Thoughts on Torah Portion--Mattoth, July 26

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Thoughts on Parashat Mattoth

by Rabbi Marc D. Angel

As the Israelites prepared to enter the promised land, the tribes of Reuben and Gad approached Moses with a request. They stated that they had many flocks, and that they preferred not to cross the Jordan. They wanted to establish themselves on this side of the Jordan, and were willing to forego territory in the land of Canaan.

Of course, their request implied that they were "seceding" from the Israelite nation, in the sense that they would not share in the promised land, and would not have to face the coming wars along with the rest of the Israelites. Moses was outraged. "Will your brothers go to war while you sit here?" The tribes of Reuben and Gad reassured Moses that their men would go along with the rest of the nation, would fight in the battles, and then later would return to the territory on the other side of the Jordan. With this assurance, Moses granted them their request.

Why was Moses so agitated with them in the first place? 1) the tribes of Reuben and Gad seemed to be interested primarily in their own comfort and material wellbeing; they put their interests above the needs of the entire nation. 2) by suggesting that they stay on the other side of the Jordan, these tribes were not only shirking their national responsibilities, but were damaging the morale of the people. The other tribes would feel weakened and betrayed if Reuben and Gad did not join them in the conquest of Canaan. 3) once people's morale is low, it is all the more difficult to lead them to victory.

The question that Moses asked Reuben and Gad is a question that needs to be asked of us in each generation. "Will your brothers go to war while you sit here?" The Jewish people in Israel and throughout the diaspora faces numerous challenges. We need all our strength and energy to withstand enemies, anti-Semites and anti-Zionists. We need tremendous will and fortitude to maintain our Jewish educational system, our religious and cultural way of life, our beautiful family life. We need to resist the external and internal forces that undermine our physical and spiritual wellbeing. To face these challenges, we need 100%

participation. When Jews say: let others take these responsibilities, let others pay the bills, let others make the sacrifices--they undermine the strength and morale of the entire people of Israel. When Jews say: let me take care of my own needs, and let me not be concerned with the responsibilities to the entire people--they follow the bad example of Reuben and Gad. As Moses replied to those tribes, we need to respond to ourselves and to others: will your brothers and sisters go to war, wage the battles, make the sacrifices, build the nation---while you sit idly by?

Each of us needs to be reminded on a regular basis that we are part of a great Jewish nation with a great destiny. Each of us is vital to the wellbeing of the nation. Each of us has the privilege and honor of doing our share to advance the cause.