

YESHIVAT HAR ETZION
ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

INTRODUCTION TO PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT MATOT MASEI

In memory of my beloved father, Fred Stone, A"H and cousin Jeremy Steinberger, A"H. By
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Settling the Lands East of the Jordan

By Rav Michael Hattin

INTRODUCTION

With the lengthy reading of the double portion of Matot-Masei, the Book of Bemidbar is completed. Poised to enter the land, encamped just east of the River Jordan at the Plains of Moav, the people of Israel complete their final preparations. Not long before, they had defeated the dual Amorite menace of Sichon and Og, the mighty kings who ruled over the 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 Chermon in the Lebanon mountains. In later Biblical history, that military victory would continue to loom large as a remarkable triumph abetted by the God of 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 136:17-26).

THE APPEAL OF REUVEN AND GAD

As the first of the sections of Matot is concluded, a number of the tribes "sheepishly" approach Moshe to tentatively 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).

Thus, the two tribes of Reuven and Gad, blessed with large numbers of herds, begin to wonder whether the vast tracts of fertile grazing land that they now occupy might not better meet their material needs than the rocky Canaanite highlands. Perceptively, the fifteenth century Spanish commentator Rabbi Yitzhak Abarbanel detects in their disconnected 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 introduces 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 stand before Moshe and the tribal leaders. After all, hadn't the last thirty-eight years been disastrously dissipated in purposeless wandering because of an earlier generation's reluctance to enter the new land? Understandably, Moshe is 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! On the one side, stands the aged lawgiver as he is flanked by the new leaders of the people. Moshe remembers the debacle of the Spies only too well. How that buoyant mission had ended so tragically because the people lacked the steadfastness to trust in God's assistance. Perhaps the troubling thought of his own more recent exclusion from entering the land also lurks 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 and by an unbridgeable chasm, stood the tribes of Reuben and Gad. Certainly, they had shared in the people's fate up until this point and had taken part in the communal calamity imposed by God's decree. Had they not sufficiently 'paid the price'? Besides, why did God grant them victory over these 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 their shared destiny?

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 defiance, the two tribes spell out their plan: they WILL fight with their brethren and help them to secure their land, but in the end they WILL NOT settle it with them. After the territories in Canaan have been secured, they will return to their own homes east of the Jordan. Surprisingly, Moshe acquiesces and places an oath upon them in the presence of Yehoshua, El'azar and the tribal leaders.

RETURNING FROM CANAAN

While this episode may seem to fade into the background in the aftermath of its happy resolution, the decision of Reuven and Gad has portentous consequences. They do fulfill their oath, by dutifully accompanying the people over the Yarden to fight on their behalf, as recorded in the early chapters of Sefer Yehoshua. It should be noted that part of the tribe of Menashe, namely the descendents of mighty Machir, eventually join forces with Reuven and Gad to remain on the eastern side and share in their fate. Of course, Canaan is eventually conquered, and after a good many years the battle for the land subsides. Reuven and Gad and 'half' of Menashe return home, but when they reach the shores of the Yarden they leave 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, accompanied by ten tribal elders, to dissuade them. Again, Reuven and Gad must explain their true motives and calm Israel's fears:

...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 the 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 in our parasha. 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. At the same time, though, an ominous undercurrent of fear swirls below the surface as they approach the shores of the river. By consciously choosing to remain on its eastern side, Reuven, Gad and Menashe 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 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 THE ROLE OF MENASHE

All of the above perhaps explains with greater clarity the role of Menashe in the resolution of the events. Recall that the initial petition presented to Moshe was offered by Reuven and Gad. 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 now substantiate a claim that he had regarded as potentially ruinous, by assigning another tribe to the lands east of the Jordan? The Ramban (thirteenth 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 Reuven and Gad themselves had serious misgivings about the consequences of their decision. Perhaps the rest of the people would one day reject them. In essence, they share the very same doubts as Moshe, except that they express them from their perspective. Moshe considers the matter and decides on a course of action that may tend to limit the danger. By ASSIGNING part of Menashe to the lands east of the Jordan while the bulk of this important tribe settles on its western side, Moshe introduces a mechanism that can only help to preserve a cohesive connection between all of the tribes on both sides. The bulk of Menashe's descendents will remain within Israel proper but the powerful cultural, historical and linguistic bonds that characterize the tribal unit will ensure that a strong link is maintained with the families to the east. In this way, the tribes to the east will not be completely cut off from the national pulse and they themselves will have an interest in nurturing the connection.

This explanation is bolstered by the fact that not only Menashe's descendents settled east of the Yarden. As Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra demonstrates from the lineage lists preserved in Divrei Ha-Yamim 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 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 Ha-Yamim 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, will not guarantee a shared destiny with those that dwell in the land. Only settling with them, only dwelling among them as one, will ensure an enduring relationship with the people of Israel and a true appreciation of Israel's mission.

Shabbat Shalom