

Matot-Masei, 5782
Rabbi Zev Wiener

Near the end of Parashat Matot, the tribes of Gad and Reuven approach Moshe, requesting to reside outside the formal Land of Israel in order to help raise their livestock. As they pitched their proposal, they note:

גָּדְרַת צָאן נָבֵנָה לְמִקְנֵנוּ פָּה וּעֲרֵים לְטַפְנָה
We will build pens for our flocks here and cities for our children (32:16)

However, when Moshe accepted their proposal, he curiously responded by reversing the order of their terms:

בְּנֹו לְכֶם עָרֵים לְטַפְכֶם וְגָדְרַת לְצַנְאָכֶם
Build cities for your children and pens for your flocks (32:24)

Noting this change, Rashi (v. 16) explains the powerful lesson Moshe was teaching these tribes:

חֲסִים הָיוּ עַל מְמוֹנָם יוֹתֵר מִבְּנִיהָם וּבְנוּתִיהָם שֶׁהָקִידִימָוּ מִקְנִיהָם לְטַפְמָה. אָמַר לְהָם מֹשֶׁה לֹא כִּן עָשָׂו הָעִיקָּר עִיקָּר וְהַטְּפָל בְּנֹו לְכֶם תְּחִלָּה עָרֵים לְטַפְכֶם וְאַחֲרֵיכֶם גָּדְרוֹת לְצַנְאָכֶם
They were more concerned about their property than about their sons and daughters, for they mentioned their livestock before their children. Moshe said to them, ‘Not so. Make that which is primary primary, and that which is secondary secondary. First build cities for your children, and only afterwards pens for your flocks.’

The tribes of Reuven and Gad had simply forgotten their priorities. The lure of material prosperity was so appealing to them that they consecrated it above their children, losing sight of what was truly **עִיקָּר** – primary, and what was **טְפָל** – secondary. All that Moshe had to do was remind them of what they already knew: that there is no profession more important than raising the next generation.

The mistake of the tribes of Gad and Reuven remains as relevant today as it was thousands of years ago. It is a lesson that we all know, yet that is so easy to forget. But the future of our people depends upon us remembering it. The tension between the need to earn a living and the need to invest time in raising our children is one that confronts every generation, and the resolution of this tension – where we choose to place our priorities – can bear eternal ramifications.

Nowadays, many parents work endless hours in the office, literally not seeing their children except on weekends. Other parents may have more forgiving schedules, but are

constantly going out with friends and to events, handing their children off to babysitters, nannies, or self-supervision. Even among those parents who do stay home, the ubiquitous distraction of smartphones and media is creating a generation of children who do not know what it means to deserve the complete attention of their parents, as their parents always seem to have something more important and pressing that momentarily grabs their attention while their children are speaking to them. Moreover, aside from diverting a parent's time and presence, professional demands occupy a great deal of parents' mental space. Sometimes, these demands can be so taxing that parents have no remaining bandwidth to regularly reflect on how each of their children is doing in life, in order to try to notice and gently address problems while they are still small, before the unnoticed problems become larger and harder to fix.

No amount of money, no size of a home, and no fanciness of a vacation can ever replace the gift of presence, love, and discipline, which can set a child up for life. Just as sunlight enables a plant to grow, the light of a parent's loving presence helps a child to grow up strong, selfless, and healthy. Living in a global culture so heavily characterized by entitlement, pleasure, and the value of projecting image over character, today's children appear particularly susceptible to feelings of low self esteem, nihilism, and worthlessness. And if the staggering rates of childhood mental illness and addiction are any indication, we cannot assume that whatever worked in previous generations will necessarily work in this generation. Even if children of previous generations grew up ok with largely absent parents, today's children seem to be inundated by so many more alien values – values which infiltrate everywhere, even within the walls of our home – that every parent must stay actively attuned to doing whatever possible to foster his or her children's wellness.

Of course, there is only so much we can do. Nothing elicits humility -- the recognition that each of our accomplishments is never truly "ours" but rather an undeserved Divine gift -- more than parenting. In this pursuit, we recognize how precious little we control in terms of the outcomes of our children, and that we cannot guarantee anything, no matter how much we monitor our children. Indeed, some parents sincerely try to do everything "right," but their children tragically do not end up on a healthy path, while other parents seem to do everything "wrong," yet their children turn out incredible. And yet, despite the fact that we can never control the final outcome, we are nonetheless required to do whatever attempts are in our control to increase the likelihood of success. First and foremost, we must pray to G-d constantly for the wellbeing of our own and our community's children. There is never any substitute for that. But in addition to prayer, we must follow the lesson of Moshe, always making our children our number one priority above other professional and personal responsibilities. Our children must always come before our livestock.

Prioritizing our children is not an easy task. Earning a living can be extremely difficult, and we often may not have a choice in how many hours we need to work (though sometimes, we

may have more of a choice than we realize). Furthermore, putting down our work phones every single time we are with our children is likely unrealistic and not sustainable, and life will always have distractions that drain our mental bandwidth. But all this notwithstanding, we must never forget our priorities. The more we constantly remind ourselves of our true priorities, the more we will naturally find less-obvious opportunities to attend to our children and make them feel loved, whatever our particular work situation may be.

Whether a person has children of one's own or not, the responsibility to prioritize and help raise the next generation falls upon every single Jew. The essence of being a Jew is sharing in collective responsibility and a collective destiny. As Moshe himself taught the tribes of Gad and Reuven just a few verses earlier, *האחים יבואו למלחמה ואתם תשבו פה* – *will your brothers go out to war while you stay here?* (32:6) In the very difficult war that so many young children face nowadays to simply grow up as healthy, upstanding Jews, it truly does take a village. Our Sages teach that even if a person does not have physical children, in the spiritual realm, parenthood transcends biology, and that one who teaches someone else's children Torah is considered to be a parent of that child as well (Sanhedrin 19b). By teaching Torah values, which include love and kindness, to each other's children when we see them in Shul and around the city, we become spiritual parents of those children, and have the potential to impact them eternally. We must never underestimate the powerful effect we can have on other people's children by showing interest, offering encouragement, and teaching Torah whenever we see them – thereby making them our own children as well. And in the merit of these efforts, may we be blessed to see each and every one of our beautiful collective children grow up to Torah, Chuppah, and Maasim Tovim.