



## BALANCING THE SPIRITUAL AND THE PRACTICAL

**A** CONSTANT THEME IN JEWISH TEACHING IS THE INTERFACE between spirituality and life, between idealistic dreams and harsh reality. The clash between these two dimensions, and the attempt to find a resolution of the problem, is expressed in an incident in the Torah reading<sup>1</sup> this week.

After forty years wandering in the desert, the Jewish people were camped on the Eastern Bank of the Jordan. Soon they will cross the Jordan and conquer the Land of Israel. Now a group of two and a half Tribes approached Moses and made a request. "We have flocks of sheep," they said. "The area where we are on the East of the Jordan is good sheep country. Let us stay here instead of crossing the Jordan"<sup>2</sup>.

Moses' reaction was extreme concern. He saw this as a replay of the argument with the Spies some forty years previously, when the people claimed that it would be better not to enter the Land. The request to stay on the East Bank seemed similar. However, after a discussion with the two and a half Tribes, Moses agreed. As long as they helped the rest of the Jewish people to conquer the area West of the Jordan, everything would be fine.

What is happening here? What are the real issues?

Chassidic commentaries explain that the generation of the Spies did not want to enter the Land because they preferred the spirituality of the desert. There they could feel close to G-d. They did not have to work: the Manna from heaven and the water from the rock supplied

their physical needs. Going into the Land would mean ploughing and reaping, and all the humdrum activities of daily life. So they preferred to remain in the desert. This overbalancing in favour of the purely spiritual was condemned by G-d.

When the two and a half Tribes asked to be able to stay on the East Bank of the Jordan where they could graze their sheep, it seemed to be the same kind of claim. The Sages tell us the reason why many of our ancestors were sheep farmers is because this activity enabled them to maintain a spiritual frame of mind, far from the hurly-burly of the city.

At first Moses was upset by this request. It was another case of rejection of the reality of life. Yet then he came to terms with it. Why?

The generation of the Spies wanted the entire Jewish people to remain in a spiritual world. By contrast the two and a half Tribes were a minority. Further, they agreed that they would cross the Jordan in order to help the rest of the Jewish people conquer the Land. This means they accepted that their spirituality was for *the benefit of others*. Moses was then able to approve their plan.

In our own time there are people who are primarily active in the world of commerce and the professions, while there are others who devote themselves to the spiritual dimension of life, and studying Torah is their prime activity. The presence of these two groups, those active in the practical world and the scholars, is a time-honoured feature of the Jewish community. (In general society too there are many full time academic scholars).

Sometimes the question is raised whether the Torah scholar is, in some sense, “escaping” from the real world. The lesson of the Sedra is that if the scholars see that their true purpose is fulfilled by *helping others*, by communicating Torah knowledge and inspiration to them, then they are not escapists at all. Instead they are helping to combine the spiritual and the practical, to make the reality of this world into a true dwelling for the Divine<sup>3</sup>.

1. Numbers 30:2 – 32:42. 2. See Num.ch.32. 3. Based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe's *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 8. pp. 189-191.

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*SEDRA MATTOT*

***A PROMISING TALE***

Debbi sat in the waiting room of the dentist's surgery, waiting for her sister Leah to come out. She had been quite a while already. Finally the door opened and Leah staggered out, looking pale.

"Oh. that was awful" she gasped. "That dentist did such horrible things to me."

"Really? He was quite nice to me - and he told me my teeth are in very good condition." Debbi said proudly.

"Oh no - he said I have to take much more care of my teeth, and I shouldn't eat so many sugary things. He's right, I really do eat too many sweets. I swear -.."

"Hey Leah - don't say 'swear'!"

Leah looked confused. "Alright, promise. I was just going to say I absolutely promise I'm never ever going to eat sweets again."

“That’s also a problem”, said Debbie.

“Why? It’s not bad language. It’s just a promise!” said Leah.

Debbi explained: “Remember what Rabbi Cohen said a few days ago in the School Assembly about the Sedra? He said we have to be careful about making vows. He said that if you make a vow or a promise, it’s really important that you keep it, because it’s hard to get out of a vow once you’ve made it.”

“Yes, I remember. It was the day it rained and rained.”

“That’s right. So he said we should be very careful about promising to do something. Rabbi Cohen told us that if we do, we should add the words Bli Neder - which means ‘without a vow’.”

“Oh, I remember now. But what would someone do if they made a vow that they couldn’t keep? How could they get out of it?”

“Oh, I think he said that the person has to ask a Rabbi. He will work out if there is a way the person can have their vow annulled, which means cancelled. But of course the best thing is not to make stupid vows and rash promises in the first place - like yours. You know yourself you wouldn’t be able *never* to eat sweets again. It would be much too hard.”

“You’re quite right”, said Leah. “But I am still going to try and cut down on sweets for the sake of my teeth - Bli Neder, without a vow”.

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