MATTOT: Children or Sheep?

THE FIRST ARMY OF ISRAEL

Our most precious possession is our children: we work for them, save money for them, and make every necessary effort to ensure that they lack nothing and have everything they need—and if possible, more. My question is: do we, as parents, consistently act with this goal in mind, or do we sometimes forget the importance of our children?

In the first parasha of this week, Mattot, the Torah tells us that the tribes of Reuben and Gad had a lot of livestock. Before entering the land of Israel, they asked Moshe to settle on the other side of the Jordan River in the territories of Sichon and Og, which were very fertile lands. Moshe initially refused. Why? Because the Jewish people had to face the powerful Canaanite nations militarily, and they needed a strong and solid army. These tribes constituted nearly 20% of the army, and their desertion would cause great frustration among the other tribes. Moshe asked them: "How can you settle in these lands and leave your brothers to fight without you?" Moshe demanded that they join the conquest war. The leaders of these tribes then told Moshe that they would not abandon the rest of the tribes: the plan was to settle their families in the new lands and quickly join the army of Israel, fight alongside their brothers, and then return to their families. These were the words they said to Moshe (beMidbar 32:16): "…in the lands of Og and Sichon 'we will build pens for our livestock and cities for our children… we will leave our families there and immediately join the army." Moshe accepted the proposal and responded affirmatively with these words (beMidbar 32:25): "All right, then, build the cities for your children and the pens for your animals, and join the army…"

MOSHE AND DR. FREUD

At this point, it is worth noting, with Freudian eyes, a small but very significant difference between what the leaders of these tribes said and what Moshe told them. The leaders of the tribes mentioned that they would build “pens to settle their animals and cities for their children.” But when Moshe responded to them, he mentioned the children first and then the animals. Keep in mind that at that time, cows and sheep were not pets: livestock was one’s capital, money, and work. Moshe noticed that these men, quite literally, put their money before their children!

Finally, after listening to Moshe, the leaders of the tribes realized their Freudian slip and told Moshe that they would do what he ordered them (beMidbar 32:25-26): “Our children, our women, and all our animals will stay there in the mountains of Gil’ad, while we prepare for war.” Now, they mentioned the children first, their families, and then the animals. Although this terrible difference in the scale of values is not explicitly discussed but occurs subconsciously, it seems they understood they were mistaken. It was enough to hear Moshe repeating what they said, but in the correct order of priorities, for them to learn the lesson.

URGENT vs. IMPORTANT

Surely, we all know that our children are more important than our work. Any father or mother we ask will obviously answer that they value their children much more than their material possessions. However, we parents do not always act in accordance with that. That is to say: I know it is very important to be with my children, to dedicate time to them, listen to them, play with them, “but I don’t have time.” I know I have to take an interest in them, talk about how their day was, and know what they are doing on the internet, “but I am so busy.” Thus, unintentionally and without planning, we have no time (or energy) left for “the most important thing in our lives.”

Sometimes, unintentionally, we put our children in a second category. I remember something funny but also sad: one of my friends in South America had a domestic employee to whom she entrusted her children, almost to raise them, but she did not allow her to use her washing machine because she did not trust her to wash the clothes without ruining them.

HISTORY REPEATS ITSELF

Sometimes, without realizing it, we repeat the history of our ancestors and do not invest the necessary time in our children. Surely, the men of Gad and Reuben knew perfectly well that their children were more important than their material possessions, but like almost all parents, they needed someone, in this case, Moshe, to remind them of the order of priorities.

Our compass, our reference, is the Torah. And every time we study it, it should clearly remind us that our children should come first.

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