



Work-Life Balance • Parshat Matot

In a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled “No, You Can’t Have It All,” Eric Sinoway delineates seven dimensions of life that many people must juggle: family, social and community, spiritual, physical, material, avocational, and career. While perhaps it is impossible for most people to consistently succeed in each area, Sinoway suggests that “Consciously staggering your goals may enable you to be equally successful in many dimensions over time.” Investing in the right domain at strategic times can generate balance over the long run.

An analysis of *Parshat Matot* provides a framework for how to prioritize these different dimensions. On the precipice of entering the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuben and Gad requested the seemingly unconscionable from Moses: “If we have found favor with you, let this land be given to your servants as our possession. Do not make us cross the Jordan” (Num. 32:5). They requested to forgo their land in Israel for more cattle-friendly pastures. In their negotiation with Moses, we learn several essential lessons related to work-life balance.

The key word that frames the story is *mikneh*, cattle. In the opening verse of chapter 32, the sentence quite literally begins and ends with the word *mikneh*. In his elucidation of Professor Nehama Leibowitz’s writings, Dr. Moshe Sokolow writes “In a sense, the word *mikneh* serves as an envelope for the verse; the world of Reuben and Gad began and ended with their livestock.”

Professor Leibowitz herself notes the timelessness

of their challenge, writing that they were confronted with “a highly topical issue touching on the problem, or dilemma, of the choice of a career – personal advancement – or the fulfillment of a mission...” The tribes of Reuben and Gad valued their material well-being. Yet they had competing responsibilities to God, their people, and their families. Could they possibly have it all?

Moses’ first and most explicit critique of the tribes of Reuben and Gad’s request was about moral responsibility: “Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here?” (Num. 32:6). In an impassioned protest Moses argued that their request could be emotionally contagious, “turning the minds” of their brethren from desiring to enter the land, just as the spies did before them (Num. 32:7-8). In response, the two tribes committed that once they “build sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children” (Num. 32:15), they will fulfill their obligation to their brethren, helping them fight and settle the land.

Convinced of their social commitment, Moses subtly addresses their familial obligations as well. Rashi notes that their sentence structure communicated jumbled priorities. They said that first they will “build sheepfolds for our flocks” and then “towns for our children” (Num. 32:15), but Moses reversed the order, “Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks” (Num. 32:24). The lesson for them, according to Rashi, is to “Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary.” There is a time and a place for career, but family comes first.

In addition to their moral and familial values, the tribes of Reuben and Gad also needed a spiritual reminder. In the four verses of their response to Moses, they fail to mention God even once. While they commit to arm themselves and “go before the Israelites” – “*lifnei B’nei Yisrael*” (Num. 32:17), Moses reformulates the mission as arming themselves for battle “before the Lord” – “*lifnei Hashem*” (Num. 32:30). Accentuating the differences of approach, Moses mentions God six times in five verses (Num. 32:20-24). Moses is

emphasizing to them the need to infuse a sense of the divine throughout all their endeavors.

Pursuing a successful career is a value, but our lives can’t begin and end with “*mikneh.*” We need to account for our social, familial, and spiritual ideals as well. If we start and end with God, as well as prioritize our moral obligations, we just may be able to find that allusive work-life balance, and indeed, just maybe, we can have it all.

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Character Challenge: Perform an analysis of your work-life balance. What value might be out of balance right now for you? Should you be investing more into work, community, family, or spirituality?

Quote from Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks zt”l: “Moses’ implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor historical detail but a fundamental statement of Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary. Civilizations 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” (“Priorities,” *Covenant & Conversation*).