

# PARSHAS MATTOS

תשפ"ב

Parshas Mattos is a very interesting, sometimes confusing parsha. Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu to wage war with Midian and then he will die. Why attack Midian? Were they a military threat? No. The only reason there was to fight Midian was because of the spiritual danger that their women put Klal Yisroel in. All the men and most of the women – those who conspired to lure the Jewish men to sinning – were killed, and Klal Yisroel brought back an enormous amount of spoils of war. Moshe Rabbeinu killed Bilaam. Midian was a nation no longer. All of their possessions were plundered and the survivors were taken as slaves. The Torah goes into unbelievable detail to describe what they took and how it was divided among the people.

But Klal Yisroel weren't poor at the time. When they left Egypt, they emptied it out of its wealth. And at Yam Suf, they got even more wealth – the treasure houses of Yosef that he amassed during the years of famine were being guarded at Migdol – near a military camp next to Baal Tzfone near Yam Suf. When Pharaoh realized that Klal Yisroel were headed for this treasure, he dispatched the military to pursue them and they all drowned in the sea. The treasure became exposed and Klal Yisroel took all that as well.

So Klal Yisroel were fabulously wealthy in the desert. And they had no expenses throughout their journey because they were living on miracles the entire time and their clothes never wore out. Rishonim in the first perek of Shabbos tell us that merchants came to Klal Yisroel to sell their wares but Klal Yisroel had no reason to buy anything. Hashem kept them in the desert for 40 years for a simple reason – to learn and review the shiurim of Moshe Rabbeinu until their very being was imbued with Torah.

They have conquered the lands of Sichon and Og with all their spoils, and now they have the spoils from Midian. They are overstuffed with bounty – everything they could ever want and more than they could ever use. They are now re-entering civilization and they are confronted with a contest between competing values – money and their connection to Hashem. The Jews couldn't take personal pride in their wealth. They didn't make this money by themselves. It was all spoils of war that they simply took from their enemies. And the victories were not due to any kind of great military strategy or fighting ability on Klal Yisroel's part. Hashem clearly handed these nations to Klal Yisroel to wipe out with very minimal effort.

But even though they hadn't earned any of this wealth by their own efforts, the mere fact that they had it created a great nisayon. Money exerts a powerful pull on people and it starts to occupy their minds. The Jews must have traded the spoils among themselves and Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven chose to be the shepherds and traded their other spoils for sheep and cattle. They had vast grazing land and they decided to make their fortune right here in Eiver haYarden.

But why were they going through the desert in the first place? Why did they leave Egypt? To reach Eretz Yisroel! True, there is also kedushoh on this side of the Yarden, but it is a secondary level of kedushoh. These shevotim are faced with a dilemma – go for maximum parnossoh with second-level ruchniyus? Or first-level kedushoh with a lower-level parnossoh? It doesn't matter how they got the money – in their minds, once they have this wealth, they want to maximize it – this is the nature of having wealth. It doesn't matter that accumulating more wealth won't really increase their standard of living. As we see from modern-day billionaires, having money just drives you to make more and more of it with no limit. The place to maximize it is on Eiver HaYarden –

which has a lower level of kedushoh.

So Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven approach Moshe with their proposal to stay on this side of the Yarden. They want to sound frum about it too. So they preface their request with the fact that Hashem gave them so much cattle, and Hashem also gave them such fertile land for grazing cattle. So it is really what Hashem wants! They project their desires onto the will of Hashem. They aren't really asking for permission. They have basically made up their mind that this is where they want to live, and they are willing to settle for a lower-level kedushoh for the sake of their parnossoh.

Moshe Rabbeinu responds with a number of points. But they don't hear the entire message. When you are grabbed by money, you only hear what you want to hear.

One point Moshe makes is that you are being unfair to the rest of the shevotim who still have to conquer their territory from the seven nations. Without your contribution to the conquest, you are making it harder for the rest. You are disheartening the other shevotim – they might be tempted to stay on this side of the Yarden and not be bothered to fight.

Additionally, you are adopting the sinful attitude of the meraglim which was the very thing which kept Klal Yisroel an extra 38 years in the desert. You are turning Klal Yisroel away from Hashem and creating another rift!

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven only hear some of the problems. They said we will make corrals for our sheep and build cities to protect our children, while the men continue on and fight at the front line with the rest of the shevotim till the land is conquered. When Moshe paraphrased their offer, he made a subtle switch in the order. He told them to make cities to protect the children and corrals for their flocks. Moshe was hinting to Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven that they had their priorities backwards.

It is odd, because when you would ask any parent, point-blank, what he values more – his children or his money – the answer will certainly be that his children are the most important! But quite often, what we say we believe and what our actions show about us are two very different things. Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven let it slip that what they truly value is their money and Moshe Rabbeinu had to correct them. People make decisions and these decisions show what is primary and what is secondary in their lives. Too often, the most valuable thing becomes secondary.

People make major life decisions. Decisions about where to learn, where to live and who to marry that will map out the trajectory of the rest of their lives. But people base it on the most trivial factors. It is mind-boggling. Decisions about where to send your children to yeshiva should not be decided by whether they will have music or art enrichment classes. The priority is to make them bnei Torah with yiras shomayim. You work out the other things you want around that. Everything else should be secondary.

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven only respond to the accusation that they are leaving the rest of the nation with less fighting capability. So they pledge to go ahead and fight on the front lines. But they are missing the bigger problem. They are turning away from Hashem by preferring to live with a second-level kedushoh and making their parnossoh their highest priority. How did this happen? They were in the desert for 40

years doing nothing but learning Torah and all of a sudden they come onto some money and it all goes out the window?

Moshe said, obviously you have made a decision and you aren't going to change your mind. So I have to help you make the best out of a bad situation. So he sends half of Shevet Menashe join them. The Netziv explains that Shevet Menashe was devoted to limud Torah and Moshe thought they will make Torah an address in their territory and prevent them from being totally obsessed with their sheep and cattle. It worked, but only for a while. The first shevotim to go to golus were Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven.

Later in the next parsha, the Torah describes the setup of boundaries of Eretz Yisroel and the orei miklot. There are six cities of refuge for those who murdered accidentally to escape to. Three cities were designated to be on one side of the Yarden, and three cities for the other side. Chazal asked, why do two and ½ shevotim need the same amount of orei miklot as the 9 and ½ shevotim? It isn't proportional! Chazal answer that in Eiver HaYarden there are more accidental murderers who will need more orei miklot. But this doesn't make any sense. What is it about a piece of land that could cause people to kill accidentally? Something in the water? Something in the air or the fruit?

The answer is based on what the gemara says about not placing your life in the care of an am ho'oretz. It is because when a person doesn't take his own life seriously, he won't take the safety of other lives seriously either. Why doesn't an am ho'oretz care about his own life? An am ho'oretz is like Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. He is someone who has the wrong priorities in life – he chooses to live a more material existence and is not interested in making ruchniyus a priority. Such a person is being careless with his own neshomo. He isn't worrying about why he is put in this world. He just goes after his drives and his ambitions. So if he is careless about his own neshomo, he can't be trusted to be careful about other people's lives. He is prone to take risks with the lives of others and is more likely to kill accidentally.

An example of killing accidentally in modern times is someone who drives recklessly and ends up in an accident and kills someone. Why did he wind up in an accident? He isn't valuing life above his sense of convenience. He is willing to put his life and others at risk in order to

save a few minutes to get somewhere. He doesn't value the tzelem Elokim and with this attitude, you need more orei miklot. You need to be in the company of talmidei chachomim.

Chazal tell us that these shevotim went into golus because they didn't value the kedushoh of Eretz Yisroel. But they were living in Eretz Yisroel! Yes, but they were willing to settle for a lower level of kedushoh in order to maximize their parnossoh. So Hashem gave up on them before the rest of Klal Yisroel. This lesson is so relevant to our times. People make decisions about which career they want to pursue and where they want to live. What factors go into that decision? What is the most important factor and what are the peripheral factors? Unfortunately, for most people, the most important factor is how much money they can make with this career.

A talmid of mine was thinking about buying an apartment in Eretz Yisroel in some town for a fantastic price with potential to make a great return on the investment. But I asked him, what kind of neighborhood is it in? What kind of schools and yeshivos will his children attend? What kind of friends will he and his wife have? "But it's such a good deal!" I wanted to show him what his priorities were and they are the wrong ones. The same goes for choosing a career. Are you going to have a crazy Manhattan job working 16 hours a day with no time for learning and no time for family? What's really important in life? Your neshomo and your family or your income? You have to keep your priorities straight.

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven made their decision. They were willing to give up on kedushoh and they were willing to leave their wives and children behind for seven years. Someone else needs to take care of them for us. Why? Because Eiver HaYarden is so fertile and we have so much cattle! We can't pass up this opportunity to make it big!

The story of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven happens in every single person's life because everyone has to make these kinds of decisions sooner or later. What is the central value of my life which is non-negotiable and what else has to fall into place around that?

The tragedy of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven is that their wealth blinded them and they didn't know how to handle it. In the end, they were the first to go into golus and the first to be lost to Klal Yisroel.