

## PARASHAT MATOT

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This *shiur* is dedicated to the memory of  
Muriel Wallick and Tzvi Bodek  
whose *yahrzeits* are 7 Av.  
May their memories continue to be a comfort to us.  
-The Rosenfeld and Wallick Families

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### The Episode of the Children of Reuven and Gad By Rav Amnon Bazak

#### A. Introduction

The Torah introduces the story of the special request by the tribes of Gad and Reuven with the following objective description:

And the children of Reuven and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle, and when they saw the land of Ya'azer and the land of Gil'ad, and behold – the place was a place for cattle... (*Bamidbar* 32:1)[\[1\]](#)

This introduction appears to be intended as confirmation that there was indeed justification for the request submitted to the leadership of *Am Yisrael*:

The children of Gad and the children of Reuven came and they said to Moshe and to Elazar, the kohen, and to the princes of the congregation, saying: "Atarot and Divon and Ya'azer and Nimra and Cheshbon and Elaleh and Sevam and Nevo and Be'on, the land which God smote before the congregation of Israel, is a land for cattle, and your servants have cattle." And they said, "If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants for a possession; do not bring us over the Jordan." (verses 2-5)

At first, Moshe is fiercely opposed to their request, for two reasons. He first presents a moral argument:

Moshe said to the children of Gad and to the children of Reuven: "Shall your brethren then go to war, while you sit here?!" (verse 6)

This argument is directed against the idea of evading the responsibility of taking part in the war of conquest along with the rest of *Bnei Yisrael*. It is surely unfair that the tribes of Gad and Reuven should receive their inheritance without having to make the slightest effort, while their brethren are forced to wage war, without their help, in order to conquer the land.

However, Moshe immediately goes on to offer a religious argument as well. He claims that acceding to their request will harm the security of *Am Yisrael* when they cross over the Jordan:

(7) “Why would you dishearten *Bnei Yisrael* from crossing over to the land which God has given them? (8) Thus your fathers did, when I sent them from Kadesh Barne’a to see the land. (9) They went up to the wadi of Eshkol, and they saw the land, and they disheartened *Bnei Yisrael*, that they should not go into the land which God had given them. (10) And God’s anger burned on that day, and He swore, saying, (11) ‘The men who came out of Egypt, aged twenty and upward, shall not see the land which I swore to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov, for they have not wholeheartedly followed Me. (12) Except for Kalev, son of Yefuneh, the Kenizi, and Yehoshua, son of Nun, for they wholeheartedly followed God.’ (13) And God’s anger burned against Israel, and He caused them to wander in the desert for forty years, until all of that generation, which had done evil in the eyes of God, was gone. (14) And behold, you have risen up in place of your fathers – a group of sinful people – to aggravate further the fury of God’s anger towards Israel. (15) For if you turn away from following Him, He will leave them again in the desert, and you will have destroyed all of this nation.”

This argument is set forth at length, because Moshe finds it important to emphasize that the request of the children of Gad and Reuven is, in fact, a reenactment of the sin of the spies. Admittedly, they do not state explicitly – as they spies had – that there is no chance of driving out the inhabitants of the land, but in practical terms, their behavior – to Moshe’s mind, at least – projects fear, which may dishearten *Am Yisrael* and cause them to repeat the previous generation’s disastrous mistake.

Now the tribes of Gad and Reuven have to persuade Moshe of their noble intentions and bring him around to their view. They offer a suggestion which is meant to address both arguments raised by Moshe:

(16) They drew near to him and they said, “We shall build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our children. (17) But we ourselves will go ready armed before *Bnei Yisrael*, until we have brought them to their place; meanwhile our children shall dwell in the fortified cities, [for protection] from the inhabitants of the land. (18) We shall not return to our homes until *Bnei Yisrael* have settled, each his own inheritance. (19) For we will not inherit with them on the other side of the Jordan, and yonder, for our inheritance has fallen to us on the eastern side of the Jordan.”

Both problems – the moral partnership and the religious faith in the conquest of the land – are solved by the readiness on the part of Gad and Reuven to go out to war at the head of *Bnei Yisrael*.

## **B. The dual and double-edged condition**

Moshe is ultimately convinced of the honorable intentions of Gad and Reuven, but he seeks a way to emphasize their commitment. He arrives at a set of conditions known as “the conditions of the children of Gad and the children of Reuven,” which has become a model for the formulation of conditions in halakha. The most prominent feature of this formulation is the “double-edged condition.” Moshe notes what will happen if Gad and Reuven fulfill their commitments, as well as what the consequences will be if they do not fulfill them. However, we find that this double-edged condition is itself doubled; for some reason, the Torah presents it twice. First, Moshe sets forth the condition to Gad and Reuven, and then he repeats it before Elazar the kohen, Yehoshua bin Nun, and the chiefs of the tribal families. Let us examine these two descriptions in parallel:

<b>Moshe addresses the children of Gad and Reuven (verses 20-24)</b>	<b>Moshe addresses Elazar, Yehoshua, and the heads of the tribal families (verses 28-30)</b>
<p>(20) Moshe said to them, “If you will do this thing, if you will go armed before God to war, (21) and all of you go armed over the Jordan before God, until He has driven out His enemies before Him, (22) and the land is subdued before God, then afterwards you shall return and shall be guiltless before God and before Israel, and this land shall be your possession before God.</p> <p>(23) But if you do not do so, behold, you will have sinned before God, and know that your sin will find you. (24) Build cities for your children, and sheepfolds for your flocks, and do that which has proceeded from your mouths.”<sup>[2]</sup></p>	<p>(28) Concerning them Moshe commanded Elazar, the kohen, and the chiefs of the heads of the tribes of <i>Bnei Yisrael</i>. (29) And Moshe said to them, “If the children of Gad and the children of Reuven pass with you over the Jordan, every man armed for battle, before God, and the land is subdued before you, then you shall give them the land of Gilad for a possession. (30) But if they do not pass over armed with you, they shall have their possession in your midst, in the land of Canaan.”</p>

What is the meaning of this repetition?

A review of the formulation of the condition reveals a significant difference between the two presentations. In the first formulation, Moshe tells the children of Gad and Reuven that if they do not fulfill the condition, they will be considered as having sinned:

“But if you do not do so, behold, you will have sinned before God, and know that your sin will find you.”

From this we deduce that violation of the condition will be a sin against God – but will not cancel the inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan. To the chiefs of the heads of the tribes, on the other hand, Moshe makes it clear and explicit that a violation of the condition will cause the entire agreement to be annulled:

"But if they do not pass over armed with you, they shall have their possession in your midst, in the land of Canaan."

Why the discrepancy?

It would seem that this is the way that Moshe chooses to emphasize the two aspects of condition, reflecting the two different arguments against their request in the first place – a commitment towards God and a commitment towards *Bnei Yisrael*. As he promises them, if they fulfill their undertaking, "You shall be guiltless *before God and before Israel*." In addressing the tribes of Gad and Reuven, Moshe emphasizes the aspect of their commitment to God, and he therefore repeats God's name six times. If Gad and Reuven do not go out to war before God, they will be considered as having sinned before Him, since this would express their lack of faith in God and in His ability to cause them to inherit the land – just like the spies. However, this sin would not cause them to lose the inheritance that they had requested.

C. The description in Sefer Devarim

A somewhat different version of the story is included in Moshe's first speech in *Sefer Devarim*:

And this land, which we possessed at that time, from Aro'er which is by wadi Arnon, and the half-mountain of Gil'ad, and its cities, I gave to the Reuveni and the Gadi. And the rest of the Gil'ad, and all of the Bashan – the kingdom of Og – I gave to the half-tribe of Menashe, all the region of Argov, with all of the Bashan, which is called the land of Refaim. Yair, son of Menashe, took all of the region of Argov, up to the border of the Geshuri and the Ma'akhati, and named them after himself; [he called] the Bashan "Chavot Yair" to this day. And to Makhir I gave the Gil'ad. And to the Reuveni and to the Gadi I gave from the Gil'ad to wadi Arnon, the middle of the wadi being the border, and up to Yabbok, the wadi which is the border of the children of Amon. And the Arava and the Jordan as a border, from Kinneret up to the sea of the Arava, the Salt Sea, under the slopes of Pisga, eastward. And I commanded you at that time, saying, "The Lord your God has given you this land to possess it. Pass over armed, all who are fit to fight, before your brothers, *Bnei Yisrael*. But your wives and your children and your cattle – I know that you have much cattle – shall dwell in your cities which I have given you, until God gives rest to your brethren as [He has] to you, and they too possess the land which the Lord your God has given them on the other side of the Jordan, and then you shall return, every man to his possession which I have given you." (*Devarim* 3:12-20)

According to this description, following the conquest of the eastern side of the Jordan, it is Moshe himself who initiates the transfer of the region to the tribes of Gad and Reuven. Here, too, he instructs them to pass over armed before their brothers to wage war in the land of Canaan, but no condition is mentioned here as being attached.

What is the meaning of this description, and why the contradiction between it and the narrative in our *parasha*?

It would seem that the two descriptions reflect two different perceptions of the eastern side of the Jordan. The plain reading of our *parasha*, as well as several other chapters in the Torah, suggests that this area was not originally meant to be included in the inheritance of *Bnei Yisrael* in the land of Canaan – which, by definition, lies on the western side of the Jordan. This is especially apparent in the description of the borders of the land further on, in chapter 34, where the text sets forth precisely the eastern border of Canaan:

Command *Bnei Yisrael* and say to them, “When you come into the land of Canaan, this is the land which shall fall to you as an inheritance – the land of Canaan with its borders... And you desired for yourselves as an eastern border, from Chatzar-Einan to Shefam. And the border shall go down from Shefam to Rivla, on the eastern side of Ayin, and the border shall go down and reach the eastward projection of the sea of Kinneret. And the border shall go down to the Jordan, and its limits shall be at the Salt Sea – this shall be your land with its borders around it. (34:2, 10-12).<sup>[3]</sup>

According to this view, the eastern side of the Jordan is a sort of annex to the land of Canaan, which *Am Yisrael* received owing mainly to the desire of the tribes of Gad and Reuven to settle there. The impression arising from the text is that these tribes were indeed given this region, with Moshe’s approval, but they do not dwell in the land of Canaan and have no portion in God’s inheritance.

Indeed, according to *Sefer Bamidbar*, the very conquest of this area was “accidental,” as it were. In *Parashat Chukat*, we read of how *Bnei Yisrael* requested of Sichon:

“Let us pass through your land: we shall not turn aside in the fields or in the vineyards, we shall not drink water from the wells; we shall go along the king’s highway until we have passed out of your border.” (21:22)

In other words, *Bnei Yisrael* had no intention of conquering Sichon’s kingdom. Had he not come out to wage war against them, it seems reasonable to assume that the region would have remained his, and would not have become an inheritance for tribes of Israel.

This explains what Pinchas son of Elazar the *kohen* tells the two-and-a half tribes towards the end of *Sefer Yehoshua* (22:19):

“However, if the land of your possession is impure, then pass over to the land of God’s inheritance, where God’s *Mishkan* resides, and take possession among us.”

The distinction here is very clear: the land of Canaan, the western side of the Jordan, is “the land of God’s inheritance,” while the eastern side may possibly be “impure.”

*Sefer Devarim* expresses a different view, according to which the inheritances of Sichon and Og were meant from the outset to be part of the greater *Eretz Yisrael*. This becomes apparent already in the story of the war against Sichon, which is described in *Sefer Devarim* as a war instigated by *Bnei Yisrael* with a view to conquering the territory:

God spoke to me, saying... “Arise, journey on, and cross wadi Arnon; see – I have delivered into your hand Sichon, king of Cheshbon, the Emorite, and his land; begin to possess it, and contend with him in battle. This day I will begin to put the fear of you and the dread of you upon the faces of the nations that are under the entire heaven, who shall hear reports about you and shall tremble and quake from before you.” (*Devarim* 2:17-25)<sup>[4]</sup>

The very fact of the command, “Begin to possess,” seems, according to the plain meaning, to suggest that this represents the beginning of the possession of the land at the hand of Moshe. Indeed, Moshe himself says, further on:

And this land, which we possessed at that time – from Aro’er which is by wadi Arnon, and the half-mountain of Gil’ad, and its cities – I gave to the Reuveni and the Gadi. (*Devarim* 3:12)

According to these verses, the inheritance of *Bnei Yisrael* is not limited to the land of Canaan, but rather extends to a broader area, as promised to Avraham at the Covenant Between the Parts:

On that day, God forged a covenant with Avram, saying, “To your seed I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. The Keni and the Kenizi and the Kadmoni; and the Chiti and the Perizi and the Refaim, and the Emori and the Canaani and the Gargashi and the Yevusi...” (*Bereishit* 15:18-21).

Indeed, the same chapter in *Sefer Devarim* also sets down the inheritances of other nations which received them by virtue of their connection with Avraham: the children of Esav inherit the land of Edom (*Devarim* 2:4-5), while the children of Lot inherit the land of Moav (verse 9) and the land of Amon (verse 19). Unlike the inheritances of these nations, which remain with them by virtue of their lineage from Avraham, the inheritance of Sichon<sup>[5]</sup> was meant to fall to *Bnei Yisrael*, even though it was not part of Canaan, because its inhabitants were from the tribe of the Emori – one of the ancient nations whose inheritance was promised to Avraham – rather than descendants of Avraham himself.

In summary, the two different descriptions as discussed above demonstrate the complex status of the eastern side of the Jordan. On the one hand, this region is not part of Canaan, as stipulated in *Sefer Bamidbar*; on the other hand, it is part of the territory promised to Avraham, as emphasized in *Sefer Devarim*.

This complex status is the root of the different attitudes in the two *Sefarim* concerning the inheritance of the tribes of Gad and Reuven. *Sefer Bamidbar* emphasizes that this inheritance was given to *Bnei Yisrael* only because of the specific request by these two tribes; therefore, there was room to make the accession to the request conditional upon their going forth armed to war before God. In *Sefer Devarim*, in contrast, the initiative of settling this area emerges from Moshe, and it is he who suggests it as an inheritance for the tribes of Gad and Reuven. Therefore, Moshe could only command them to go and fight with their brethren in order to take possession of Canaan, but he could not make the inheritance conditional upon them doing so, since the land was meant to be theirs in any case.

Translated by Kaeren Fish

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[1] All references are to *Bamidbar* 32, unless otherwise specified.

[2] The conclusion, “Do that which has proceeded from your mouths,” brings us back to the beginning of the *parasha*: “If a man makes a vow to God, or swears an oath to God, to bind his soul with a bond, he shall not break his word; he shall do according to all that proceeds from his mouth” (30:3). These are the only two occasions in the Torah in which Moshe issues a command to the heads of the tribes.

[3] Likewise, we find in verse 30 in our *parasha*: “But if they do not pass over armed together with you, then they shall inherit amongst you, in the land of Canaan” – meaning that the eastern side of the Jordan is not considered part of Canaan.

[4] Following this command by God, we find a surprising development: “So I sent messengers from the wilderness of Kedemot, to Sichon king of Cheshbon, with words of peace, saying: ‘Let me pass through your land. I shall go through by the highway, I shall not turn right or left. You shall sell me food for money, that I may eat, and give me water for money, that I may drink, only let us pass through on foot. So the children of Esav, who dwell in Se’ir, and the Moabites who dwell in Ar, did to me. Until I pass over the Jordan, into the land which the Lord our God has given to us’” (verses 26-29). How could Moshe propose to Sichon that *Bnei Yisrael* would pass through the land peacefully, after God had commanded him to wage war? Extensive commentary has been devoted to this question, and we shall not elaborate here (see, inter alia, Rashi and Ramban ad loc.). In any event, Sichon’s refusal of Moshe’s offer of peace was also no coincidence: “But Sichon, king of Cheshbon, would not agree to let us pass through him, for the Lord your God had hardened his spirit and made his heart obstinate, in order to deliver him into your hands, as [is apparent] this day” (verse 30). This conclusion sits well with the perspective of *Sefer Devarim*, according to which God had intended all along to have Sichon’s territory fall into the hands of *Bnei Yisrael*.

[5] The inheritance of Og and its connection to the half-tribe of Menashe is a subject all on its own; the scope of our present discussion does not allow for elaboration here.