



COVENANT & CONVERSATION

Family Edition

מטות תשע"ט
Matot 5779

Priorities

WELCOME TO COVENANT & CONVERSATION 5779 FAMILY EDITION

Covenant & Conversation: Family Edition is a new and exciting initiative from *The Office of Rabbi Sacks* for 5779. Written as an accompaniment to Rabbi Sacks' weekly *Covenant & Conversation* essay, the Family Edition is aimed at connecting teenagers and families with his ideas and thoughts on the parsha. To receive this via email please make sure you are subscribed to Rabbi Sacks' main mailing list at www.RabbiSacks.org/Subscribe.



PARSHAT MATOT IN A NUTSHELL

Parshat Matot begins with Moses instructing the leaders of the tribes about how to keep vows and oaths, as well as how to annul them. The Israelites are then commanded to wage war against the Midianites because of their hostility towards them. There is an account of what is to be done with the spoils of war.

Two tribes, Reuben and Gad, together with half the tribe of Menashe, ask permission to stay east of the Jordan where the land is ideal pasture for their cattle. Moses is initially angered, but eventually agrees on condition that they first join and lead in the battles for the land west of the Jordan.



THE CORE IDEA

The Israelites were almost within sight of the Promised Land. They had successfully waged their first battles. They had just won a victory over the Midianites. There is a new tone from the Jewish people in the story. The complaining and negativity was the sound of the original generation, born in slavery, that had left Egypt. But now almost forty years have passed. The second generation, born in freedom and toughened by conditions in the desert, have a more purposeful feel about them. Battle-tried, they no longer doubt their ability, with God's help, to fight and win.

Now a fresh challenge arises. The people as a whole are focused on the destination: the land west of the river Jordan, the place that even the spies had confirmed to be "flowing with milk and honey" (Bamidbar 13:27). The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, began to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they were travelling was ideal for raising cattle, they decided that they would prefer to stay there, to the east of the Jordan, and proposed this to Moses. Unsurprisingly, he was angry at the suggestion: "Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, 'Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why would you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them?'" (Bamidbar 32:6-7). He

reminded them of the last time a group discouraged the nation from entering the land - the spies - and how the whole nation suffered. If they remained on the east side of the Jordan, they would show not only that they were unsure about God's gift of the land but also that they had learned nothing from history.

The tribes did not argue with his claim. They accepted it, but they pointed out that his concern was not incompatible with their objectives. They suggested a compromise. They were willing to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead, and were even prepared to be the nation's advance guard, in the forefront of the battle. They were not afraid of combat and were not trying to evade their responsibilities to the people as a whole. They simply wanted to raise cattle to the east of the Jordan, where the land seems ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agreed, on condition that they keep their word. And so it came to pass (see Joshua 22:1-5).

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the Sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. They listened carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said, and to the order of their priorities:

"They said, 'We would like to build sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.' Moses replied: 'Build towns for your children, and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised'" (Bamidbar 32:24).

The arrangement of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they spoke of their flocks first, their children second. Moses reversed the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes: "They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: 'Not so. Make the main thing primary and the less important thing secondary."

First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks." (Commentary to Bamidbar 32:16).

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Do you think the request these tribes made was reasonable?
2. What does Rashi suggest is the real problem with the request they made? How does Moses address this?
3. How important is your education to you? Is it near to the top of your list of priorities?



IT ONCE HAPPENED...

When Hillel the Elder was a young man he was very poor. He earned a mere half-dinar for every hard day's work. Half of this he spent on food for himself and his relatives, and the other half he would use to learn Torah. The great spiritual leaders of the generation, Shemaya and Avtalyon, had a Bet Midrash to teach Torah every day, for a quarter-dinar per person, per day.

One Friday Hillel could not find work and did not earn any money at all, and so the guard of the Bet Midrash did not allow him to enter that day. He was so determined to continue his studies that he climbed onto the roof of the Bet Midrash and leaned over the edge of the skylight so he could hear the words of Torah from these great teachers. It was the month of Tevet and one of the coldest Shabbat evenings of the year. Hillel stayed up on the roof all night and snow fell on him, covering him completely.

When it was dawn, Shemaya noticed it was darker than usual inside, so he looked up and saw the image of a man in the skylight. He and Avtalyon climbed to the roof and found Hillel almost frozen, covered with snow three cubits high!

They needed to work quickly to save his life. They carried him down, gave him dry clothes and, although it is forbidden to light a flame on Shabbat, they built a fire to warm him up. They said: "This man is worthy for us to desecrate Shabbat for him." Saving a life always overrides Shabbat laws; however, this great man was especially deserving. Clearly, he understood even in poverty the importance of striving to study Torah!

Talmud Bavli, Yoma, 35b

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. What values did Hillel prioritise in this story? What did he compromise on to do this? Do you agree with his decision?
2. How is this story connected to the message of the *Covenant & Conversation* (see *Thinking More Deeply* in addition)?



THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The story of these tribes requesting to remain on the east side of the Jordan turned out to be not a minor incident in the wilderness long ago, but rather, a consistent pattern throughout much of Jewish history. The fate of Jewish communities, for the most part, was determined by a single factor: their decision, or lack of decision, to put children and their education first. Already in the first century, Josephus was able to write: "The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls." The Rabbis ruled that "any town that lacks children at school is to be excommunicated" (Shabbat 119b). Already in the first century, the Jewish community in Israel had

established a network of schools at which attendance was compulsory (Bava Batra 21a) – the first such system in history.

The pattern persisted throughout the Middle Ages. In twelfth-century France a Christian scholar noted: "A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of God's law – and not only his sons but his daughters too."

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a council was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first thing Jewish communities in

Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to reorganise the educational system. In their classic study of the *shtetls*, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family: "The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys' school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son ... The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew – for her the two are synonymous."

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became Rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshiva heads and Chasidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilisation that has so predicated its very existence on putting children and their

education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues – Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor historical detail but a fundamental statement of Jewish priorities. Children come first, property is secondary. Civilisations that value the young stay young. Those that invest in the future have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our faith and way of life into the next generation.



FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

For Jews, education is not just what we know. It's who we are. No people ever cared for education more. Our ancestors were the first to make education a religious command, and the first to create a compulsory universal system of schooling – eighteen centuries before Britain. The Rabbis valued study as higher even than prayer. Almost 2,000 years ago, Josephus wrote: "Should anyone of our nation be asked about our laws, he will repeat them as readily as his own name. The result of our thorough education in our laws from the very dawn of intelligence is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls."

The Egyptians built pyramids, the Greeks built temples, the Romans built amphitheatres. Jews built schools. They knew that to defend a country you need an army, but to defend a civilisation you need education. So Jews became the people whose heroes were teachers, whose citadels were schools, and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. How can we deprive our children of that heritage?

The world is changing ever faster. In a single generation, nowadays, there is more scientific and technological

advance than in all previous centuries since human beings first set foot on earth. In uncharted territory, you need a compass. That's what Judaism is. It guided our ancestors through good times and bad. It gave them identity, security, and a sense of direction. It enabled them to cope with circumstances more varied than any other people have ever known. It lifted them, often, to heights of greatness. Why? Because Judaism is about learning. Education counts for more in the long run than wealth or power or privilege. Those who know, grow.

Letters to the Next Generation: Jewish Education

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:

1. Why do you think Jews have valued education so highly throughout their history?
2. What do you think the long-term impact of this has been on Jews as individuals and as a nation?



AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. How was Reuben and Gad's request not to enter the Land of Israel different from the previous story of the spies?
2. Do you think the request these two tribes made was reasonable?
3. How does Rashi explain Moses' criticism of Reuben and Gad, and his message to them?
4. How does Rabbi Sacks take this criticism further, contrasting their priorities with the priorities of the Jewish people throughout history?
5. Why have Jews always been so passionate about their children's education, and what impact has this had in Jewish history?



QUESTION TIME

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EDUCATIONAL COMPANION TO THE QUESTIONS

THE CORE IDEA

1. When Moses first heard the request he thought not. It sounded to him as if they were avoiding their responsibility to join with their people in the conquest of the land. Once they reassured him they would fight side by side with the rest of the people he agreed to their proposal. The question is: should we nevertheless see this as a rejection of the Land of Israel God promised the people, or just as an understandable proposal to expand the military and political presence the Jewish people had, in order to allow these tribes to thrive economically?
2. Rashi suggests that they "they mentioned their cattle before the children" which revealed that their priorities needed re-balancing. Moses addresses this by switching the order of the nouns, stressing to them that they should be more concerned with their children than with wealth.
3. This could be an interesting discussion to have across the generations around your Shabbat table, as children and parents may have a different perspective on this. If this is the case, try to ensure that both sides express fully the rationale behind their positions.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. While the story is clear to say he provided for his family and placed that priority on a par with his Torah study (in contrast perhaps with the tribes of Reuben and Gad), he was willing to compromise on his health and safety in order to continue to learn Torah.
2. The tribes in the story seem (according to Rashi) to think about wealth before anything else. Rabbi Sacks draws our attention (in *Thinking More Deeply*) to the traditional Jewish focus on education as an example of where Jews throughout the ages have put the welfare (spiritual and all the more so physical) above other priorities such as wealth. It is interesting to reflect on the fact that while Rabbi Sacks celebrates the Jewish tradition of universal education for all Jews, the story from the Talmud shows us this wasn't always the case (only the wealthy and religious elite had access to the educational institutions during this time, until later when this was changed to allow all Jews to learn Torah).

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. This value has been central to the Jewish people since the beginning of their history. Love of learning in general and Torah specifically is a core value found in Jewish text and Jewish tradition. However, the diaspora experience of being a nomadic people has forced the Jewish people to rely more on their intellectual skills rather than the physical skills that come with agriculture and other crafts connected to the physical land. Universal education is a particularly Jewish concept. All people are created equal and in the image of God, and education is a basic right of all. This is why Jews established universal education many generations before this became the norm in the west.
2. Placing education as a central and core Jewish value has meant that Jewish literacy levels tend to be high, leading to Jews finding themselves in professions that require this. This has often led to Jewish communities prospering, as well as suffering from persecution. Ensuring that all Jews are fully versed in their own traditions and laws has also contributed to the strength of Jewish identity and continuity throughout the period of exile, being one of the factors explaining the miracle of Jewish survival and continuity against the odds.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. The spies lacked the faith that they would be able to enter the land and conquer its inhabitants. Whereas the request in our parsha was about a specific need for these tribes – agriculturally rich land that was on the east side of the River Jordan. These tribes were fully willing to fight side by side with the rest of the people and they showed no lack of faith that they would be successful in this campaign.
2. See *The Core Idea*, answer 1.
3. See *The Core Idea*, answer 2.
4. For Rabbi Sacks the best example of the Jewish concern for children is the preoccupation with providing a Jewish education for every Jewish child. Often, just as Moses suggested to these tribes by switching the order of the priorities mentioned in the verse, Jewish communities and families have used every last financial resource they have to ensure their children receive an education.
5. See *From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks*, answers 1 & 2.