



Canfei Nesharim

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Mattot: Living in Balance

By Jonathan Neril

This week’s Torah portion, Mattot, conveys a profound message about the ways in which we struggle to balance material and spiritual aspirations. With the Jewish people poised on the east bank of the Jordan River in what is now modern-day Jordan, the tribes of Reuven and Gad make a strange request of Moses. They ask his allowance to settle where they are rather than receiving their portion in the Land of Israel.¹

In describing the event, the Torah notes the two tribes’ abundant livestock and records their query as follows: “Enclosures for the flock we shall build here for our livestock and cities for our children”². Moses is disturbed by this request and sharply rebukes them. He demands that the men of Reuven and Gad fight alongside their brethren in conquest of Israel, and then continues in pointed reversal of their original statement of intention: “So build yourselves cities for your children and enclosures for your sheep.”³ Many commentators contrast the seemingly problematic request of the leaders of Reuven and Gad with Moses’ incisive response.

The great Torah commentator Rashi⁴, cites the Midrash that states, “They were concerned for their property more than [they were] for their sons and daughters, for they put [mention] of their livestock ahead of their children. Moses said to them: This is not right! Make that which is essential essential, and that which is secondary secondary. First build cities for your children, and afterward, enclosures for your sheep.”⁵ Their fundamental error, says the Midrash, was in allowing secondary values to trump primary ones.

Reuven and Gad found themselves caught in a web of conflicting values. On the one hand they saw in Jordan marvelous pasture land, holding the promise of material bounty and a comfortable life. On the other hand G-d had promised them a portion in Israel, where they could truly connect to the holiness of the land and their people. Moses viewed their initial preference - choosing pasture land and opting out of the war of conquest - as an improper resolution to their dilemma. He expected them to fight alongside the other tribes in the conquest of Israel. Furthermore, the Midrash views their final decision to settle on the east bank of the Jordan River as the reason why Reuven and Gad were eventually the first two tribes to be exiled.⁶

The conflict of values at play in this narrative is one that parallels tensions that many of us negotiate every day. Three particular value areas are in tension - material, spiritual, and ecological.

Most Westerners seek a relatively high material standard of living marked by ownership of a house, car, and appliances; vacations; and frequent consumption of meat and other “luxury” items. We

1 The author would like to thank Avraham Neuman for his assistance in editing this piece.

2 Numbers 32: 16 All translations and bracketed phrases are from Artscroll Rashi Chumash unless otherwise noted.

3 Translation from Judaica Press.

4 France, 1040-1105

5 Midrash Tanchuma (a collection of homiletical exegesis based on the passages of the Torah, originating from 200-400 CE) Mattot 7

6 Midrash Tanchuma, Mattot 7, citing I Chronicles, 5:26

also feel a deep desire for spiritual fulfillment, inner peace, and a connection to the Infinite; which manifests itself in traditional religious practice, 'new age' spirituality, and a host of other forms and perspectives. Finally, most of us sincerely value a planet in ecological balance, where the global climate is stable, species perpetuate themselves, and the ozone layer is intact, to name a few primary issues. We search for balance between these things for ourselves, but even more importantly for our children and for their children. Yet true equilibrium often escapes us.

Like the tribes of Reuven and Gad we find our material and spiritual pursuits at odds. Excessive focus on material well-being distracts us from G-dly pursuits, and in the Book of Deuteronomy Moses warns the children of Israel of exactly this dynamic:

Take care ...lest you eat and be satisfied and you build good houses and settle, and your cattle and flocks increase, and you increase silver and gold for yourselves, and everything that you have will increase - and your heart will become haughty and you will forget Hashem your G-d...⁷

How does this happen? What accounts for the negative correlation between material excess and awareness of the Divine?

In a world where “belief” in the power of money is a primary value, there is simply less room for belief in G-d as the central force in our world. Even more so, we begin to credit ourselves for our successes and dismiss G-d’s uniquely providential role in our lives. As the Kli Yakar⁸ says about Reuven and Gad, “the nature of wealth is to make its owner arrogant.”⁹ Focusing too much energy on the material unbalances us, weakens our ability to focus on the spiritual, and ultimately removes us from G-dly consciousness and pursuits. Thus a first step toward *tikkun* (repair) is acknowledging that some material aspirations can undermine spiritual ones.

The hardship of balancing material and ecological desires is as problematic for most of us as resolving the above conflict between material and spiritual ones. A good example is global climate change. Fossil fuels are central to our standard of living in that they power the manufacture and operation of consumer goods. They are also the main driver of global climate change. International scientific consensus states that such change will very likely bring more severe storms, floods, and droughts, with major impact on human societies.¹⁰ In light of this, it would seem reasonable to amend the way in which we produce and consume. Yet many of us would experience a serious reduction in fossil fuel use as inconvenient at best and seriously distressful at worst. What do we do when the lifestyle we want to live endangers the healthy functioning of the planet on which we live?

In spite of the real difficulties in resolving the dichotomies of materialism/spiritual vibrancy and materialism/ecological balance, we must constantly strive to do so. Rabbi Aharon Liechtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel, points out that harmonizing values which are in tension is supremely important to the spiritual life of a Jew. He writes that “Balance... is very important... Throughout his works, the Rambam [Maimonides] stresses its importance in different areas of one's life:

⁷ Deuteronomy 8:11-14

⁸ Rabbi Ephraim Luntchitz, Prague 1550-1619

⁹ Kli Yakar to 32:1-2. See also a teaching cited by the author of this dvar Torah by Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg from his book HaKetav VehaKabala on the Torah portion of Yitro in *Canfei Nesharim's Eitz Chaim Hee* series.

¹⁰ See the 2007 Fourth Assessment Report of the Nobel-peace prize winning Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, specifically the *Working Group II Report "Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability"* available online at <http://www.ipcc.ch/ipccreports/ar4-wg2.htm>

action, emotion, thought, one's personal, social, religious, and moral self...The Rambam [views] the element of balance as a condition of one's ideal service of G-d..."¹¹

Moses' rebuke of Reuven and Gad raised the two tribes' awareness about a fundamental imbalance in their worldview. He catalyzed them to change their actions. In the end they did settle the east bank of the Jordan River, but only after accompanying their Israelite brethren in the conquest of the land of Israel. The insight Moses provided about how to prioritize values is one that we can all bring into our lives everyday. On a deep level, our values and the actions they produce determine the makeup of our lives. The return to balance is not only a move towards personal harmony, but has an impact that ripples outward into the world, from which the whole world can only benefit.

Action Items:

1. Take the time to list the values that are important to you. Rank them according to primacy. Consider whether your life reflects those beliefs.
2. Choose two ways in which you can change your life, bringing it into closer accord with the values you hold – both on the material/spiritual level and the material/ecological level. Notice how those value sets are interrelated.

Jonathan Neril is a rabbinical student at Yeshivat Bat Ayin, and is currently in his fifth year of Jewish learning in Israel. He holds an MA and a BA from Stanford University with an emphasis on global environmental issues. He serves as *Canfei Nesharim's* project manager for *Eitz Chayim Hee: A Weekly Environmental Torah Commentary for Learning and Action* and is involved in Canfei Nesharim's pilot-program, *Seminars for San Francisco-area Jewish Educators on Judaism and the Environment*. He and his wife Shana live in Gush Etzion.

¹¹ "A Pure Heart: Refining Character and Balancing Values," in *By His Light: Character and Values in the Service of God*, based on addresses by Rabbi Aharon Lichtenstein, Rosh Yeshiva of Yeshivat Har Etzion, Israel. Adapted by Rabbi Reuven Ziegler, Ktav Publishing House: Jersey City, NJ, 2002, p. 212-213.