

July 19, 2014

D'RASH - MATOT

There is no denying that it is better to be rich than poor. While much of the world may deride Americans as being overly materialistic, few nations complain when their standards of living rise, as measured in material terms, and few object to emulating the American way of life. Blue jeans and McDonalds are very popular world-wide. While some other religions and philosophies may cultivate a disdain for the physical comforts, many voices within Judaism have asserted that possessions are neither intrinsically good nor necessarily evil. What matters is how we come to possess them, how we use them, and how we discard them when we are finished.

This parashah speaks of a case in which material desire gained an excessive prominence - where lust for property could have corrupted religious values and displaced social responsibility. As the Israelites approached the Promised Land, they could hardly wait to take possession of it. And yet, the members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad could not help noticing that the land on which they were standing looked pretty good. They thought the grass was greener on this side of the river. It may have occurred to them that this land might meet their material needs perfectly without having to fight for the land of Israel.

Rather than affirming their loyalty to HaShem, grazing their flocks with the least amount of effort became their goal. They were rich, possessing a large number of cattle, but because of their love of wealth, they wanted to settle outside of the land of Israel. When they said to Moshe, "Do not take us across the river," it may have triggered thoughts in Moshe's mind of an earlier incident which resulted in a 40 year vacation in a warm and sandy place. After the two tribes agreed to arm themselves and not return to the land they wanted until Canaan was subdued, Moshe let them have their own way. Their "yes" was "yes" and they kept their word, but because of their material wealth and a desire for an easy living, they separated themselves from their brothers. Being detached from their kinsmen, they became a flashy and easy target for their enemies. In fact, they were the first tribes to go into exile. Few of us would deny that while wealth can be a great blessing, it can also be a person's undoing. When it becomes an obsession and displaces the abiding source of happiness, wealth turns on its owner and becomes a snare. Let your highest goal remain that of living a life style that is embodied in the Torah - you'll be glad you did.

Hebrew                Numbers 32:4-5

English                Numbers 32:4-11

Haftarah              Jeremiah 1:16

B'rit Chadashah    Matthew 5:33-37