeinu and asked to live in Trans-Jordan, Moshe Rabbeinu jumped at them. He accuses them of being cowards, of refusing to fight, of repeating the sin of the Meraglim, and on and on. Then they clarified their original position. However, in the meantime, they sat there and listened to Moshe Rabbeinu's whole tirade. They patiently took in all the mussar that he was giving them, before they corrected his misimpression of their proposal.

It is worthwhile to hear mussar from a great teacher. It is worthwhile to hear oneself being cut up and put in one's place by a great individual... even if the criticism is not correct. The Sefas Emes explained that it was worth hearing his grandfather's mussar, whether or not he was at fault.

This week's write-up is adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tapes on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic portions for this parsha from the Commuter Chavrusah Series are:

Tape # 108 - Toiveling Dishes
Tape # 601 - Maa'ris Ayin Revisited
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