

The Reubenites and The Gadites and
the Possession of the Eastern Portion of the Jordan River
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The last two parshiyot of Bamidbar conclude with the two parshiot Mattot, which means “vows” and the last chapter Massai, which refers to the 42 journeys that the Children of Israel took from Egypt to the eastern part of the Jordan ready to cross into the covenantal or Promised Land given to them by God and promised to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

These two parshiot have at least 6 important areas that could be discussed plus the Haftora which is the second Haftora of admonition from the second Chapter of the prophet Jeremiah.

In Mattot, one could discuss the vows between the father and daughter and between a man and wife. One could discuss the war against the Midianites and the final slaying of Balaam. The third possibility is to talk about the Reubenites and Gadites who prefer the grazing land on the eastern portion of the Jordan River. In the final chapter of Massai, one could talk about the 42 marches from Egypt to the Jordan River or the apportionment of the land to the tribes and finally, the 6 cities of refuge on both the eastern and western portion of the Jordan River.

What is important in a D’var Torah, I think, is to select one meaningful part of one of the Parshiot and discuss it as thoroughly as possible and most importantly, to try to relate that story or that historical point and correlate it with what it means for us today and how we can live by it today.

Therefore, I have chosen Chapter 32 of Bamidbar, which essentially is focusing on the Reubenites, Gadites and half -tribe of Menasha who elect to live in what they think is an excellent land for grazing for their cattle and sheep on the eastern side of the Jordan and as is demonstrated in the handouts of the map of Israel as it existed during the time of Joshua.

In a rather superficial way, the reason the Reubenites and Gadites decide that they would like to stay on the eastern portion of the Jordan River is that the grazing lands are superior to what they might find in the west of the Jordan river which they do not yet know about. Is this selfish? Is there a reason for it? Is it because they have more cattle? The latter comment cannot be true because all of the tribes had cattle from the exodus from Egypt. There were 3 wars; one against King of Sion, a second against the King Og and the most recent battle, which is described in Mattot Chapter 31, where the Children of Israel defeat the Midianites and again, the cattle, sheep, gold and silver are equally distributed among all of the tribes. So why is it that just the Reubenites and Gadites want to settle on the eastern portion of the river? This is a question which is difficult to answer.

In preparing for this D’var Torah, I reviewed a commentary several years ago by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks, the former Chief Rabbi of Great Britain. *Much of the following is quoted or paraphrased from this commentary.* I also discussed this with Rabbi Heschel Greenberg. I also looked at commentaries by Rashi and Nachmanides, who incidentally totally disagree with each other. So, I am forced to come to some type of resolution of all of these ideas and commentaries.

So let me begin with a rather dramatic approach to the beginning of my Drash. The Israelites are almost within sight of the Promised Land. They have waged a victorious campaign against the Midianites. We feel the tempo quicken. No longer are the Israelites in the desert. They are moving inexorably toward the Jordan, to the west of which lies their destination: the land ‘flowing with milk and honey’.

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they are travelling is ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would like

to stay there, to the east of the Jordan. Moses is angry at the suggestion. In Chapter 32, verse 16, they state to Moses, “We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children.” In other words, they put their possessions first before their children. But they state that they will hasten to be shock-troops in the battle in the land of Canaan along with the other 10 tribes of the Israelites and will not return to the eastern part of the Jordan until the other tribes have established themselves in their homes on the west side of the Jordan river. I have handed out the distribution of the 10 tribes in Canaan at the times of Joshua and the two and a half tribes on the eastern part of the Jordan.

Moses said to them, “If you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord, and every shock-fighter among you crosses the Jordan, until God has dispossessed his enemies before Him and the land has been subdued, and then you may return, you shall be clear before the Lord and before Israel and this land shall be your holding under the Lord.”

But then Moses goes on to say something profound. He reverses the order of the nouns. He says in Verse 24, “Build towns for your children and sheepfolds for your flocks, but do what you have promised.” And now, in verse 26, the Gadites, the Reubenites sort of reverse what they said and say, “Our children, our wives, our flocks and all of our other livestock will stay behind in the towns of Gilead.”

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and then detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said:

Then they came up to him and said, “We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children.” Moses replies: “Build cities for your children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised.”

The ordering of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they speak of their flocks first, their women and children second. Moses reverses the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes: “They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children.” Moses said to them: ‘Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks.’

The midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 22: 9) makes the same point through a dazzling interpretation of the line in Ecclesiastes: The heart of the wise inclines to the right, but the heart of the fool to the left. (Ecclesiastes 10:2)

The midrash identifies ‘right’ with Torah and life: “He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand (Deut. 33:2). ‘Left’ refers to worldly goods: Long life is in her right hand; in her left hand are riches and honour. (Proverbs 3: 16)

The men of Reuben and Gad put ‘riches and honour’ before their children and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong and the midrash continues: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: “Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.”

One of the very difficult questions is that if the distribution of cattle from Egypt, the defeat of the territory of the King of Og and the King of Sion and particularly the destruction of the Midianites and the statement in the Torah that the spoils of war were equally distributed with the entire 12 tribes, why was it only that the Gadites and Reubenites selected this land for their sheep and cattle?

The approach from Chassidus is that throughout Torah the most spiritual people are Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They are all shepherds. Moses was initially a shepherd before the burning bush encounter. The 10 spies, according to Chassidus, who decided not to go into the land of Canaan not because they were afraid, but because they enjoyed the spiritual life in the desert more than wanting to go

into the land to work with their hands. But this is not what God wanted. He wanted the people to be physical as well as spiritual and to bring godliness down in the world – that is the purpose of Judaism.

So one possible reason for the choice of the Reubenites and Gadites to pick the eastern portion of the Jordan was that they were very spiritual and that they wanted to continue to have grazing lands for their sheep and cattle, rather than to go into the Holy Land and work and till the soil physically. This would be the approach of Chassidus.

Finally, in my opinion, the most important lesson that we learn from the fact that the Reubenites and Gadites put riches and honor before children and posterity, is that one of the most important and consistent patterns of Jewish history is the way communities, through the ages, put children and their education first. I have selected a few statements in Torah to emphasize this concept.

Deuteronomy Chapter 6, “And this is the instruction, the laws and the rules that the Lord your God has commanded me to impart to you to be observed in the land that you are about to cross into and to occupy so that your children and your children’s children may revere the Lord your God and follow as long as you live, all His laws and commandments that I enjoin upon you so you may long endure.”

One of the most, if not most important statements in all of Torah is Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one, or unique.” And then it goes on to say in Deuteronomy 6:7, “Impress them upon your children; recite them when you stay at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you get up.” In Deuteronomy 11 in parashat Eikev, “Therefore impress these words upon your very heart, bind them as a sign on your hand, let them serve as a symbol on your forehead and teach them to your children.”

Therefore, one of the most consistent patterns in Jewish history is the way communities through the ages put children and their education first. Already in the first century, Josephus was able to write, “The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our souls.”

In the 12th Century France, a Christian scholar noted, “A Jew however poor, if he has 10 sons will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for understanding of God’s law and not only his sons, but his daughters too.”

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years’ War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organize the educational system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family:

The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys’ school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son.

The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her son’s schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew – for her the two are synonymous.

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshiva heads and Hassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilization that is as child-centered as Judaism, nor any that has predicated its very existence on putting their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues – Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor detail but a fundamental statement about Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary.

In the words of Lord Jonathan Sacks, "Civilizations that value the young, stay young. Those that invest in the future, have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our belief and way of life into the next generation."

Shabbat Shalom