

MORASHAH

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Weekly *Parshat HaShavuah* Series

Rabbi Kalman Winnick

Parashat Mattot/Masei (5770) **Building a Jewish home? The challenging choices of Reuben and Gad**

From the time of Abraham, the Jewish people were told to go and inherit their own land - 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee" (Gen 12:1). And that initial charge was renewed as a promise to Moses "and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey..." (Ex 3:7-8). The Jews risked their lives (and ultimately the lives of the Egyptians) to leave Egypt and return to Israel. They suffered the trials and tribulations of forty years in the desert. Moses himself, the most faithful and humble of all G-d's servants, struggles to accept G-d's decree against him and begs that he should be allowed to enter into the good land. (Deut 3:25).

How then can the tribes of Reuben and Gad request to settle on the East bank of the Jordan - outside the land of Israel? Why would they be willing to forfeit the long-sought goal when it was in their grasp? An answer can perhaps be seen in the text itself. Chapter 32 of Numbers begins by telling us that Reuben and Gad had abundant livestock. The midrash is surprised at this statement. Since all the tribes inherited equally, how could these tribes have more? The Or HaChaim suggests that perhaps Reuben and Gad were more advanced militarily and came away with more plunder than the other tribes. The Midrash Hagadol brings another possibility. He suggests that all the tribes had the same amount. But Reuben and Gad placed greater *emphasis* on their possessions than the other tribes and this brought with it greater worry on their parts. Reuben and Gad saw the world in materialistic ways. Look at their evaluation of the land they wanted. They described it as "makom mikneh" - a place for possessions! It did not matter to them whether the land was Holy like the land of Israel. They were unconcerned with the values exhibited by the previous tenants in the land who lacked any amount of hospitality and grace - waging war instead of allowing the Jews to walk through their land. And they were okay with the fact that they would be separating from the other tribes and in essence breaking up the family.

The compromise solution is anything but ideal. They will leave their wives and children, going with the other tribes to conquer the land of Israel. This is better than not helping at all, but it is still not very good. They still won't be living in the Holy Land. They still won't be with their brethren. And now they must leave behind their own wives and children for an extended period of time. And for what? In order to quench a self-imposed need to protect their possessions. Look at the Torah's response to the compromise. Moses tells them that if they fulfill their bargain, they will be "neki'im" from G-d and from the Israel. The word "neki'im" means clean. At best, this means that Reuben and Gad will not be in trouble. But there are other implications. By simply fighting for the land and then returning to the East, Reuben and Gad are in essence

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being “cleansed of” (forfeiting?) their relationship with G-d, with Israel (the land, the people, both?). They may not have sinned, but they may still have lost.

Why then, would Moses accept such an offer? Perhaps because at some point you can not make people want to be Holy and connected. The tribes of Reuben and Gad – with all they had witnessed – still chose materialism over holiness and over community unity. At that point all Moses could do was make sure they protected the other tribes.

What about us? Where and how are we building our homes and our families? Are we thinking about the Holiness of our surroundings - near shuls and schools (or even in Israel!)? Or are we choosing a “makom mikneh” - a place for our possessions? Are we aware that providing for protecting our children is not only about having more and better things and building bigger fences, but about raising our children in places which have proper values and where they are close to community? We live in the land of the free. Do we want to be “neki”im” clean or free of these sacred opportunities and bonds? Nobody - not Moses, not G-d - can force us. May we be blessed to make healthy, informed, thoughtful choices for ourselves and our families - recognizing that the Holy Land is both an incredible place in the Middle-East and also a possible reality right before us if we build her values into our homes and our lives.

Shabbat Shalom.

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