



Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies

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Today's Torah

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Shabbat Parashat Mattot-Mas'ey July 14, 2018 – 2 Av 5778



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Balancing Family and Work

Torah Reading: Numbers 30:2 – 36:13

Haftarah Reading: Jeremiah 2:4 -28; 3:4

This Shabbat's Torah reading includes Chapter 32 of the Book of Numbers, in which the men of the tribes of Gad and Reuven ask Moses to give them the land east of the Jordan River rather than the land west of it that the Israelites were going to invade and occupy. When Moses gets angry with them for abandoning the common effort to conquer the land of Canaan, they agree to fight for the land with the other tribes but would still like to settle in trans-Jordan:

We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home, while our dependents [women and children] stay in the fortified towns [east of the Jordan River] because of the inhabitants of the land.... (Numbers 32:16-17)

When Moses agrees to this plan, he subtly but very importantly teaches them a lesson about proper priorities: "Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised" (Numbers 32:24).

As Rashi points out (in his comment on verse 16), by stating that they would “build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children,” in that order, they indicated that:

They were more concerned with their assets than their sons and daughters, for they put their flocks before their children. Moses said to them: “Do not do things that way, but rather make the important primary and the less important secondary: build first cities for your children and afterward sheepfolds for your flocks.

Moses and Rashi lived centuries before our own time, but even then there was a need to remind people that family comes first. If that was true in the 13th century B.C.E., the era of Moses, and the 11th century C.E., the time of Rashi, all the more so is it important for us today. After all, today in the United States, one’s “net worth” is measured in monetary assets, and Americans spend more time at work each week than people in any other Western society. They even skip vacation time given them in their contracts. Modern forms of communication, for all their blessings, have enabled work to invade home life and even vacations. In the meantime, even if we intend the opposite, we show by the amount of time and attention we give our families that they are indeed our second, not our first, priority. Work is surely important, not only to earn a living but also to give one a sense of self-worth and to contribute to the productive functioning of society. But, as Moses taught the men of the tribes of Gad and Reuven, family really needs to come first in our priorities.

Along these lines, many of my rabbinic colleagues who serve congregations have told me this: When people are dying (especially men), they never say that “I wish I had spent more time at my job.” They regularly say, instead, “I wish that I had spent more time with my family, especially when they were young and really wanted to interact with me.” This reminds me of the poignant song, “Cat in the Hat,” by Harry Chapin (Cat Stevens). Both the lyrics of that song and what my colleagues report about how people evaluate their lives toward their end should reinforce for us now what the rabbis are saying about prioritizing family over work.

Another way to see this concerns Shabbat. In the Decalogue, the Torah proclaims:

Observe the Sabbath day and keep it holy, as the Lord your God has commanded you. Six days shall you labor and do all your work, but on the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your god; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your ox or your donkey, or any of your cattle, or the stranger in your settlements, so that your male and female slave may rest as you do. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God freed you from there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day. (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

So work is clearly important: we should spend six days out of every seven doing it. On the seventh, though, we need to cease our labor (the literal meaning of the Hebrew word “Shabbat” is to desist, stop). We Americans, who are enslaved to our work in ways different from, but just as constricting as our ancestors were in ancient Egypt, desperately need to set limits to our work so that we can refresh ourselves and renew our family life. As Rabbi Edward Feinstein so aptly puts it, “The Sabbath is the antidote to American civilization.” Hopefully, during the Sabbath we can renew ourselves spiritually, in part by renewing and reinvigorating our ties to our family and our community.

So a simple change in order in what Moses says to the men of Gad and Reuven in today’s Torah reading teaches us a lesson even more important now than it was in his time: family needs to come before work in our priorities. That needs not only to be thought and said, but lived out in how we spend each of our days. The Sabbath, though, can be especially helpful in making this order of priorities real, for then we take one

day out of seven to set aside our work altogether and devote time to what is even more important, our family and our community.

Shabbat Shalom.

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