

This week, we read Parshas Mattos-Massei. It is a very long and complex parsha.

Hashem instructs Moshe Rabbeinu to exact revenge on the Midianim and then he will die. The very next posuk says Moshe gathered the people to prepare them to follow Hashem's orders to attack Midian. This is amazing – Moshe knows that this is the last thing he will be doing before he dies. He could have delayed it, made some kind of excuse to push it off. But he sets out to do it immediately without hesitation! He is the Eved Hashem – no ego, no sense of entitlement. This is why Moshe is the perfect conduit to convey the will of Hashem to Klal Yisroel with absolute fidelity. He had no agenda other than to fulfill the will of Hashem, and completely nullified himself to achieve it.

Then we have the war against Midian. The posuk repeats: *אלך למטה אלך למטה*. Chazal learn from this that for every thousand soldiers sent to the battlefield, there were a thousand Jews praying for the soldiers to succeed. Each soldier was part of a partnership. His fighting in the battle depended on his counterpart's tefillos. In the first battle Klal Yisroel ever fought – against Amoleik – Moshe Rabbeinu instructed Yehoshua to gather soldiers, and Moshe went up to the hill. The Mishna in Rosh Hashono tells us that the purpose of Moshe's holding up his hands was to instruct the soldiers on the battlefield to subjugate their hearts to Hashem. If they did that, and realized their success depends on Hashem, they would win. If they thought they were the ones winning on their own without Hashem's help, they would lose.

So Moshe sets up two sets of 12,000 soldiers. Hashem is with them in the battlefield. Without the military camp being kodosh and cleansed of tumoh and arayos, the Shechinoh would not reside with them and they wouldn't be successful in battle.

In the end, Klal Yisroel are completely victorious. They wipe out all the adult males and come back with an enormous number of spoils of war. What right did they have to do this? Midian tried – and succeeded – in seducing Klal Yisroel to commit very grave sins, and this put them in severe jeopardy. The Midian nation had a din of a rodef. Someone who tries to entice a Jew to committing zhus and avodo zoro is the same as attempting to kill him. So, Hashem told Klal Yisroel to wipe them out.

The army comes back and divides half the spoils among themselves and the shevotim equally. They began trading among themselves and bartering one kind of spoils in exchange for another. Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven wound up trading their other spoils in exchange for the sheep, goats and cattle that the other shevotim got.

Now we come to a very critical point. Klal Yisroel are spread out all over Ever haYarden. They are conquering swaths of territory and start to settle the vast plains before them. These two shevotim come to Moshe Rabbeinu and ask to remain in this territory to have access to the grazing land needed for their enormous flocks, and not go over the Yarden. Moshe has two complaints against this request. The first is that this land you are settling was conquered by all 12 shevotim jointly. You benefitted from everyone's participation. Is it fair that the rest of the land be conquered by only 10 shevotim and you don't help out in their conquest in return? The second complaint is that this isn't the land that Hashem promised the Jewish people. The sin of the meraglim was that they rejected Eretz Yisroel. Here you are repeating this horrible sin! You are rejecting Eretz Yisroel.

So Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven make a compromise. They do not want to weaken the morale of Klal Yisroel and agree to join them in

conquering their land. But first, they must build corrals for their flocks and cities for our families. Then they will go over and fight alongside the rest of Klal Yisroel. But they insist on settling in this land and not living in Eretz Yisroel proper.

Moshe Rabbeinu agrees to the compromise, but when he paraphrases their requests, he makes one significant change. He says you will first build cities for your families and corrals for your flocks. He is conveying a very powerful critique: you have skewed priorities. You talk about prioritizing your money over your children when it should be the reverse.

They make a conditional agreement to ensure each side keeps their end of the deal. They finish conquering the rest of Ever haYarden.

This is a very strange story.

It concludes with setting up Orei Miklot. Moshe set aside six cities – three in Ever haYarden and three in Eretz Yisroel proper. But Chazal are puzzled about the proportions. Why set up three out of six cities of refuge for only two and ½ shevotim, while the other three service 9 and ½ shevotim? The gemara answers that there will be more accidental murderers in Ever haYarden, so they will need a disproportionate number of Orei Miklot. But this answer is very strange. How did Moshe Rabbeinu know this in advance? Was there something in this environment that causes fatal accidents?

The answer is very deep. The Mishna in Keilim says there are levels of kedushas ho'oretz, and the kedushoh of Ever haYarden is lower than that of the rest of Eretz Yisroel. The bris between Hashem and Avrohom Ovinu was for Eretz Yisroel, the land on the other side of the Yarden. The side of Ever haYarden has less kedushoh. But what did Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven do? They opted out of the higher kedushoh and chose the lower level of kedushoh for the sake of their parnossoh.

There is a basic standard of shemiras Torah and Mitzvos that everyone has to meet. That is the minimum below which you cannot slide under. This level is already challenging and complex. Take hilchos Shabbos – meleches tzod. Even simple, everyday scenarios of closing drawers and doors can be very complicated. But this is the minimum and it is obligatory on every Jew from the highest level to the lowest. Hashem gives us everything we have, and this creates a debt of obedience to keep Shulchan Aruch. But, there are higher and higher levels of avodas Hashem in each mitzvah.

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven are saying we are taking a second-class level of avodas Hashem for ourselves. We'll pass on going for the highest level because we need to ensure a good parnossoh. Moshe is telling them that they don't appreciate that the full kedushas ho'oretz allows the fullest expression of kiyum Torah and Mitzvos. This is why we are being given Eretz Yisroel in the first place and not some other land. They made a decision to compromise on their level of ruchniyus.

What is a rotzeach b'shogeg? It is someone who acts recklessly and is sloppy in his concern for human life. He drives down the highway at a crazy speed, endangering himself and others who may suddenly get in the way. The problem of people opting for a lower level of avodas Hashem similarly means they don't value the fact that their neshomo will be underdeveloped as a result. They don't value the preciousness of the neshomo of a human being – not their own neshomo and certainly not those of others. So, Moshe Rabbeinu reasons that they will predictably become careless and wind up becoming accidental

murderers and they will need more Orei Miklot.

With this, we can answer another puzzling part of the story. The bargain to remain in Ever haYarden was originally made by Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. But by the end of the parsha, we see that half of Shevet Menashe is also settling in this area. Where did they come from? Why are they getting a part of it? The Netziv proves from many pesukim that Shevet Menashe had a special involvement in limud Torah. Moshe Rabbeinu decides that if these two shevotim are opting to compromise on their ruchniyus, they are going to need role-models who can show them the value of limud haTorah. Otherwise, they will be lost completely. So he assigns half of Shevet Menashe the job of keeping these two shevotim in check. But the gemara tells us that they didn't succeed in their mission and in the end, they were the first to go into golus along with Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. In the end, the influence went in the wrong direction.

The other lesson we learn from Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven is that people are capable of prioritizing their parnossoh over their families. They will ostensibly tell you that they value their children more, but their actions betray their true priorities. They were so preoccupied with their path to parnossoh and financial success, they lost perspective and confused the tofel for the ikar. They lost the value of human life. They will certainly remain frum and keep Torah and mitzvos, but they will make compromises for money and other things that aren't so important.

This parsha is critical for understanding what life is really about, and

what is important. In the culture of the Western world, one's job, one's economic situation is the most important thing. The fact that we don't have the same priorities as the Western world makes us different and often despised here in Israel. People get wrapped up in all kinds of external things and that's how they identify themselves. It is Yonah's response when he was confronted on the ship about who he was. They ask him where he comes from and what he does. They assumed that these things defined him, either by his country, or a certain social group, or his profession. Yonah responds that he doesn't define himself by any of those things. He is a Jew who fears Hashem, the Master of heaven and earth. Everything else is secondary. It doesn't make him who he is and why he makes his decisions in life.

We make brochos every morning defining who we are – we are Jews who are part of a nation who serves Hashem. This is one of the most important things we can discuss and we need to take it very seriously. The frum chareidi magazines used to feature only gedolim and great talmidei chachomim as the heroes and role-models of the Jewish people and highlight their spiritual accomplishments. Now they routinely portray successful frum business men as the heroes and role models, and highlight all their economic accomplishments. It is disgusting. This is not who Klal Yisroel are – we have a different identity and a different definition of success in this world.

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven made a critical mistake. Hashem drowned them with wealth and they lost all sense of proportion and balance to pursue it to the exclusion of everything important. We have to learn from their mistakes.