

AVODAH: The Jewish Service Corps

Torah Portion – Matot-Masei

Priorities

וּמִקְנֵהוּ | רֹב הָיָה לְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וּלְבְנֵי גַד עֲצוּם מְאֹד וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת-אֶרֶץ יַעֲזֵר וְאֶת-אֶרֶץ גִּלְעָד
וְהָיָה הַמָּקוֹם מְקוֹם מִקְנֵה: בַּיָּבֵאוּ בְנֵי-גַד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַלְעָזָר
הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶל-נְשֵׂי־הָעֵדָה לֵאמֹר: גַּעֲטוּרוֹת וְדִיבּוּ וְעֵזֶר וְנִמְרָה וְחִשְׁבוֹן וְאֶלְעָלָה וּשְׁבִים וּנְבוֹ
וּבְעֵן: דַּ הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה יְהוָה לְפָנָי עַדְתָּ שְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מִקְנֵה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מִקְנֵה: ס
וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִם-מִצְאֵנוּ חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ יִתֵּן אֶת-הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת לַעֲבָדֶיךָ לְאֶחָיָה אֲלֵי־תַעֲבִרְנֵנוּ אֶת-הַיַּרְדֵּן:

The tribes of Reuven and Gad owned lots of cattle. Noting that the lands of Jezzer and Gilad were a region suitable for cattle, they approached Moses, Eleazar the Priest and the chieftans of the community [just before the Israelites were about to cross over the Jordan River into the promised land], and they said: "...the land [on the East bank of the Jordan] that God has [already] conquered for the Israelite people is cattle country, and we have cattle. It would be a favor to us if this land were given to us as a holding. Do not cause us to cross the Jordan.

(Numbers 32:1-5)

AVODAH commentary: The Hebrew words for “lots of cattle” (*mikneh rav*/רב/מקנה), can also be read to mean “lots of possessions, or “great wealth.” That double meaning is used by the rabbis in the following midrash:

ומקנה רב זש"ה לב חכם לימינו וגו' לב חכם לימינו זה משה ולב כסיל לשמאלו אלו בני ראובן ובני גד שעשו את העיקר טפל והטפל עיקר, למה שחבבו נכסיהם יותר מגופן שאמרו למשה גדרות צאן נבנה למקנינו פה תחלה ואח"כ וערים לטפנו, אמר להם משה לא תעשו כך עשו את העיקר תחלה בנו ערים לטפכם ואחר כך גדרות לצאנכם

The tribes of Reuven and Gad confused the means and the end. How? They valued their possessions more than themselves. When they spoke to Moses about remaining East of the Jordan, they said: *We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.* (Numbers: 32:16). First the sheepfolds, and then the towns for the children. But Moses said to them: Don't proceed in this manner. Take care of the essential things first. *Build towns for your children and [then build] sheepfolds for your flocks.* (Numbers 32:24)

[*Midrash Tanhuma, Rashei Ha-Matot #7*]

Questions: How do we discern what is essential (*ikkar*/עיקר) and what is less important in our lives (*tafeyl*/טפל)? Are some things *always* essential in our lives, or is it a matter of our circumstances and our preferences that dictate the difference between *ikkar* and *tafeyl*? Is the *tafeyl* unnecessary or bad? How should we fit it into our lives?