

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

First Things First!

2003 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The Tribes of Reuben and Gad were wealthy. They owned larger flocks of livestock than the other tribes. They needed a place to graze those flocks. That place was the East Bank of the Jordan River.

The two tribes asked Moses to allow them to inherit the East Bank:

“ . . . The land . . . is livestock land -- and what we have is livestock . . . let this land be given to us . . . don't bring us across the Jordan.” (Numbers, 32:4,5)

A win/win situation. Reuben/Gad get grazing land for their flocks. The other tribes get to divide the Land of Israel ten ways, rather than twelve.

Moses, however, was not impressed:

“Will your brothers go out to battle while you stay here? Why are you trying to discourage the Israelites from crossing over into the land that G-d has given them? . . . If you will discourage them from following Him, He will once again leave us in the desert. Then you will have destroyed this nation completely!” (6-7, 15)

The Reubenites and Gadites offered Moses a deal:

“We will build enclosures for our sheep and cities for our children. We will then arm ourselves and go quickly in front of the Israelites until we have brought them to their homeland . . . We will not return home until every Israelite has taken possession of his hereditary property.” (16-18)

Seems like a fair proposal. Moses seems to have gone for it:

“Every armed man must cross the Jordan . . . When the land is conquered before G-d, you may return home . . . This land will then be yours . . . Now build cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep -- and keep your promise! ” (21-22, 24)

It was a deal! *“We will do as you have ordered. Our children, wives, property, and livestock will remain here . . . All our forces will cross over for battle before G-d, as you have said.”* (26-27)

Now everything was going to be okay. Everyone was in agreement.

Or were they? Did you notice the nuanced indications of diverse priorities?

Reuben and Gad offered to “*build enclosures **for our sheep** and cities **for our children**.*” First the sheep and then the children?! Rashi explains that Moses rejected that offer and reprimanded them. He insisted that they “*build cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep.*” The children had to come first.

The Reubenites and Gadites implied that they got the message: “*We will do as you have ordered. Our children, wives, property, and livestock will remain here ...*” They now understood that they had to straighten out their priorities. Family comes first!

But did they REALLY get the message? Why did they reject the Land of Israel in the first place? “. . . *the land . . . is livestock land -- and what we have is livestock.*”

The whole premise of their request was that Transjordan would be good for business. The kids? Oh, they’ll be okay. We’ll protect our assets and our kids. Oh, that’s not the right order? Okay, we’ll protect our kids and our assets, if you prefer that order. Whatever we have to say to get this done . . .

Did they really understand Moses’ point, or were they only paying lip service? It seems to me that if they had really understood Moses’ reprimand about family priorities, they would have abandoned the project entirely. If they were really as concerned about the spiritual well-being of their children as they were about the material well-being of their property, would they have turned their backs on the Holy Land and settled in the Diaspora? Would they have rejected the opportunity for their children to live in the Land that G-d had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, preferring the opportunity to make a buck across the river?

The Talmud points out that when the Ten “Lost Tribes” of Israel were led into exile, those living on the East Bank of the Jordan were the first to go. Could it have been due to their mixed-up priorities?

It is important to make a living. It is even a Mitzvah. But how often does it happen that people put so much emphasis on their business that they neglect their REAL careers as parents and spouses?

They will even justify their work ethic by claiming it’s for the family! I’m doing everything I can FOR THEM! If I make a lot of money, my wife and kids will have whatever they need/want. Except for the fact that maybe what they REALLY need/want is a husband and a father! (“And the cat’s in the cradle and the silver spoon...”)

What is the cost of sacrificing one’s family on the altar of one’s career? Let me put it this way -- if business fails, there’s always Chapter 11.

But what are you going to do with a bankrupt family?

Have a great Shabbos.

