

PARASHOT MATOT-MASEI

Moshe's Speech to Gad and Reuven (32:6-15) –

Justified Rebuke or a Misunderstanding?

By Rav Elchanan Samet

a. WAS MOSHE'S REACTION JUSTIFIED?

In chapter 32 of parashat Matot, the tribes of Gad and Reuven present their request to Moshe:

(5) "If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land [on the east bank of the Jordan] be given to your servants as a possession; do not bring us over the Jordan [into Eretz Yisrael]."

Moshe responds with a lengthy and harsh monologue (verses 6-15) accusing them of trying to evade the responsibility of participating in the war of conquest with their brethren. He compares them to the spies who had turned the hearts of the nation from the mission of reaching the land:

(14) "And behold, you have risen up in place of your fathers, a tradition of sinful men, to stoke again God's anger against Israel."

From Moshe's perspective, their request is likely to lead to results similar to those of the sin of the spies, or even worse:

(15) "You will destroy all of this nation."

The two tribes respond to this rebuke by offering to leave their wives and children to settle the east bank while the men lead the Israelite forces in their war of conquest of Eretz Yisrael. Moshe's anger is assuaged and he accepts their proposal.

How are we to understand Moshe's harsh monologue? Does his accusation of the tribes of Gad and Reuven arise from a misunderstanding of their intentions, such that following their clarification Moshe realizes his mistake, or does Moshe in fact understand their intention all too well, such that only his accusatory attack changes their original intention and leads them to their subsequent proposal? The answer to this question depends on our interpretation of the words

of the two tribes in verse 5, "Do not bring us over the Jordan." Do they mean that they should not be brought over at all, that they should be left in the conquered territories, or is their request that they "not be brought over" tantamount to saying merely that they do not wish to inherit land on the other side of the Jordan?

b. TWO UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE PURPOSE OF THE STORY

The commentators were divided on this question. The Ramban (32:5) appears to believe that the situation involved a misunderstanding on Moshe's part, and the Abarbanel says this explicitly:

"The children of Gad and Reuven ... wished to tell Moshe that despite his great wisdom he had misunderstood their intention... Out of respect for him they approached him to tell him quietly, 'Our master, you have not understood our words and our intention... We do not wish to settle here immediately; rather, we shall pass over armed... and go to war with our brethren.'"

However, R. Yitzhak Arama (Akeidat Yitzchak, chapter 85) believes otherwise:

"Indeed it appears that Moshe our master, of blessed memory, with his wealth of wisdom, understood their true intention... For their original intention was not to pass over with them to war. And this is what they meant when they said, 'Do not bring us over the Jordan.' Moreover, it is not written (in verse 16), 'And the children of Gad and the children of Reuven said to him,' but rather, 'And they approached him and said.' Meaning that they had heard what he said and had reconsidered, and thereafter they came back to him with their answer."

This is not simply a local exegetical debate on the interpretation of one particular verse. Rather, the question concerns our perception of the entire point of the story. According to the Ba'al Ha-Akeida the point is clear: Moshe Rabbeinu, the loyal shepherd of the nation, took up the challenge of this renewed danger of national disintegration – a danger which again threatened the imminent inheritance of the land. Through his harsh words he treats the threat before it develops, straightening out the problem with the two tribes who are causing the danger. But what is the point of the story if we follow the interpretation of the Ramban and the Abarbanel? If there was a misunderstanding between Moshe and the tribes of Gad and Reuven, why does the Torah recount it – and at such length?

It would seem that according to these commentators the following conclusion is unavoidable: this story, like the incident of Mei Meriva which precedes it, comes to illustrate the lack of understanding between Moshe, leader of the generation that had left Egypt and had died in the desert, and the generation that was about to enter the land. Moshe is haunted by the memory of the sin of the spies, and he sees its shadow in the actions of the new generation. But this generation is unlike the preceding one. On the contrary: they are eager for battle, and are

wholeheartedly prepared to fight and conquer the land. This misunderstanding exemplifies the distance between Moshe and the people about to enter the land, and provides further justification for the need for a change in leadership.

Thus we have directly opposing views of the purpose of the story, which disagree concerning both Moshe's behavior and that of the two tribes. This obligates the student of the narrative to decide: is the story criticizing Moshe, or is it praising him for addressing the challenge? Is the story criticizing the tribes of Reuven and Gad for their request, or is it ultimately meant to testify in their favor? Let us analyze the story from the beginning with a view to choosing our standpoint.

c. SETTING THE SCENE FOR THE STORY (VERSE 1)

The beginning of the story – included in the setting of the scene in verse 1 – is strange in that it begins with the object of the sentence: "Much cattle was possessed by the tribes of Reuven and Gad; a great multitude" ("U-mikneh rav haya li-vnei Reuven..."). A typical biblical sentence begins with the verb: "There was to the tribes of Gad and Reuven much cattle; a great multitude," or sometimes a sentence starts with the subject: "The tribes of Gad and Reuven possessed much cattle; a great multitude." What, then, is the reason for the unusual formulation of the opening sentence of our story?

There are some stories in which the opening word is meant to fix the central message in the linguistic consciousness of the reader or listener (e.g. the story of those who desired meat, Bamidbar 11:4 - "And the multitude (asafsuf) who were in their midst..."; see our shiur on Beha'alotekha). The same can be said of our parasha. The "cattle" is a central issue in the story. It serves as the basis for the request by the tribes of Gad and Reuven, and determines for them their preferred inheritance in the land. It is also dealt with further in the negotiations between them and Moshe in the second half of the story.

The Torah uses a number of different terms to denote the herds and flocks of animals raised by man: they are sometimes called "tzon" or "tzon u-vakar," sometimes "be'ir" and at other times "mikneh." This last term emphasizes the possessive aspect – the fact that they are the property of their owners. The word "mikneh" is used six times in our story, as mentioned by the tribes of Gad and Reuven or in connection with them. Surprisingly, Moshe does not use this word even once. Even when he repeats their words he is careful to use a different term (v.24): "Build yourselves cities for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks (tzonkhem)."

It should further be noted that the scene-setting in verse 1, which opens with the word "mikneh," concludes with the same word: "Behold, the place is a place for 'mikneh' (cattle)." Thus both the two tribes are characterized by ownership of "mikneh" and the land is characterized by suitability for "mikneh," and this is in fact what links them.

d. THE REQUEST OF REUVEN AND GAD

The first words uttered by the representatives of Gad and Reuven to Moshe are also introduced in a most peculiar way:

(3) "Atarot and Divon and Ya'zer and Nimra and Cheshbon and El'aleh and Sevam and Nevo and Be'on;

(4) the country which God smote before the congregation of Israel, is a land for cattle, and your servants possess cattle."

They begin with a list of the names of nine cities which were honored in the kingdom of Sichon, and these nine names occupy an entire verse. This is not a usual manner of speech: one does not normally list details without any introduction as to their meaning or context. They should have said, "The land which God smote, Atarot and Divon... is a land for cattle." But even had they worded their request thus, we could nevertheless ask as to the purpose of the list of names of these cities.

After first presenting the geographic and economic conditions relevant to their petition, Reuven and Gad proceed to the actual request:

(5) "They said: If we have found favor in your eyes, then this land shall be given to your servants as a holding; do not bring us over the Jordan."

Why does the verse insert once again the phrase, "They said"? No one seems to have interrupted their remarks; what does the new introductory phrase add? Additionally, we must carefully examine their final comments: "Do not bring us over the Jordan." We already noted the dispute between Abarbanel and the Akeidat Yitzchak whether this refers to only their final settlement, which will not occur across the Jordan, or even to warfare, thus implying that Reuven and Gad had no intention of assisting their brethren in battle. Which of the two explanations better accommodates the straightforward meaning of the text?

The key to understanding the request of the tribes of Reuven and Gad lies in these final words: "Do not bring us over the Jordan." The straightforward reading of the word "ta'avirenu" - "bring us over" - suggests that they refer here to their bodies, not their permanent residence. Thus, we prefer the approach taken by the Akeidat Yitzchak, that Reuven and Gad had intended to remain on the East Bank of the Jordan even during Benei Yisrael's conquest of the land. If so, then presumably the representatives of Reuven and Gad sensed the inherent problem in their request: their receiving the land most suitable for them by abandoning their brethren who must wage war to capture theirs. They therefore decided to present their request in a subtle manner, rather than asking directly. They figured they would simply present the facts to Moshe, who would hopefully suggest on his own that these tribes remain in the land of Sichon.

They carefully crafted their remarks accordingly. First, they enumerated the nine cities in the newly captured territory that came unexpectedly under Benei Yisrael's control. What will happen to all this fertile land after they cross the Jordan? Will they just leave it empty, inviting the occupation of the surrounding nations?

Then comes the implied solution: "and your servants possess cattle" (v.4). From both a political and economic viewpoint, it is in the nation's best interest to settle the land with cattle ranchers. They assumed, therefore, that Moshe's offer would be immediately forthcoming.

Of course, they could not expect Moshe to overlook the moral difficulty of their absence from the war across the Jordan. After all, why should they receive for themselves the territory conquered by the entire nation, staying behind as the other tribes fight for their land? To mitigate this ethical dilemma, Reuven and Gad refer to the land of Sichon as "the land that GOD HAS CONQUERED for the community of Israel." The Akeidat Yitzchak observes that they mention God nowhere else in their monologue except in this verse. He thus concludes, "With this mention [of God] they intended to say that they do not seek something for which Benei Yisrael risked their lives, but only that which God conquered for them, not with their swords or bows." Since God, not Benei Yisrael, captured the land of Sichon, the ethical issue of their annexing the territory for themselves is laid to rest.

Reuven and Gad finish speaking and await Moshe's response. To their surprise and dismay, they hear nothing but silence. This uncomfortable pause, which essentially foiled their plan, accounts for the new introduction in the following verse: "They said..." Moshe understands what they want, but he wants to hear them say so explicitly. He thinks to himself: Do they really plan to remain behind as their brethren go to war? They then present their request directly, and Moshe realizes that the time has come for harsh rebuke.

e. MOSHE'S RESPONSE

Moshe formulates his response in a way that most effectively expresses his somewhat startling message: the "innocent" request of Reuven and Gad threatens to bring about a catastrophe similar to that which resulted from the mission of the spies thirty-eight years earlier. He opens and concludes his response with two verses of rebuke (6-7; 14-15), while in between he recalls the tragedy of the spies. Wherein lies the specific point of comparison between the tribes of Reuven and Gad, and the generation of the spies?

Significantly, Moshe never accuses Reuven and Gad of lack of trust in God, of unwarranted fear from the nations of Canaan. After all, Benei Yisrael - including Reuven and Gad - had fought valiantly against Sichon and Og. Their request to remain behind during warfare involved no fear or lack of faith. Similarly, Moshe does not, in this monologue, point to any lack of trust on the part of the spies or their generation. He rather takes the tribes of Reuven and Gad to task for their inappropriate attitude towards "the land that God had given them." He recounts that he

sent the spies to survey the land, but they came back and "turned the minds of the Israelites from invading the land that God had given them." Anyone who spurns the land that God has given them is considered disloyal to the Almighty. Therefore, only Yehoshua and Kalev merited entry into the land, "for they remained loyal to God." Similarly, Reuven and Gad "saw the lands of Yazer and Gilad," just as the spies looked upon the land. Like the spies, they did not see "the land that God had given them." They rather saw a land that suited their economic interests.

Moshe thus feared that these two tribes, like the spies, could easily dissuade Benei Yisrael from continuing on to Eretz Yisrael. After all, they had before them a large, spacious territory; they had finally arrived at fertile grounds. Why not settle there and leave the task of conquering the land for a future generation? If they would influence the rest of the people, God would react just as He did upon the spies' return: "He will abandon them in the wilderness, and you will have brought calamity upon all this people."

In one sense, it now becomes clear why Moshe's attitude changes once Reuven and Gad agree to join the other tribes in battle across the Jordan. He no longer feared that they would persuade the other tribes to remain on the East Bank, since now not a single tribe would settle its portion before the others complete their conquest. Secondly, the preparedness of these tribes to join the battle and even stand in the front lines attests to their proper attitude towards Eretz Yisrael. Through the language of action, these tribes demonstrated their full identification with the destiny of God's nation: the conquest of "the land that God has given you" and the settlement therein, regardless of their decision to dwell on the opposite side of the Jordan.

Nevertheless, it seems that there remains room for criticism of their preference of the land of Sichon over the land of Jewish destiny. How does their decision to join the other tribes in war resolve this problematic issue?

f. THE REVISED PROPOSAL OF REUVEN AND GAD (16-19)

Following the end of Moshe's speech in verse 15 there is a break of a "parasha setuma," and then we are told (v.16): "And they approached him and said..." Why did the representatives of Gad and Reuven have to "approach" Moshe again, even though they had not gone anywhere? As we saw, the Abarbanel and the Akeidat Yitzchak are divided as to the interpretation of this verse.

The Ba'al Ha-Akeida maintains that they approached Moshe following a break (illustrated by the closed parasha) during which they held consultaamong themselves, and after formulating a new proposal which would cancel the accusations which he had leveled at them.

According to the Abarbanel, on the other hand, their words were an immediate response to Moshe's speech, and were meant to point out his misunderstanding of their original request. Therefore they approached him in order to explain quietly, out of respect for him.

Let us examine the contents of their words: if the Abarbanel were correct, it would have been sufficient for them to point out the misunderstanding and to correct it – in other words, to clarify to Moshe that they intended to fight AS EQUALS with their brethren. But in fact they commit themselves to more than this: they promise to pass over armed BEFORE Benei Yisrael, and even to follow the process of their settlement in the land ("until they are brought to their place"). This commitment is surely new, and requires some consultation and decision-making. We therefore find ourselves returning to the Ba'al Ha-Akeida.

But the important question here is why the tribes of Reuven and Gad made this commitment. It seems that it was meant to serve as a counterweight to their request to remain in the land conquered from Sichon from then on, after they understood from Moshe's words the severity of their request. If this had been their original intention – to participate in the conquest together with their brethren – and Moshe had misunderstood it, as the Abarbanel maintains, then it was not they who were obligated to make some placatory gesture with a new and magnanimous commitment, but rather it would have been Moshe who should have somehow placated them.

But not only does Moshe not placate them following his seemingly baseless accusations, nor praise them for their commitment; rather, he launches into negotiations with them, stipulating a dual condition, as if to say, "I do not know whether you have spoken wholeheartedly or whether it is simply deceit."

It is therefore clear that Moshe understood their original intention, which arises quite clearly from their request, "Do not bring us over the Jordan," and he justly accused them in his response. His monologue achieves its intended effect and reveals to the representatives of Gad and Reuven the seriousness of their request. They in turn consult among themselves and formulate a new proposal which addresses Moshe's accusations against them. Then they approach him and present their new proposal, which is indeed acceptable to him, with minor changes – which also teach us something of the materialistic perspective of these tribes, and of Moshe's educational personality.

And so we find ourselves interpreting the story along the lines of the Ba'al Ha-Akeida. We discover that the story points its accusation against the tribes of Gad and Reuven, while depicting Moshe as a loyal shepherd who takes on the challenge posed by any danger to his nation, conducting complex and sensitive negotiations aimed at bringing about a favorable conclusion.

Even according to this interpretation we must point out that ultimately our story also points to the great difference between the generation of those who left Egypt and the generation destined to inherit the land. It is specifically against the backdrop of Moshe's comparison of these two tribes with the spies that we find highlighted the fact the tribes in question are quick to deny any such similarity, and without any psychological or practical difficulty they place themselves at the head of the fighting forces for the conquest of the land.

(Translated by Kaeren Fish and David Silverberg)

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