

A Taste of Torah - Nourishment in the Parasha

By Rebbetzin Chana Bracha

Parashat Matot-Masei: "Israel's Shepherds"

What Do Israel's Shepherds Teach Us About Making Our Livelihood Serve Hashem?

Why Do Shepherds Feel at Home in Bat Ayin?

One of the things I love about Bat Ayin is that while hiking through its beautiful rolling hills, I often encounter a shepherd gently leading a flock of sheep and goats. These gentle, humble animals, quietly following their shepherd's path, radiate a sense of peace and trust. I delight in watching their thick wool brush softly against the grasses and wildflowers as they graze. They awaken within me a deep love for Hashem, His Torah, and His Holy Land, echoing the words of King Solomon: "Tell me, O You whom my soul loves, where You pasture Your flock, where You make it lie down at noon" (*Shir HaShirim* 1:7).

Watching the flock also reminds me that I, too, am one of Hashem's sheep. Just as sheep follow their shepherd with quiet trust, so too are we called to follow our compassionate Shepherd wherever He leads us.

It is therefore no coincidence that B'erot has been home to several students who became shepherdesses. Drawn to the meditative rhythm of life in rural Bat Ayin, nestled in the heart of the Judean Hills, they sought to reconnect with the biblical world of our foremothers. Rachel and Tziporah both tended flocks before assuming their unique roles in Jewish history, and my students found that caring for sheep and goats offered a similar opportunity for reflection, prayer, and closeness to Hashem. As they tended the flock entrusted to their care, they learned patience, responsibility, and quiet devotion. Seeking pasture, finding water, and watching over every member of the flock gradually cultivated within them the qualities of compassionate spiritual leadership. Some would bring a flute or ukulele into the pasture, filling the quiet hillsides with music and heartfelt prayer as they watched over their flocks.

It is perhaps fitting that at least four of these B'erot shepherdesses were called Rachel – a name that itself means 'ewe.' Whether by providence or coincidence, they embodied something of our matriarch Rachel's gentle devotion and quiet strength as they lovingly cared for their sheep.

One former student eventually established her own farm in Bat Ayin, raising a large flock of sheep and goats. From their milk she crafted wonderfully delicious goat cheese, which she would personally deliver. It goes without saying that I happily became one of her regular customers. Yet what I treasured even more than the cheese was seeing an ancient biblical way of life continuing to flourish in the hills of Eretz Yisrael. It reminded me that shepherding is far more than an occupation. It is a way of life that continues to nourish both body and soul, inviting us to walk peacefully through Hashem's world while faithfully following the Divine Shepherd Who lovingly guides us all.

How Can Shepherding Become a Path to Hashem?

Long before Israel became a nation of farmers, it was a nation of shepherds. This was no coincidence. Rabbeinu Bachaya explains that the forefathers continued the vocation of shepherding because it provided an honest and peaceful livelihood. It yielded milk, wool, and offspring without excessive toil or the moral pitfalls associated with commerce, allowing them to provide for their families while preserving the inner freedom to devote themselves to Torah and the service of Hashem (Rabbeinu Bachaya, *Bereishit* 46:32).

Rabbi Ya'acov Tzvi Mecklenburg explains that shepherding was far more than a livelihood. Removed from the distractions of society, the shepherd spent long hours in the solitude of the open fields, where the wonders of Creation inspired contemplation of the Creator. The meditative nature of shepherding refined the soul, awakening it to Divine wonder. It is therefore no coincidence that Hevel, Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'acov, the twelve tribes, Moshe, and David all tended flocks before becoming the spiritual shepherds of

Israel (*HaKtav V'Hakabbalah, Bereishit 4:2*).

The Midrash teaches that although shepherding appeared to be a humble occupation, Ya'acov described Hashem as “the G-d Who has shepherded me” (*Bereishit 48:15*). David likewise proclaimed, “Hashem is my Shepherd” (*Tehillim 23:1*). By describing Hashem as a Shepherd, they revealed the profound spiritual dignity of the shepherd's calling. Just as a shepherd lovingly nourishes, guides, and protects every member of his flock, so too Hashem continually nourishes, guides, and protects each one of us (*Midrash Tehillim 23:2*).

Which Pitfalls Can Turn the Blessings of Our Livelihood into Spiritual Stumbling Blocks?

Parashat Matot answers this question through the request of the tribes of Reuven and Gad. As Israel stood on the threshold of the Promised Land, the tribes of Reuven and Gad looked across the Jordan and saw excellent pastureland. Their eyes were drawn to the very thing that sustained their livelihood: grass for their flocks, space for their herds, and a fertile place where their flocks could flourish. They approached Moshe with the following request:

ספר במדבר פרק לב פסוק א. וַיֵּרְאוּ אֶת אֶרֶץ יַזְעַר וְאֶת אֶרֶץ גִּלְעָד וְהִנֵּה הַמָּקוֹם מְקוֹם מְקָנָה... (ד) הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה הַשֵּׁם לִפְנֵי עַדְתֵּי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מְקָנָה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מְקָנָה:

“The descendants of Reuven and Gad had exceedingly abundant livestock, and they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. ...The land that Hashem struck before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock” (*Bamidbar 32:1,4*).

Their request was entirely understandable. Sheep and goats nourished the people with milk, cheese, and meat. Their wool provided clothing, their hides served everyday needs, and the very same animals offered in the Mishkan became the means through which Hashem nurtured the spiritual lives of His people. From the same flocks flowed nourishment for both body and soul.

The Torah itself repeatedly emphasizes the extraordinarily abundant livestock of the tribes of Reuven and Gad. This repetition invites deeper reflection. Perhaps the Torah's emphasis on their abundant livestock hints that even such a noble livelihood can conceal a subtle spiritual danger. The Tosafists explain that the wealth of these two tribes foreshadows the challenge to come. It led them to cherish their possessions so deeply that they chose to separate themselves from the rest of Israel by settling outside the Land. Because of this attachment to their wealth, they became the first tribes to be exiled (*Da'at Zekeinim, Bamidbar 32:1*). Beneath their seemingly practical request lies a deeper dilemma. At what point does a livelihood that sustains us begin to shape our priorities rather than serving them? Conversely, how can our livelihood become a vehicle for serving Hashem rather than an end in itself? When our gaze becomes fixated on the pasture that sustains us, we may forget the higher purpose for which we are being sustained.

How Can Our Livelihood Help Us Strengthen Our Connection with Our Creator?

The Netziv offers a beautiful insight into the deeper meaning of the word *ro'eh* – shepherd. He connects it with the verse, *רַעֵה אֱמוּנָה/re'eh emunah*, which can be understood as “cultivate faith” (*Tehillim 37:3*). A true shepherd is not merely one who tends the sheep, but one who nurtures faith with patience and devotion, gathering what has become scattered and uniting it into a greater whole (*Ha'emek Davar, Bereishit 49:24*).

This sheds new light on Moshe's response to the tribes of Reuven and Gad. Their flocks were never the problem. The danger arose only when their livelihood began to shape their priorities instead of serving them. Moshe therefore required them to cross the Jordan and fight alongside their brothers before returning to their pasturelands (*Bamidbar 32:20-22*). Only after placing the needs of the nation before their own possessions could their material blessing truly become “before Hashem.”

Rebbe Nachman of Breslev explains that when a person consciously binds the inner purpose of his business

dealings to Torah, even the ordinary activities of daily work become elevated and infused with emunah. In this way, the world of action itself becomes an expression of Divine service (*Likutei Moharan* I:280).

Every one of us has an *eretz mikneh* - a place that sustains us. For some, it is a profession; for others, a business, a farm, a home, or another form of livelihood. The Torah does not ask us to reject material blessings. We all need nourishment for ourselves and our families. Rather, it asks whether our livelihood has become our destination or remains a means of serving Hashem. When our work is guided by faith, responsibility, generosity, and devotion to a purpose greater than ourselves, it nourishes not only our bodies but also our souls. Like the faithful shepherd, we discover that our greatest task is not merely to earn a living, but to allow our livelihood to draw us ever closer to the Divine Shepherd, Who lovingly nourishes, guides, and protects us all.