

Parashat Matot-Masei 5780, Rabbi David Mahler

In the 1992 Presidential election, Governor Bill Clinton defeated the incumbent candidate, George Bush.

The soon to be President Clinton had a few campaign slogans. His first was “For People, For a Change”. His 2nd, “Putting People First” was actually the name of his first book.

The affable message of Clinton’s slogan was in stirring contradistinction to the Independent Presidential hopeful, Ross Perot, “Ross for Boss”.

In “Putting People First”, Clinton had it right. He just wasn’t the first one to write the book.

The last few *parshiot* in *Sefer Bamidbar* have recorded the Jewish people’s steady advance through the *midbar* into *Eretz Yisrael*.

In this week’s *parsha*, the Jewish people find themselves on the threshold of the Holy Land, in the freshly conquered territory just East of the Jordan River.

Before the people are ready to move on westward however, the two enterprising tribes of *Reuven* and *Gad* notice the East Bank isn’t so bad. These two tribes have an enormous amount of livestock, and the land sits unoccupied, with plenty of open pasture: it seems like a perfect match.

But when representatives from the two tribes approach Moshe with the request that they be allowed to waive their portion in *Eretz Yisrael* in exchange for the right to settle the land on the other side of the Jordan, he is less than pleased.

Moshe minces no words. In a long rebuke, Moshe exclaims that the tribes of Reuven and Gad’s proposition was nothing short of a cowardly betrayal: at the hour of the Jewish people’s greatest need, they are simply punching out, and abandoning their brethren to fight on their own.

Aside from the dent this would put in the Jewish people’s fighting force, the psychological damage to their morale would be even worse. This was an act of treason and treachery akin to the previous generation’s Sin of the Spies,

when the spies returned and sowed despair in the hearts of the people, depleting them from the will to conquer their homeland.

As Moshe furiously denounced these alleged traitors, the representatives maintained a respectful silence, and listened. Finally, after Moses was through with his harsh rebuke, they spoke up.

“No, Moshe,” they exclaimed. “It was never our intent just to remain here. **We’ll build stables for our livestock and homes for our children.** Then we will join our brothers in the fight for Israel. Only after all is conquered will we return home and settle.”

Reuven and Gad’s proposal, was never about shirking from their responsibilities towards their people, or cutting their brothers loose to wage war on their own. That had never been their intention. While they did not want to settle the Land of Israel on the West Bank, they were fully prepared to enter it with their people, to help conquer and settle it. Only then, say the two tribes, would they return to Transjordan, rejoin their families and settle their own land.

“Ahh,” says Moses, if that is the case, this idea isn’t so bad after all. Moshe accepted their request, so long as they fulfilled the conditions they had laid out on their side of the bargain.

However, let’s look a little more closely at Moshe’s words.

Moshe, obviously pacified by the quick and obviously well-prepared response, reviewed the stipulations. “OK,” he countered, “you shall arm yourself for battle, cross the Jordan and fight with your brothers until *Hashem* drives out the enemy. Once the land is conquered and settled, you can come back here and this land will be a heritage for you.” Then, in what is seemingly out of place he adds the following. “**Build cities for your children and pens for your livestock**”.

Why is Moshe adding his comments on the domestic portion of their request? This is an issue of foreign policy! Isn’t his only concern that the tribes should join their brothers in the conquest of *Eretz Yisrael*?

Rashi brilliantly notes that Moshe subtly switches the order of the request. The tribes said they will “**build stables for our livestock and homes for**

our children.” Moshe switches the order and tells them **“build cities for your children and pens for your livestock”**

Moshe was pleased with the offer to fight. However, he noted a major problem in the plans of the tribes of *Gad* and *Reuven*.

Moshe is very concerned with the order of their words. He feels that it is indicative of their priorities. He listens, reviews their offer and is doubtful. People who put physical and monetary values before humans tend to worry about finances before family.

I’m not sure who said this line first but, “The most important things in life, aren’t things”.

And people who put money first often change their position, when their holdings are at stake.

Thus, Moshe reiterates their pledge with one major amendment. Make sure you first build cities for your children and only then construct pens for your livestock.

A major provision in the deal was not only a military commitment, but a philosophy, a *hashkafa*, that will guide Jews for centuries. Put the people first!

What a message for the 3 weeks and the 9 days. Put our interests aside for the needs of others. Don’t ignore my own needs but prioritize others. Think about that. Let me give of myself for someone else this week. Let me push myself a little bit more in thinking and doing for others.

One of the stops on a family trip to Israel a few years back was Latrun – Israel’s Tank Museum.

The most amazing thing I learned while there was the difference in the construction and layout of the Israeli constructed tanks. After the Yom Kippur War in 1973, Israel decided that instead of purchasing or capturing older, and sometimes outdated tanks from other countries, they would begin to build their own.

In a meeting of some high-ranking generals and engineers, the question was posed:

What part of the tank is the most important? Is it the hull? The guns? The turret? The engine?

The answer to this question meant that the rest of the tank's construction would be built around protecting it.

Up until this point, all other countries felt the engine was indispensable, placed the engine in the rear of their tanks, and did the best they could to protect the engine.

However, Major General Israel "Talik" Tal, felt the world was wrong. The most important part of a tank's success isthe crew – the people. We need to protect them Tal said. The new Israeli tanks would put the crew in the back of the tank and the engine in the front – the exact opposite of the rest of the world.

The Merkava made its debut on the battlefields during the 1982 Lebanon War.

"Putting People First"

Let's ask ourselves that question.

How often do I call someone – a friend, relative, community member who I know would so appreciate that personal attention?

Do I ask people often enough about what is going on in their lives.....and when they open up to me, and let me in to their world, do I care enough to follow up, make mention of it in a caring way the next time we touch base?

How often do I inconvenience myself because I was able to put myself in someone else's shoes and actually give them what they needed instead of me offering only what I'm comfortable with?

I'm unsure whether "Putting People First" was what catapulted Clinton into office but it definitely has made Israel's *Chayalim* safer and more secure.

Moshe Rabbeinu's message to *Reuven* and *Gad* was about accentuating the thou. Is a responsibility that falls on of all of us.

Do we do that enough?

Good *Shabbos*!