

Allowing our Wealth to Draw us away from God

This weeks reading is from Parsahat Mattot (*Bamidbar / Numbers 30:2-32:54*). the Lord commands the men of Israel saying **נָקֵם נְקַמְתָּ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֵת הַמִּדְיָנִים** assemble to make war against Midian to “*avenge the children of Israel of the Midianites.*” The men went and made war with Midian, burning their cities and killing the men but they kept the women and children alive. Moshe was angry with the military officers for keeping the women alive because they were the ones who caused the people to sin against the Lord at Baal Peor on the counsel of Bilam. In addition to this, the Scriptures tell us that the sons of Reuben and Gad had a large number of cattle and they desired to remain on this side of the Jordan to make their homes. The Scriptures say they asked to not be taken across the Jordan river into the Promised Land. Based upon the war with Midian, the people keeping the women and children alive, and these people wanting to remain on this side of the Jordan, these Scriptures appear to be speaking to us about bondage and lust of our own desires verses a life that is surrendered to God’s will and purpose. Did the sons of Reuben and Gad desire God’s will for their lives?

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א ומקנה | רב הנה לבני ראובן ולבני-גד עצום מאד ויראו את-ארץ יעזר ואת-ארץ גלעד והנה המקום מקום מקנה: ב ויבאו בני-גד ובני ראובן ויאמרו אל-משה ואל-אלעזר הכהן ואל-נשיאי העדה לאמר: ג עטרות ודיבן ויעזר ונמרה וחשבון ואלעלה ושכם ונבו ובען: ד הארץ אשר הפה יהיה לפני עדת ישראל ארץ מקנה הוא ולעבדי מקנה: ה ויאמרו אם-מצאנו חן בעיניך יתן את-הארץ הזאת לעבדיך לאחזה אל-תעברנו את-הירדן:

Bamidbar / Numbers 32:1-5

32:1 Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had an exceedingly large number of livestock. So when they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, that it was indeed a place suitable for livestock, 32:2 the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben came and spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the priest and to the leaders of the congregation, saying, 32:3 ‘Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo and Beon, 32:4 the land which the Lord conquered before the congregation of Israel, is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.’ 32:5 They said, ‘If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not take us across the Jordan.’ (NASB)

In Parashat Matot, the sons of Reuben and of Gad say *32:5 “... ‘If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not take us across the Jordan.’” (NASB)* This is a significant statement to make having come all this way and all those many years to turn around and ask that they would not be taken over the Jordan into the Promised Land. Based upon their request, Moshe and Aaron thought they were again trying to discourage the sons of Israel from crossing over into the Land. In the process of trying to explain what the sons of Reuben and Gad were thinking at this point in time, the rabbis expound upon the Section of Scripture from

Parashat Matot in *Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 22, Part 9* (מדרש רבה במדבר) (פרשה כב סימן ט) saying the following:

Midrash Rabbah Bamidbar, Parashat 22, Part 9

An alternative exposition of the text, Now a very great multitude of cattle (Bamidbar / Numbers 32:1). This bears on what Scripture says, A wise man's understanding is at his right hand; but a fool's understanding at his left (Ecclesiastes 10:2). The expression, A wise man's understanding is at his right hand, applies to the good inclination which is set on one's right, while the expression, A fool's understanding at his left, applies to the evil inclination which is set on one's left. Another exposition is that the expression, A wise man's understanding is at his right hand, refers to the righteous who apply their minds to the Torah, which is on the right; as it says, At His right hand was a fiery law unto them (Devarim / Deuteronomy 33:2), while A fool's understanding at his left, alludes to the wicked, who set their minds on getting rich; as it says, In her left hand are riches and honor (Mishley / Proverbs 3:16). Another exposition, the expression A wise man's understanding is at his right hand, applies to Moshe, while A fool's understanding at his left, applies to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, who made the main thing the subordinate, and put the subordinate thing first, for they cherished their property more than human life, saying to Moshe, We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our little ones (Bamidbar / Numbers 32:16). Moshe said to them, That is not right. Rather, do the more important things first, build you cities for your little ones (Bamidbar / Numbers 32:24), and afterwards Folds for your sheep. Thus, we have explained the expression, A wise man's understanding is at his right hand as applying to Moshe, and a fools understanding at his left as applying to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad. The Holy One blessed be He, said to them, Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for humans souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it. Of them it says, an estate may be gotten hastily at the beginning; but the end thereof shall not be blessed (Mishley / Proverbs 20:21). In the same strain it says, Weary not yourselves to be rich; cease from your own wisdom (Mishley / Proverbs 23:4). And who is rich? He that is contented with his lot; as it says, When you eat the labor of your hands, happy will you be, and it will be well with you (Tehillim / Psalms 128:2).

The midrash opens with the wise man having understanding at his “*right hand*” and the fool, his understanding at his “*left hand.*” The idea taken out of the midrash is that the righteous stand on the right side, whereas the wicked are on the left. The rabbis equate the fools understanding to the left hand, to the wicked, and to the children of Reuben and Gad because they desired to get rich by remaining on this side of the Jordan. Note

how they say that they cherished their wealth over life. The last time the congregation decided not to go over to the Promised Land they had to stay 40 years in the wilderness and many died. The rabbis say that the Lord (the Holy One blessed be He) said to the children of Reuben and Gad *“Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for humans souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.”* The idea is that they desired wealth rather than human souls and since their focus was on material things, there would be no blessing from God. The midrash also equates the right hand with Moshe, and the left hand with a fool’s understanding. The interesting point here is with regard to the right-verses-left imagery that is being illustrated. Why do the rabbis correlate the right hand with righteousness and the left with wickedness? In the Scriptures, we often find the use of the right-verses-left imagery and so the question is *“why do Scriptures emphasize the right hand so often?”*

Today we have a phrase that is known as one’s *“Right hand man.”* According to Merriam-Websters Dictionary, the definition of *“Right hand man”* is the following:

Websters’ Definition of “Right hand man”

1. *A soldier holding a position of responsibility or command on the right of a troop of horses*
2. *A valuable assistant upon whom one is accustomed to rely*

The idea of the right hand man is as a servant who works on behalf of his master, the one who is at the right hand has the authority of the master to go forth on behalf of the master similar to the soldier who has authority to command the troop of horses. The Scriptures also equate the right hand to the “arm of the Lord” in the Torah.

According to the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy, Israel attained her liberation from slavery (Egypt) by the power of God, symbolized by his victorious conquering arm. There are several expressions used to describe the victorious arm, but two stand out as being the most frequently occurring, *yad hazakah* (יָד הַזְּקָה) *“hand / arm of strength,”* and *zeroa netuiah* (זְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה) *“outstretched arm.”* These two expressions are found most frequently in Exodus and Deuteronomy.

yad khazakah (יָד הַזְּקָה)

Shemot / Exodus 3:19
Shemot / Exodus 13:3, 14, 16
Shemot / Exodus 32:11
Devarim / Deuteronomy 3:14
Devarim / Deuteronomy 6:21
Devarim / Deuteronomy 9:26

zeroa netuiah (זְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה)

Shemot / Exodus 6:6
Devarim / Deuteronomy 9:29
Devarim / Deuteronomy 26:8

Both expressions are paralleled in *Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:34, 5:15, and 7:19.* For



example, according to *Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:34*:

Devarim / Deuteronomy 4:34

4:34 'Or has a god tried to go to take for himself a nation from within another nation by trials, by signs and wonders and by war and by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm and by great terrors, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your eyes? (NASB)

לד או | הַנִּסֵּה אֱלֹהִים לְבוֹא לְקַחֵת לּוֹ גּוֹי מִקֶּרֶב גּוֹי בְּמַסַּת בְּאִתּוֹת וּבְמוֹ-
פְּתִים וּבְמַלְחָמָה וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה וּבְזְרוּעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֹלִים כָּל־כָּל אֲשֶׁר-
עָשָׂה לָכֶם יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם לְעֵינֶיךָ:

The Scriptural use of the “*right hand*” range from a description of direction to the opposite of doing wrong (doing what is right). Being on the right suggests that one lives with justice and righteousness which conforms to a standard of holiness (Torah principle) thus the right hand is a place of honor and authority. According to *Bereshit / Genesis 48:13-14* (48:13 *Joseph took them both, Ephraim with his right hand toward Israel’s left, and Manasseh with his left hand toward Israel’s right, and brought them close to him. 48:14 But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on Manasseh’s head, crossing his hands, although Manasseh was the firstborn. NASB*) Jacob divided the blessings over Joseph’s sons and emphasis is given on Jacob making the distinction between the right and the left hands, and the older and younger sons.

In the first century, the believers understood the “*right hand*” as a place of honor, dignity, and authority. This is understood from the Apostle Paul’s words to the Ephesians in *Ephesians 1:19-21* (1:19 *and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. These are in accordance with the working of the strength of His might 1:20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places 1:21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. NASB*) Here Paul says that our Father in heaven exalted Yeshua above all others and seated Him at His right hand. We find the usage of the “*right hand*” in prophecy relating to the Messiah looking forward to what God was going to do, to give the Messiah power and authority to subdue His enemies (see *Tehillim / Psalms 110:1 and 118:16*). Yeshua being seated at the right hand of God enables him to make intercession on our behalf (*Romans 8:34*).

In addition to this, the Mishneh Torah (מִשְׁנֵה תּוֹרָה, “*second Torah*”) is subtitled “*Sefer Yad HaHazaka*” (סֵפֶר יַד הַחֲזָקָה, “*Book of the Strong Hand*”) written by Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon) also known as Rambam, one of history’s foremost rabbis. The Mishneh Torah was compiled between 1170 and 1180 CE, while Maimonides was living in Egypt. The Mishneh Torah consists of fourteen books, subdivided into sections, chapters, and paragraphs. This work details all of Judaism’s observance of the Torah, including those commands that are only applicable when the Holy Temple is

in existence. Rambam remains an important work in Judaism today.

This Torah principle of the “*right hand*” has made its way into Judaism in the following manner. Based upon *Tehillim / Psalms 118:15*, the Scripture says “*God’s right hand does valiantly*” which has become the source text for the right hand taking preference to the left. For example, when performing the ritual washing (netilat yadayim) the right hand is washed first. When one lays hold of an object such as the cup of wine for the Kiddush, one holds it in the right hand to illustrate its importance. When holding food for the Berachah (the blessing) one holds it in the right hand. When giving charity, one is to give money with the right hand to illustrate how we are to give back to the Lord with great importance (*Midrash Rabbah Devarim, Parshah 5*). The midrash states “*two things are in the right hand of the Holy One - charity and Torah. Charity, as it says (Tehillim / Psalms 48) Charity fills your right hand.*” According to the Shulchan Aruch, OH 651:3, the teaching that a left-handed person should hold the mitzvah in their right hand - as the right-hand side is spiritually always on the right; for example, the laws of shaking lulav and etrog, where the Ashkenazi and Sephardi traditions are explained. There are many more ways in which the “right hand” illustration is used in Judaism, but I think you get the point that based upon the Scriptures there is a significance to the use of the right hand that not only brings glory to God but is known as a reference to honor, power, and authority that is given by both man and God.

The point is in this weeks Torah reading, the sons of Reuben and Gad had a large number of cattle, they desired wealth and they wanted to remain on this side of the Jordan to make their homes. Midrash Rabbah opens with the rabbis saying a wise man has understanding at his “*right hand*” and the fool, his understanding at his “*left hand.*” The righteous stand on the right side, whereas the wicked are on the left. The fools understanding is equated to the children of Reuben and Gad because they desired to get rich by remaining on this side of the Jordan in the wilderness rather than going over into the Promised Land to take hold of the promises of God. All of these things taken into context speak to us about the bondage and lust of our own desires verses a life that is surrendered to God’s will and purpose. Have you surrendered your life and will to God’s purposes or do you desire to take hold of a blessing while remaining in the wilderness of sin? When the children of Israel finally got almost across the wilderness previously, they were afraid to go in and take what was theirs. Their own sin, stubbornness and lack of faith held them back. Is sin, stubbornness, and lack of faith holding you back today? The Scriptures say “*Those who are Christ’s have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.*” (*Galatians 5:4*) Have you done this or are you actively seeking God for help to do this? The theme here in Parashat Mattot (*Bamidbar / Numbers 30:2–32:42*) is the reality and difference between spirituality and life. Today, there are people who are primarily active in the world of commerce and the professions, while there are others who devote themselves to studying Torah (the Scriptures). The lesson of the Parshah is that today we are faced with the reality of having to make a living, but there is also the necessity of spending time in God’s Word and Seeking His presence in our lives. Let’s not allow our wealth or freedoms to draw us away from the Lord and His promises to serve our own passions, wants, and desires.