ABI M’LEBT?!

How should we set our priorities? A lesson from an unexpected part of the parsha.

Abi Gezunt

A few years back, a Chassidic singer named Lipa came out with a song called *Abi M’leibt*—which, in plain English, means *“As long as I’m alive.”* The song tells the story of a guy who somehow manages to stay ridiculously upbeat no matter what life throws at him.

First, he’s driving along when he gets pulled over by a cop. Now, most people in this situation would groan, argue, or at least mumble something about quotas. But not him. Instead of getting upset, he hops out of the car and starts dancing with the officer. (Disclaimer: Please do *not* try this at home… or anywhere else.) His attitude? *Abi m’leibt!* So what if I got a ticket? I’m alive, and that’s what counts!

Next, he rushes to the bank to cash a check—just as the manager locks the door in his face. Most of us would knock, plead, or get angry. But him? He just smiles, shrugs, and starts singing, *Abi m’leibt!*

Then, late one Friday afternoon, he’s loaded up with his Shabbos groceries, heading to his car, when—bam!—some guy plows right into him, sending his challahs, grape juice, and who-knows-what-else flying across the parking lot. The other guy starts apologizing profusely, but does our hero get angry? Nope.

He just grabs the man's hands and starts dancing with him right there, singing *Abi m'leibt!*

This whole song is built around an old Yiddish expression: *Abi gezunt.* If you listen to Jews kvetching about their business, their investments, or their kids' latest shenanigans, chances are, they'll wrap up their complaint with a big sigh and a resigned, *"Nu, abi gezunt..."* Meaning, *"So I'm not a millionaire, big deal—as long as I'm healthy!"*

But that raises an interesting question. Is health really the ultimate priority? Is life *perfect* as long as you're physically well? Or is there something more to life than just being healthy?

Priorities

This week's parsha talks about the mitzvah of tzedakah. The Torah lays out a clear order of priorities when giving: *"When you lend money to My people, to the poor person who is with you..."* Rashi explains that this verse teaches us *who* should come first. If both a Jew and a non-Jew request a loan, the Jew takes priority. If a rich person and a poor person apply, the poor person comes first. And if there's a choice between helping the needy in your own city versus those in another city, your own community takes precedence.

Honestly, it's a good thing G-d spelled this out for us, because if it were left up to us, we'd probably get it all backwards. In fact, we see this play out all the time. Ask someone to help out a struggling neighbor, and their first reaction is often, *"Why can't he just get a job?"* But tell them about a family in some distant country they've never heard of, and suddenly, their wallets

open wide. Somehow, helping a stranger thousands of miles away feels more noble than helping the guy next door.

So, thank G-d for setting us straight.

We see this idea in the Ten Commandments as well—they help establish priorities. The first five focus on our relationship with G-d: believing in Him, rejecting idols, keeping Shabbat, and so on. Only after that does the Torah move on to interpersonal laws—no stealing, no murder, no jealousy, etc. First, we build a solid foundation in our connection with G-d, and then we focus on how we treat each other.

But here's the big question: When it comes to setting priorities in life, how do we know what should come first? Sure, the Torah gives us plenty of guidance, but not every situation comes with a step-by-step manual. With every new challenge that arises, the same question pops up: *What's more important right now?*

Maybe the answer is in this week's parsha…

Slaves?

The parsha opens with the laws of owning slaves. Now, that seems like an odd choice. You'd think that right after the Ten Commandments, the Torah would jump into something more universal—like the mitzvos at the end of the parsha: *stay away from falsehood, don't charge interest, lend money to My people.* These are practical, everyday lessons. But the laws of owning slaves? Not exactly relevant to most people—especially back then, when every Jew had just walked out of Egypt *filthy rich.* So why does the Torah start here?

The answer comes later in Leviticus, where G-d declares, *"The people of Israel are My servants."* But why "servants"? Wouldn't it be nicer if we were called G-d's employees? What's wrong with being hired workers for G-d?

The difference is huge. An employee works from nine to five, clocks out, and then goes home to *his own* life. He might do a great job while he's on the clock, but once the workday is over, his boss and his job are the last things on his mind. A servant, on the other hand, doesn't have a separate, personal agenda. His life revolves entirely around his master—his existence is defined by that relationship.

And that's exactly what G-d wants from us. He doesn't want us serving Him like employees—praying and studying for an hour in the morning and then moving on as if He doesn't exist for the rest of the day. Instead, G-d wants every part of our lives—our eating, working, socializing—to be infused with purpose. A Jew's connection to G-d isn't just part of his life—it *is* his life.

Take Responsibility

Rabbi Israel Jacobson once shared a story from 1925, when he traveled to the previous Rebbe's home in St. Petersburg for the High Holy Days. As he entered the prayer hall, he was shocked—there wasn't a single bench set up for the holiday! Concerned, he found R' Elya Chaim Althaus, a senior Chassid, and asked, *"R' Elya Chaim, it's Erev Rosh Hashanah and there's still nothing in the shul?"*

R' Elya Chaim looked up, repeated the question right back at him, and then just stared. *"Yisroel, it's Erev Rosh Hashanah and*

there's still nothing in the shul?"

Rabbi Jacobson later said, *"His words lit up my eyes—though it took me ten years to fully understand what he meant."* Here was an older, devoted Chassid, entirely dedicated to the Rebbe's household, subtly teaching a younger Chassid that he too should take full responsibility—not just notice a problem, but *own* it.

And that's exactly how a Jew should feel about Judaism. It's not just something we observe from the sidelines—it's *ours.* The rabbi in the story knew what the issue was and even knew what had to be done, but what he lacked was the sense that *this was his responsibility.*

It's like a husband who walks into his house, sees a mess, and complains to his wife, *"Why is the place so messy?"* Really?! It's your house just as much as hers—so grab a broom and start cleaning!

The Torah doesn't spell out priorities for every single situation in life. And realistically, we can't teach our children how to navigate every dilemma they'll ever face. But what we *can* do is instill in them the understanding that Judaism isn't just something they *do*—it's *who they are.* It's *their* business, *their* responsibility, *their* life.

Because if we raise children who feel personally invested in their Judaism, then the next time they face a tough choice and ask themselves, *"What's more important right now?"*—they won't have to think twice. They'll already know.