

Walk through the Parsha

with **Rabbi David Walk**



TO BUILD A COMMUNITY

Matot

The current issue of Jewish Action, the magazine of the Orthodox Union, features an analysis of the single parent phenomenon which is becoming ever more prevalent within the Orthodox Jewish population. Baruch HaShem the coverage also includes a key piece of advice: these strong individuals can succeed in establishing families with community support. As in so many situations, it takes a community. This is an especially important piece of advice in light of this week's Torah reading which prepares the Jews to enter the Promised Land to establish our homeland.

This process is continued into next week's parsha, this duo of readings is usually a double parsha and will be a double parsha this year, as well, in the Diaspora. In both readings, there is special mention of the Leviyim. In Matot, they get a portion of the plunder from the wars of conquest (Bamidbar 31:30); in Mas'ei, they get 48 towns to dwell in because SHEVET LEVI didn't get a tribal portion. Why not?

Their special role began during the sin of the Golden Calf, when they didn't participate. At that point they were designated to be religious leadership for the nation. In our parsha, we're told they are SHOMREI MISHMERET HaMISHKAN. The specifics of this role changed over time. In the desert they were responsible for the portable Temple. In Eretz Yisrael, that role continued in the stationary sanctuaries, but the prophet Malachi expands these roles:

I am telling you these things so that my agreement with Levi will endure. My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave these to him; it called for reverence, and he revered me and stood in awe of My name. He taught the truth and never told lies, and he led many people to turn from sin, because he obeyed me and lived upright (Malachi 2:2-5).

So, the Leviyim were to be the spiritual leaders and officiants in the Beit HaMikdash, but also the educators of the nation. That's why they didn't get portions and work the land; they were too busy teaching the nation. This is not only important historically, but actually feeds directly into another major problem for modern Jewish communities highlighted in this very same issue of Jewish Action: The Great Teacher

Shortage. Actually, there's nothing 'great' about it. It's a crisis.

As Jewish Action reported, last summer, in an entire issue dedicated to The Economics of Frum Life (Fall 2021), it costs a lot to be a religious Jew in America. Basically, if you're not in the top ten percentile of earners in the US, it's hard to make ends meet and live an Orthodox Jewish life style. One of the reasons, there is a shortage of teachers in American day schools and Yeshivot is because you can't teach and be in the top ten percentile of wage earners, even if both spouses are teaching you won't make that top 10.

So, a Jewish high school principal, who BTW is in the top 10 percentile, thinks there isn't enough MESIRAT NEFESH for CHINUCH anymore. Another Jewish leader, also in the top 10 percentile, bemoans the lack of 'idealism'. He opines that, 'You can't be motivated by money.' Okay, maybe. But for teachers it hasn't been tried. Shuls and schools often recruit with salaries in the top 10 percentile. Why don't they claim that 'You can't be motivated by money'? Money shouldn't be used to attract teachers, but it's fine to attract principals and heads of major Jewish organizations? What am I missing?

There were a number of beautiful

vignettes about Jewish educators who had profound influence on lives. Will this continue? Can we find such people without offering the salaries that Jewish Action claims is needed to live a Frum life in America?

I hope so. I firmly believe that these two parshas provide a path to a solution. The Levitical teachers didn't work for schools; they worked for the community and were supported by community lands and tithes. We should do something similar. When schools and communities find talented teachers who light up their classrooms with a zest for Torah, the communities must do everything possible to keep them in front of their students, and not behind a desk.

We, as a community, must see this as a priority. Instead of bemoaning the problem, let's be creative. When teachers are finally recognized as community resources and treasures, then we can mine the whole community for funding, not just within particular schools. Personally, I was able to afford to remain teaching because a wonderful community in Stamford found ways to keep me in front of my beloved students.

Rambam alludes to this reality at the end of his Laws of Agriculture (ZERA'IM): Why did the Levites not receive a portion in the inheritance of

Eretz Yisrael and in the spoils of war like their brethren? Because they were set aside to serve God and minister unto Him and to instruct people at large in His just paths and righteous judgments (Yovel and Shmita 13:12). And in his final law in this section, he declares: Not only the tribe of Levi, but any one of the inhabitants of the world whose spirit generously motivates him and he understands with his wisdom to set himself aside and stand before God to serve Him and minister to Him and to know God, proceeding justly as God made him, removing from his neck the yoke of the many reckonings which people seek.

In other words, people who dedicate themselves to spreading Torah should be cared for by the community at large. Schools can't necessarily accomplish this on their own. Tuitions are already very high. However, with community support we can keep talented educators in our classrooms.

To put this in perspective, what's at stake is the very future of our people. I recall the description of history by HG Wells, 'Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe.' We must support educators. 