

Parashat Matot, 5771, 2011:

*Establishing Proper Priorities*

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Dedicated to the sacred memory of my sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam and Sheva bat Sarah Rivka.

[Rabbi Akiva said:] Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of G-d]; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to him that he was created in the image, as it is says, “For in the image of G-d, He made man” (Genesis 9:6). (*Ethics of the Fathers* 3:14)

Rabbi Akiva’s words refer to man in general, rather than to a particular ethnicity or religious group. His statement is a forceful pronouncement of the ultimate value of human life and our singular import in the eyes of our Creator. Unfortunately, however, much of world history reflects an entirely different attitude on the part of mankind toward human life. Man’s inhumanity to his fellow man is infamous, and the cataclysmic events that illustrate the cheapening of human value are far too numerous to list. One need only think of the Holocaust and other genocides in order to focus upon the dark and demonic side of mankind wherein the value of human life was all too demonstrably denied.

Sadly, mankind’s rejection of the ultimate value of human life is as ancient as the fourth chapter of *Sefer Bereishit*, wherein Cain murdered Abel:

And Cain spoke to Abel his brother, and it came to pass when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother and slew him. And the L-rd said to Cain, “Where is Abel your brother?” And he said, “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?” And He [G-d] said, “What have you done? Hark! Your brother's blood cries out to Me from the earth.” (Verses 8-10, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*, underlining my own)

According to the 8<sup>th</sup> century Midrash, *Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer* (Chapter 24), the generation that constructed the Tower of Babel (*dor hahaflagah*) personified the negation of the sanctity of human life:

Rabbi Pinchas said that they did not have enough bricks to build the city and the tower [of Babel]. What did they do? They would make bricks and count them, like an artisan, until they had built the tower to a height of seven levels. This height was accomplished on its east and its west. The builders brought the bricks up on the east side and brought them down on the west. If a man fell down and died, no heed was given to him. But when a brick fell down, they stopped work and wept, saying, “Woe unto us! When will another be brought up in its stead?” When Abraham son of Terach passed by and saw them building the city and the tower, he cursed them in the name of his G-d: “Oh G-d, confound their speech!” (<http://on1foot.org/text/pirkei-d'rabbi-eliezer-horev-24>, underlining my own)

In that perverse and twisted generation, a man's death meant less than nothing, whereas “when a brick fell down, they stopped work and wept, saying, ‘Woe unto us! When will another be brought up in its stead?’” Objects eclipsed the importance of human beings. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, the pursuit of rampant materialism was the goal of the day.

In our *parasha*, our ancestors regrettably fell into nearly the same error as the *dor hahaflagah*. Their priorities were radically skewed toward the pursuit of wealth instead of being focused upon the vital importance of their wives and children. Thus, when *b'nai Gad u'b'nai Reuven v'chatzi shavet Menasheh* (the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe) approached Moshe for permission to settle in Trans-Jordan, their words represented the essence of their acquisitive nature:

The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an abundance of livestock very numerous and they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. The descendants of Gad and the descendants of Reuben came, and they spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the kohen and to the princes of the community, saying, ... “the land that the L-rd struck down before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.” They said, “If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not take us across the Jordan.” They approached him and said, “We will build sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 32 selections from verses 1-16, underlining my own)

In one fell swoop, the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe gave up their inheritance in the Promised Land and revealed their true nature – corrals for their livestock took precedence over building cities for their children. Rashi (1040-1105), basing himself upon *Midrash Tanchuma Parashat Matot 7*, formulates their avaricious orientation in these words: “They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before their children.” (*Sefer Bamidbar 32:16*, translation, Rosenbaum and Silberman, *Pentateuch with Rashi’s Commentary*). Rashi continues and cites Moshe’s rebuke of their approach: “Not so! Make the chief thing the chief thing and what is subordinate subordinate. First build cities for your little ones and afterwards folds for your flocks.” (Ibid., with my emendations) This statement is based upon verse 32:24: “So [stated Moshe] build yourselves cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep...” Our ancestors apparently took Moshe’s *musar* (ethical admonition) to heart. Notice the new order of precedence in our passage:

The descendants of Gad and the descendants of Reuben spoke to Moses, saying, "Your servants will do as my master commands. Our children and our wives, our livestock and our cattle will remain there, in the cities of Gilead. (*Sefer Bamidbar 32:25-26*, underlining my own)

Instead of “sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children,” we now find: “Our children and our wives, our livestock and our cattle will remain there...” Following Moshe’s teaching, the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe finally “got it right,” and understood that children and wives must at all times take precedence over the pursuit of materialistic goals. *Moshe Rabbeinu* (our teacher Moshe) was gifted in that he could transmit this life-lesson in a manner in which it could be heard and practically applied. At long last, the tribes of Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe established the proper priorities

and embraced spiritually authentic family values that reflected the sanctity and value of human life.

With G-d's divine guidance, may we be *zocheh* (merit) to apply these lessons and establish proper priorities in lives based upon genuine Torah values. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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<http://reparashathashavuah.weebly.com/>

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