

WHERE FIRSTBORN RUSH IN.□.□.

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshios Matos & Masei

Parshas Mattos: Where Firstborn Rush In.□.□.

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"The children of Reuven and Gad had abundant livestock - very great. They saw the land of Yaazer and the land of Gilad, and behold! - the place was a place for livestock." (32:1)

The people of Reuven, Gad, and half of shevet Menashe made a special request to Moshe: They wanted to live east of the Jordan River (Eiver HaYarden), not in Eretz Yisrael proper (Canaan at that point). Moshe initially is upset with them, because he assumes that they are trying to back out of fighting to conquer the Land with the rest of the tribes. They then explain that they want that land only because it is good for their livestock. They would go along with the rest of Bnei Yisrael to conquer Eretz Yisrael, and only once the Land is settled will they return to their inheritance on the other side of the Jordan.

Moshe Rabbeinu accepts their offer. Chazal, however, find fault with these shevatim for choosing to live on the other side of the Jordan River. They teach that these tribes were the first to go into exile because they chose not to live in Eretz Yisrael proper.

The sefer Shivtei Yisrael finds an interesting common denominator between the three shevatim who chose to live east of the Jordan River: They were all firstborn. Reuven was firstborn to both his father and his mother, Gad was firstborn to Bilhah, and Menashe was firstborn to Yosef.

We know that the Torah affords firstborn sons certain privileges that others do not get. They inherit a double portion, and they command the respect of their siblings (Kesubos 103a). On a more practical level, firstborn children tend to be leaders by nature, and they are often infused with loads of energy.

The problem is that that energy can sometimes be used impetuously. Yaakov Avinu, when blessing

the shevatim, rebukes Reuven for being pachaz kamayim - "in a rush like water." Reuven, by his very nature, was like a torrent, and in his rush to do what he considered right, he made errors in judgment. This was not only Reuven's shortcoming, it is something that tends to exist among firstborns.

In general, firstborns tend not to fare well in the Torah: think Kayin, Yishmael, and Eisav; Reuven who lost his bechorah, and Menashe who was surpassed by Ephraim. Perhaps being pachaz, impetuous, unbridled, and unwilling to let things play themselves out has some part in this lack of success.

A case in point might be the reaction of these tribes when they saw the eastern side of Eretz Yisrael. The rest of the shevatim were willing to wait and see the wonderful land that awaited them on the other side of the Jordan River. But Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe saw good grazing land and said, "Let's grab it!"

Chazal disliked this attitude.

Shivtei Yisrael suggests that the impetuosity of these two-and-a-half tribes cost them a yearly mitzvah. The Mishnah teaches that one may not bring bikkurim from Eiver HaYarden. The Mei Shiloach teaches that the significance of bikkurim is that a farmer spends his entire year working his field, waiting for his fruit to start growing. When they finally do start to appear on the trees, the farmer might be tempted to rush out to the field and grab them. The Torah tells him, "No, this is not for you. This is for the Kohen."

Part of the message of the bikkurim, then, is to learn to be patient.

Perhaps, suggests Shivtei Yisrael, those on the eastern bank of the Jordan River were not allowed to bring bikkurim because the trait that placed them there was the impatience that bikkurim is meant to counteract.

Parshas Masei: Selfish, But Potent Nonetheless

"For he must dwell in his city of refuge until the death of the Kohen Gadol, and after the death of the Kohen Gadol the killer shall return to the land of his possession." (35:28)

The Torah makes the length of an unintentional killer's sentence in an ir miklat (city of refuge) contingent upon a most peculiar condition: the death of the Kohen Gadol. The Talmud (Makkos 11a) relates that mothers of Kohanim Gedolim were concerned that those killers might pray that their sons should die, and they would therefore bring food and clothing to the arei miklat in an effort to make its residents happy so they should not wish death upon the Kohen Gadol.

The Talmud wonders why they had to undertake such action. A verse in Mishlei (26:2) states clearly, "A gratuitous curse will not come upon him"; one need not fear a curse issued for no reason. Why, then, should the Kohen Gadol's mother be concerned that her son would die as the rest of a killer's curse?

Talmud Yerushalmi explains that there is a difference between a curse and a tefillah (prayer). An unprovoked curse will not come to pass, but there is no guarantee that an unjustified and unprovoked tefillah will not be answered.

There is another halachah involving a Kohen Gadol that points to this very same teaching.

We read during the avodah of Yom Kippur Mussaf that in the times of the Beis HaMikdash, as the Kohen Gadol exited the Kodesh HaKodashim, he would utter a short tefillah. What was he davening for at that exalted time?

One of the things he said was, "Please ignore the prayers of wayfarers."

The Kohen Gadol was concerned that someone would be in the middle of a road trip and he would feel a couple of drops. In fear of getting caught in a downpour, he might pray, "Please, Hashem, let it stop raining." Since that selfish prayer would be detrimental for farmers and society at large, the Kohen Gadol had to expend some of the uplifted moments as he exited the Kodesh HaKodashim to pray that Hashem ignore that tefillah, because he realized that Hashem might just listen to this single wayfarer!

To understand how and why it is so, we must analyze a story in the Gemara.

The Talmud relates that a demon was injuring members of the yeshivah of Rav Acha bar Yaakov, and all attempts to rid themselves of the demon failed.

One day, Rav Acha bar Yaakov heard that Abaye would be visiting their town, and he came up with a plan. He issued orders that no one should invite Abaye to stay with them in their homes, which would compel him to sleep in the shul (where the yeshivah learned) that night. Acha figured that Abaye would meet the demon and daven to have it removed once and for all.

Indeed, that is exactly what happened.

The Maharsha poses a question on this story. How could Rav Acha bar Yaakov endanger Abaye's life under the assumption that he would somehow emerge alive and well? How did he know that a miracle would save not only Abaye, but the entire city from danger? Even assuming that one is allowed to rely on miracles — which we are not allowed to do - a person who has enough merit to warrant a miracle may not want to waste his merits on having a miracle performed for him.

How did Rav Acha have the right to make Abaye lose some of his merit in heaven?

The Maharsha answers that Rav Acha bar Yaakov felt that Abaye would be able to stop this demon through tefillah, not through a miracle. Prayer, he explains, is part of the natural order of the world, and since it is a law of nature, one does not lose merit when using it.

The same applies to the prayers of unintentional killers in an ir miklat or of a wayfarer.

True, there is no reason for Hashem to grant their wish that a Kohen Gadol die or that there be no

rain because one person will get home with wet clothing. But prayer is a natural part of the system this world was built on, and it can be accepted even without a reason.

When we see how potent prayer is even when the person davens for outrageous things (that the High Priest should die; there should be no rainfall), we realize how much more potent our prayers are when we daven that we should be able to learn better, to be better parents, better spouses, and better members of our community!

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