

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

Introduction to the Prophets:

Sefer Yehoshua – Chapter 22

Settling the Lands East of the Jordan

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

The major battles for the conquest of Canaan are now completed and the process of Israel's settlement in the new land is well underway. The menacing Canaanite alliances have long been smashed, the territories of the tribes have been painstakingly mapped out, and the Levitical cities have been designated. Yehoshua himself will soon complete his term as leader of the people as they in turn will be called upon to remain loyal to God's Torah. With the end of the fighting, Yehoshua now prepares to release the tribes of Reuven, Gad and Menashe from their vow that they had undertaken on the eve of Moshe's death, while the people of Israel were yet encamped on the Jordan's eastern banks. There, though they had declared to Moshe that they coveted the lands east of the Jordan for their patrimony, they still solemnly pledged to cross the river with their brethren in order to serve as the vanguard of their armies until the conquest of Canaan would be completed:

At that time, Yehoshua summoned the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half Menashe. He said to them: "You have observed all that Moshe, God's servant, commanded you and have hearkened to me in accordance with all that I commanded you. You have not abandoned your brethren for many days until now, and you have carefully observed God your Lord's command. Now, God your Lord has granted rest to your brethren just as He spoke, therefore turn now and go to your tents in the land of your possessions that Moshe, God's servant, granted you on the Jordan's other side. But be very careful to fulfill the commands and the teaching that Moshe, God's servant, commanded you – to love God your Lord and to follow His ways, to keep His commands and to cleave to Him, to serve Him with all of your heart and with all of your soul." Thus, Yehoshua blessed them and sent them on their way, and they returned to their tents (22:1-6).

THE MIRACULOUS OVERTHROW OF SICHON AND OG

The background events to the discharge of these tribes from their active service were described towards the end of Sefer Bemidbar, Chapter 21:21-35, and Chapter 32. At that time, some 14 years prior to the events now described in our chapter of Sefer Yehoshua, the people of Israel had defeated the dual Amorite menace of Sichon and Og, the mighty kings who ruled over the fertile Trans-Jordan from the wadi Arnon that empties into the Dead Sea midway along its eastern shore, all the way up to the foothills of snow-capped Mount Cheron in the Lebanon mountains. Recall that Rachav, the Yericho harlot who had concealed Yehoshua's spies in the opening salvo of the wars of conquest and thus cast her lot with Israel, had considered that victory an overt expression of God's saving might:

She said to the men: I know that God has given you the land, for your dread has fallen upon us and

all of the land's inhabitants melt away before you. We have heard how God dried up the waters of Yam Suf before you when you left the land of Egypt, as well as what you did to the two Amorite kings east of the Jordan, to Sichon and Og, whom you utterly destroyed. We heard and our hearts melted and no man had any spirit left in him before you, for God your Lord is Lord in heaven above and upon the earth below! (Yehoshua 2:9-11).

The Giv'onites, an indigenous population that had later sued for peace rather than risk engaging Yehoshua's advancing armies in battle, also recalled that triumph as an important component of their pivotal decision:

They said to him (Yehoshua): Your servants have traveled from a very far-off land for the sake of God your Lord's name, for we have heard of His reputation and all that He did to Egypt. Also, all that He did to the two Amorite kings on the other side of the Jordan, to Sichon the king of Cheshbon and to Og king of the Bashan who was in Ashtarot... (Yehoshua 9:9-10).

In fact, even hundreds of years later, the military victory over Sichon and Og continued to loom large as a powerful demonstration of God's omnipotence and providential care of His people Israel:

He struck down great kings, for His mercy endures forever. He slew mighty monarchs, for His mercy endures forever. Sichon King of the Amorite, for His mercy endures forever. And Og, King of the Bashan, for His mercy endures forever. He gave their land as an inheritance, for His mercy endures forever. An inheritance for His servant Israel, for His mercy endures forever. He remembered us in our degradation, for His mercy endures forever. He redeemed us from our adversaries, for His mercy endures forever. He gives food to all flesh, for His mercy endures forever. Praise the God of heaven, for His mercy endures forever (Tehillim/Psalms 136:17-26).

THE APPEAL OF REUVEN AND GAD

It was in the aftermath of the trouncing of those Amorite kings that two of the tribes diffidently approached Moshe to haltingly broach the subject of settling the recently conquered territory as their own:

The people of Reuven and Gad had immense flocks. They saw that the land of Y'azer and Gil'ad was pastureland. The people of Gad and Reuven said to Moshe, El'azar the Priest and the princes of the congregation: 'Atarot, Divon, Y'azer, Nimra, Cheshbon El'aley, Sevam, Nevo and Be'on – the land that God struck down before the congregation of Israel – is grazing land, and your servants have flocks.

They said: If we have found favor in your eyes, then let this land be given to your servants as an inheritance, and do not cause us to pass over the River Yarden (Bemidbar 32:1-5).

These two tribes of Reuven and Gad, blessed with large numbers of herds, began to wonder whether the vast tracts of fertile grazing land that they then occupied might not better meet their material needs than the rocky Canaanite highlands. Perceptively, the 15th century Spanish commentator Rabbi Yitzchak Abarbanel detected in their awkward speech a wavering note of hesitation:

Initially, these tribes voiced their request in allusive terms for they were ashamed to state it explicitly...therefore, the text of the Torah introduced a paragraph division after their first statement. Moshe understood their intent but chose not to reprove them immediately. Rather he remained silent to allow them to openly divulge their plea. When they saw that Moshe

remained silent and did not respond to their initial intimation, they were forced to ask again with greater directness. Hence, the text states that 'They said' a second time...

THE TENSE STANDOFF AND ITS RESOLUTION

We can certainly imagine these tribes' reluctance to be more direct as they stood before Moshe and the tribal leaders. After all, hadn't thirty-eight years been disastrously dissipated in purposeless wandering in the wilderness because of an earlier generation's reluctance to enter the new land? Understandably, Moshe was incensed:

...shall your brethren go to fight while you remain here? Why do you break the people's resolve to cross over into the land that God gave to them? Just so did your fathers behave when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land...Now you have arisen in their place as a brood of sinful folk, only to increase God's anger against Israel. By turning away from Him you will cause Him to leave them in the wilderness even longer, and you shall thereby destroy this people! (32:6-15).

What a striking encounter, indeed! As if mirroring the twin but disconnected territories of Canaan and the Transjordan, on the one side stood the aged lawgiver, flanked by Yehoshua and El'azar the Priest, the new leaders of the people. Moshe remembered the debacle of the Spies only too well. How that buoyant mission ended so tragically because the people had lacked the steadfastness to trust in God's assistance! Perhaps the troubling thought of his own more recent exclusion from entering the land also lurked in his mind, for he wished nothing more than to lead the people to their promised destination. Couldn't these tribes recognize the folly of their ways in rejecting the very future that he so desired?

On the other side, separated by a few paces but also by a seemingly unbridgeable chasm, stood the tribes of Reuven and Gad. Certainly, they had fully shared in the people's fate up until this point and had experienced the communal calamity imposed by God's decree. Had they not sufficiently 'paid the price'? Besides, why did God grant them victory over those vast tracts if not to settle them? Wasn't the natural division wrought by the meandering Jordan River rather inconsequential, in light of their cohesive connection to the other tribes and to the shared destiny of the people of Israel?

They approached him and said: we shall build sheep pens for our flocks and towns for our children. We shall quickly proceed at the vanguard of Israel until we have brought them to their place, while our children remain in the fortified towns because of this land's inhabitants. We will not return to our own homes until the people of Israel have received their inheritance. But we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Yarden, because our inheritance is rather to be on its eastern side (32:16-19).

Animated by a curious mixture of kinship and independence, defiance and accommodation, the two tribes spelled out their plan: they WOULD fight with their brethren and help them to secure their land, but in the end they WOULD NOT settle it with them. After the territories in Canaan would be secured, they would return to their own homes east of the Jordan. Surprisingly, Moshe acquiesced and placed an oath upon them in the presence of Yehoshua, El'azar and the tribal leaders.

RETURNING FROM CANAAN

In the end, the decision of Reuven and Gad had portentous consequences. It is true that they did fulfill their oath, by dutifully accompanying the people over the Yarden in order to fight on their behalf, as

recorded in the early chapters of Sefer Yehoshua (4:12-13). It should also be noted that part of the tribe of Menashe, namely the descendents of mighty Machir, eventually joined forces with Reuven and Gad to remain on the eastern side and to share in their fate. As we have seen, Canaan was eventually conquered, and after a good many years the battle for the land subsided. Reuven and Gad and 'half' of Menashe finally prepared to return home, but when they reached the shores of the Yarden they left their mark:

They reached the region of the Yarden in the land of Canaan, and there Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe built a massive altar next to the Yarden. When the people of Israel heard of their deed...they gathered against them with arms... (Yehoshua 22:9-12).

Interpreting their act as an invitation to idolatry, as an attempt to set up an alternate center of worship to rival the national shrine recently constructed at Shilo, the people send the fiery Pinchas son of El'azar (see Bemidbar Chapter 25 for more on his career), accompanied by ten tribal elders, to dissuade them. Again, just as they had almost two decades earlier, Reuven and Gad must explain their true motives and calm Israel's fears:

...Mighty Lord God, Mighty Lord God, He knows and Israel will know that if (we did this) in rebellion or as a trespass against God, He will not save us this day. We (did not) build this altar to rebel against God, we did not erect it to offer sacrifice...we were rather concerned that in the future, your children will say to ours: 'what do you have with God the Lord of Israel? Did God not place a boundary between us, Reuven and Gad, the River Yarden! You have no share with God!'...we therefore decided to build this altar... as a witness between us and you for generations to come...that we will serve God...so that your children will not say tomorrow to our children 'you have no share with God!'...Pinchas the Priest, the congregation's princes and the leaders that were with him heard the explanation offered by Reuven, Gad and Menashe, and they received it favorably... (Yehoshua 22:21-30).

Significantly, the structure of the above debate follows the very one set down earlier in Sefer Bemidbar. Here again, the tribes of Reuven and Gad decide on a striking unilateral move, the ire of Israel is aroused when their motives are justifiably misinterpreted, Reuven and Gad must then mollify the people and explain that their true intent is noble and above reproach, and the matter is finally resolved to everyone's satisfaction. Unlike the earlier situation though, in which Reuven and Gad feared Moshe's reaction but never doubted their decision, as they now approach the shores of the river, their palpable fear swirls below its murky surface. By consciously choosing to remain on its eastern side, Reuven, Gad and Menashe now realize that they will drive a wedge between themselves and the rest of Israel. Though they may have fought on their behalf when the people entered Canaan, though they may wish to still participate in the national service of God centered at Shilo, they know that their share in Israel's fortunes will not be equivalent. The latent reservations that earlier worried Moshe, now worry them. Israel may come to resent their non-involvement in the daily trials and triumphs of national life in Canaan, and may eventually reject their claim to be part of the people.

UNDERSTANDING MOSHE'S MOTIVES

All of the above perhaps explains with greater clarity the role of Menashe in the eventual settlement of the Transjordanian territories. Recall that the initial petition presented to Moshe was offered by Reuven and Gad only. Only AFTER the matter was resolved by their taking an oath did Moshe assign some of the territories to Menashe (see 32:33), for the sons of Machir, son of Menashe, captured the Gil'ad and drove out the Amorites who were there. Moshe gave the Gil'ad to Machir son of Menashe, and he

dwelt there. Yair son of Menashe went and captured their farms, and called them Chavot Yair. Novach went and captured Kenat and its villages, and called it Novach after his own name (Bemidbar 32:39-42).

Moshe's conduct seems rather puzzling in light of his initial reluctance to entertain the appeal of Reuven and Gad. Why would he in the end substantiate a claim that he had regarded as potentially ruinous, by assigning another tribe to the lands east of the Jordan? The Ramban (13th century, Spain) attempts to provide an explanation, but it fails to satisfy:

At the outset, the tribe of Menashe did not approach Moshe. But after Moshe apportioned the land to the two tribes, he realized that it was a territory too large for their needs. He therefore requested volunteers to settle it with them. Some of the members of Menashe agreed, perhaps because they also possessed flocks, and he therefore gave them their appropriate portion... (commentary to 32:33).

ATTEMPTING TO LINK BOTH SIDES OF THE JORDAN

Considering the matter in broader terms, we may posit that Moshe acted with due deliberation and care. Recall that Moshe justifiably feared that Reuven and Gad had decided to abandon the national destiny by casting their lot within the territory of Sichon and Og. Recall also that from Sefer Yehoshua it emerges that in hindsight Reuven and Gad themselves had serious misgivings about the consequences of their decision. Perhaps the rest of the people of Israel would one day reject them and come to regard them as a selfish and irrelevant diaspora.

Moshe therefore had considered the matter and decided on a course of action that attempted to limit the danger. By ACTIVELY ASSIGNING part of Menashe to the lands east of the Jordan while the bulk of this important tribe would settle on its western side, Moshe introduced a mechanism that could only help to preserve a cohesive connection between all of the tribes on both sides. The bulk of Menashe's descendants might indeed remain within Israel proper but the powerful cultural, historical and linguistic bonds that characterize the tribal unit would ensure that a strong link is maintained with the families to the east. In this way, the tribes to the east would not be completely cut off from the national pulse and they themselves would have an interest in nurturing their connection to Israel at large.

This explanation is bolstered by the fact that not only Menashe's descendants settled east of the Yarden. As Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra demonstrates from the lineage lists preserved in Divrei HaYamim 1:2:21-22, "Yair son of Menashe" was actually a member of the tribe of Yehuda who was descended from Menashe on his mother's side only: "Chezron (of Yehuda) took the daughter of Machir father of Gil'ad as his wife...she bore him Seguv, whose son was YAIR, who possessed twenty three towns in the land of Gil'ad (Trans-Jordan)."

Thus, not only were the eastern tribes joined to their western brethren through the tribe of Menashe, they were also connected by the tribe of Yehuda, these two together constituting the most important and influential of the tribes settled in Canaan.

THE CONSEQUENCES OF SEPARATION

If there is a single lesson that this episode affords us, it is the difficulty and danger of being spatially removed from the center of Jewish national life, the land of Israel. In spite of all of Moshe's efforts, in spite of everyone's best intentions and most fervent hopes, the bonds between Reuven and Gad and the other

tribes could not be preserved. Though always regarded as part of the Jewish people and often active in the issues of the day, Reuven and Gad in the end suffered an ignoble fate that mirrored their own conscious choice generations earlier: exile to distant lands, never to be heard of again:

They trespassed against the God of their ancestors and strayed after the gods of the land that the Lord had destroyed from before them. The Lord of Israel inspired Pul King of Assyria and Tilgat Pileser (who succeeded him), and they exiled the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half Menashe. He brought them to Chalach, Chavor , Hara, and the river of Gozan until this very day... (Divrei HaYamim 1:5:25-26).

As the Midrash colorfully but acerbically puts it:

The tribes of Gad and Reuven were wealthy and had many flocks. Because of their love of their possessions, they decided to dwell outside of the land of Israel. Therefore, they were exiled before any of the other tribes...what brought this fate upon them? The fact that they separated themselves from their brethren because of their wealth, as the verse states: "The tribes of Reuven and Gad had immense flocks..." (Bemidbar Rabba 22:7).

The most sincere oaths of allegiance, the most moving of monuments and memorials, even the welcome but only temporary active participation in fighting the people's wars, cannot guarantee a shared destiny with those that dwell in the land. As Reuven, Gad and half Menashe painfully realize as they prepare to cross the Jordan and effectively weaken their links with the other tribes of Israel, spatial separation DOES matter and distance from the land IS decisive. The destiny of Israel, then as now, will be decided in Canaan, and only by settling in that land with the tribes of Israel can one share in that destiny in the most comprehensive and meaningful way.

For next time, readers are kindly requested to read chapter 23.