

*Parnasah, Possessions and Priorities*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Shifra bat Chaim Alter, and Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam.

Contrary to widespread practices found in many Jewish communities, a man is obligated to provide for the financial needs of his family, i.e. to “make a *parnasah*.” Rabbeinu Yosef ben Ephraim Karo (1488-1575) in his *Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chaim* 155, first discussed the mitzvah for a man to go from the *Beit Hakenesset* (Shul), where he has prayed, to the *Beit Hamidrash* (Study Hall) where he is duty-bound to learn Torah. Immediately thereafter, in Section 156, he discusses the obligation of *masah u’matan* (literally, “doing business” and in the wider sense, “making a living”). Approximately 275 years later, Rabbeinu Yechiel Michal ben Aharon Yitzhak Halevi Epstein (1829-1908), in his halachic *magnum opus* entitled *Aruch Hashulchan*, formulated the first halacha in this section in the following manner:

Afterwards [i.e., after praying and learning Torah] he should go to his business [literally *iskuv*] since all Torah that is not combined with work will ultimately become null and void and bring about sin. This is the case since poverty drives a man insane and removes him from his connection to his Creator. It is very positive for one to have a trade (literally *umanut*)...Many, however, err in this matter and say that having a trade is an embarrassment. [This is not the case] since many of the Mishnaic and Talmudic period Sages were artisans and craftsman. *Midrash Rabbah Bereshit* states: “Work is more beloved than the merit of one’s forefathers (literally *zechut avot*) since the merit of one’s forefathers protects one’s money while work saves souls [i.e., adds to one’s psychological and spiritual well-being]... Therefore, it is a tremendous level for one to financially support himself via the work of his own hands. As the verse states: “If you eat the toil of your hands, you are praiseworthy, and it is good for you” [*Sefer Tehillim*, 128:2, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*]. It is praiseworthy for you in this world and good for you in the World to Come where everything is good. (Translation and brackets my own)

Clearly, then, a man is obligated to work to support his family. Moreover, he is required to provide for them to the best of his ability and to use all of his *kishronot* (native gifts and talents) to do so.

Given the above, it is difficult to understand why Moshe changed the order of the words of *b'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* when they approached him concerning their idea of settling on the far-side of the Jordan River:

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, "Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, and Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon, 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." (*Sefer Bamidbar* 32:1-5)

At this point, Moshe berates them for seemingly abandoning their brethren's cause of conquering the Land of Canaan (verses 6-15). *B'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* then respond in the following manner (16-19):

They approached him and said, "**We will build sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children.** We will then arm ourselves quickly [and go] before the children of Israel until we have brought them to their place. Our children will reside in the fortified cities on account of the inhabitants of the land. We shall not return to our homes until each of the children of Israel has taken possession of his inheritance. For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan and beyond, because our inheritance has come to us on the east bank of the Jordan."

Moshe then appears to accept the pledge of *b'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* to participate in conquering the Land of Canaan, thereby not forsaking the needs of the rest of the people. In Moshe's response to them, however, he changes their order of operations in a subtle, yet highly meaningful way (20-27):

Moses said to them, "If you do this thing, if you arm yourselves for battle before the L-rd, and your armed force crosses the Jordan before the L-rd until He has driven out His enemies before Him, and the Land will be conquered before the L-rd, afterwards you may return, and you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the L-rd and from Israel, and this land will become your heritage before the L-rd. But, if you do not do so, behold, you will have sinned against the L-rd, and be aware of your sin which will find you.

**So build yourselves cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep, and what has proceeded from your mouth you shall do.**” 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.** But your servants will cross over all who are armed for combat before the L-rd, for the battle, as my master has spoken.” (Emphasis my own)

Let us review the textual change. In verse 16, *b'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* initially state: “We will build sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children.” In verse 24, Moshe reverses this order and states: “So build yourselves cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep...” *B'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* then accept Moshe’s modification and state: “Our children and our wives, our livestock and our cattle will remain there....”

What has actually taken place in the above interchange? What is its significance? What can we learn from this? Quite simply, *b'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven* placed their initial emphasis upon their livestock, the physical manifestation of their wealth, rather than upon their children and wives. Moshe, however, acting as the true *rebbe* (teacher) he was, modeled a very different approach for them. He emphasized the children and wives first, rather than possessions. He made it crystal clear that their priorities were completely askew. In this way, Moshe ingeniously taught that one works for his family, which is of primary importance, and that *parnasah* is in service to its needs. Rashi (1040-1105), quoting the *Midrash Tanchuma* (VII) on verse 16, underscores this point when he states:

**We shall build sheepfolds for our livestock here:** They were more concerned about their possessions than about their sons and daughters, since they mentioned their livestock before [mentioning] their children. Moses said to them, “Not so! Treat the fundamental as a fundamental, and the matter of secondary importance as a matter of secondary importance. First ‘build cities for your children,’ and afterwards ‘enclosures for your sheep’”

Rabbi Hershel Schachter *shlita*, Rosh Hayeshiva of Yeshivat Rabbeinu Yitzchak Elchanan, in a 2005 *drasha* on our *parasha*, noted the communal ramifications of the initial thinking of *b'nai Gad* and *b'nai Reuven*:

On a communal level, we have lost our bearings regarding what is a normal and proper lifestyle, and what is an opulent and improper one. In that context, some Orthodox people spend large sums of money on non-essentials without making yeshiva tuition a top priority, and consequently want to send their children to public school to save money. We, too, need Moshe Rabbeinu's rebuke! What an unfortunate confusion of priorities! Our children are immeasurably more valuable than our homes and all other material possessions.

Each month in the *Birkat HaChodesh* (Blessing for the New Month), we beseech Hashem for a month filled with goodness and blessing. We also beg Him for long, peaceful, and good lives. In addition, we specifically request from our Creator "*chaim shel parnasah*," a life wherein we can have successful livelihoods and financially sustain our families. Many of us, thank G-d, have been *zocheh* (merited) to have these requests fulfilled. In comparison to many of our ancestors, we live like kings. Yet, we must ever be vigilant to ensure that we do not misappropriate and abuse Hashem's beneficence. We must always remember why and before whom we labor. May Hashem always provide us with *parnasah*, and the wisdom to seek the right priorities, so that our families may lead lives dedicated to His holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom,

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [rdbe718@gmail.com](mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com).

\*\*\* My audio *shiurim* for Women on "*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*," may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

\*\*\* I have posted 164 of **Rabbi Soloveitchik's** English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. They are available here:  
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