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**A Parsha Weekly by the Friedman Kollel
of Metropolitan Washington**

**Parshas Matos-Masei
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The Pursuit of Property

By Rabbi Eliezer Lachman, Rosh HaKollel

In this week's Torah portion, we read of the request of the tribes of Reuven and Gad to settle in the east bank of the Jordan River. The reason they wanted to live there was, as the Torah states, that they had a lot of livestock and the land in the east bank was well suited for grazing their herds. Moshe acceded to their request only reluctantly, and the Sages criticize the Reuvenites and Gadites, both for choosing to live outside of the Promised Land, and for choosing to live away from their Jewish brethren. Interestingly, the literal meaning of the word which the Torah uses here for livestock, mikneh, is acquisition or property. The implication is that they placed a higher priority upon their property interests than upon their spiritual interests.

This over-prioritization of their property interests affected another facet of their lives. When they were explaining to Moshe how they planned to settle their families and possessions in the east bank, the Reuvenites and Gadites stated that they would build pens for their sheep and cities for their children. As the Sages explain, the fact that they mentioned the sheep before the children indicated that to some extent they cared for their property more than for their children. Moshe criticized them and responded that the greater priority was children, and that cities for them should be built before pens for the sheep (Rashi, Bamidbar 32:16, from Midrash Tanchuma 7).

The Sages connect this shortcoming to what happened many years later, when the Kingdom of Israel was being dismembered and conquered by the Assyrian Empire, that the first tribes to be sent into exile were the Reuven and Gad. Since the possession of their land was based upon a character flaw, it lacked a Divine blessing, and was more easily taken away from them than the land of the other tribes (Midrash Tanchuma 7).

Midrash Tanchuma (5) elaborates further upon the conceptual underpinnings of this connection. It explains that wealth is one of the great gifts of God, but only if its recipient relates to it as a gift of God that comes to him by virtue of the Divine plan. If, however, a person relates to his wealth as something that he grabs for himself, it is something that can actually harm the person. The wealth will ultimately be removed from him prematurely, and oftentimes the person perishes with his wealth. The Midrash adduces Korach and Haman as examples of this phenomenon.

This principle applies to the Reuvenites and Gadites. When they chose to live outside of the Land of Israel because of their livestock, they were not only prioritizing their property interests over their spiritual and familial interests - they were, in effect, elevating their pursuit of property over God's plan for the Jewish people. Wealth to them was no longer "a gift of God," given pursuant to His plan, but something that people grab for themselves. Thus, the land of Reuven and Gad was taken away from them, and they were exiled with it.

We live in a country which protects and celebrates its inhabitants' right to amass and own property. It is important for us, as Jews, to recognize when the pursuit of property is a virtue and when it is not. When a Jew views his property as a gift from God and as part of the Divine plan, and he acts in accordance with this understanding, property and wealth is one of the greatest of Divine gifts. If, however, the amassing of property becomes an end in itself, it is no longer a gift, but something that works to the detriment of its possessor, and its pursuit serves only to distance him from His Creator.

About the Friedman Kollel

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel, located in Olney, Maryland, offers learning opportunities for Jews of all backgrounds. These include one-on-one chavrusas, public lectures and classes for men and women, as well as after-school structured learning for public school teens. The Kollel operates under the leadership of Rabbi Eliezer Lachman and Rabbi Shaya Milikowsky. For more information or to sponsor an upcoming Capital Torah, please contact Rabbi Elyakim Milikowsky at FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org.

The Rabbi Samuel and Zehava Friedman Kollel of Metropolitan Washington

18318 Georgia Avenue * Olney, Maryland 20832
FriedmanKollel@BetterFamily.org

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Samuel & Zehava Friedman Kollel of Metropolitan Washington | 18318 Georgia Ave. | Olney | MD | 20832