

Reuben, Gad, and Jewish Responsibility

Parashat Matot-Masei, Numbers, Chapters 30-36 | July 28, 2022

Let us speak of Milt Rubinfeld, an American Jew from Peekskill, New York, who had the distinction of serving as a pilot in World War II in several different capacities. He had wished to fight the Nazis, but America was not yet in the war, and so he started with the Royal Air Force before returning to fly and fight for the United States. After the war, Rubinfeld became one of the first pilots in the nascent Air Force of the State of Israel, and his own story embodies—in both an amusing and inspiring way—how he and others answered a question asked by Moses many millennia before.

As the Israelites approach the Holy Land, they engage in battle with two kings: Sihon of the Amorites and Og, monarch of the Bashan. Both kings were defeated, and with the divinely declared destination in sight, two tribes suddenly stunned Moses with a request to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan River:

Now the children of Reuben and the children of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle: and when they saw the land of Jazer, and the land of Gilead, that, behold, the place was a place for cattle;

The children of Gad and the children of Reuben came and spoke unto Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and unto the princes of the congregation, saying...

The land, which the Lord conquered before the congregation of Israel, is a land for cattle, and thy servants have cattle;

And they said, if we have found favor in thy sight, let this land be given unto thy servants for a possession, bring us not over the Jordan.
(Numbers 32:1-2,4-5)

Let us attempt to imagine what must have gone

through Moses' mind at this moment. I believe the following point was made by Rabbi Moshe Lichtenstein, who heard it from his mother, Dr. Tovah Lichtenstein, though I will express it here in my own words: Moses' deepest desire was to enter the land of Israel, and this dream was denied to him. The Almighty does not even accede to His servant's plea merely to cross the Jordan and look at the land. Moses is allowed to see it from an overlook, but he cannot ever step onto its sacred soil. Yet here we have two tribes who are about to realize the end goal of the exodus, the arrival in the Promised Land, and they suddenly say that they would rather build their lives elsewhere! What Moses most wants and cannot have, Reuben and Gad take so utterly for granted that they reject it. But Moses as a leader cannot place his personal desires at the heart of his response to them. Instead, what he utters are words that resound through Jewish history:

And Moses said unto the children of Gad and to the children of Reuben, Shall your brethren go to war, and you shall stay here?
(Numbers 32:6)

In other words: will you let your brethren risk their lives without your own effort to preserve their well-being?

Moses accuses Gad and Reuben of a lack of identification with the danger faced by the larger nation, lack of interest in the well-being of their brothers and sisters, and a seeming sense of self-sufficiency. Gad and Reuben rush to assure Moses that they will fulfill their military obligations, and their promise provides context for why the previous passages in this portion of Numbers discuss oaths, the bond of one's word. The tribes declare that they will first join their brethren in battle, and then, only after that, will they

return to this land on the other side of the Jordan. Note carefully their words:

And they came near unto him, and said, We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our little ones:

But we ourselves will go ready armed before the children of Israel, until we have brought them unto their place: and our little ones shall dwell in the fortified cities because of the inhabitants of the land.

We will not return unto our houses, until the children of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance. (Numbers 32:16-18)

Reuben and Gad will provide for their households and then head into battle, only returning after the war is won. Their promise appears admirable, but the Sages sense something is still amiss, and it can be found in the order of the phrases that they utter: first, “*We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle,*” and then “*cities for our little ones.*” There seems to be more of a focus on property and prosperity (the cattle), than on progeny. Indeed, the cattle were the very reason that they requested to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan. In response, Moses agrees to the offer, but the Sages take careful note not only of the words he says, but also of the order in which these words are placed:

Build you cities for your little ones, and folds for your sheep; and do that which hath proceeded out of your mouth. (Numbers 32:24)

In other words, Moses says, *If you fight with the rest of Israel, then this land will be yours.*

But remember, he implicitly adds, what is truly important: children over prosperity. Continuity is the truest treasure.

Thus does Moses ingrain within Israel something that reverberates throughout the generations, something that can be seen in a striking statistical phenomenon today: as the birth rate plummets in most Western democracies, Israel is the only such country that continues to have a large number of children. This fact has most recently attracted the attention of Ross Douthat,

whose fascinating book, *The Decadent Society*, describes the stagnation that he argues Western wealth and achievement have produced. He writes,

Amid all of our society’s material plenty,
one resource is conspicuously scarce.
That resource is babies.

Our technological sophistication allows us to perpetuate atomistic existences, to live virtually rather than to truly live. The result, for Douthat, is a society that does not focus enough on its future, whose own success is a source of stagnation. But there is, Douthat further notes, one society that has defied decadence. Israel, he writes, is:

the only rich, highly educated country
where birth rates leveled off well above
replacement instead of just below it, and
then actually rose again.

Douthat theorizes that the constant endangerment faced by the Jewish state is the cause of its demographic strength. As he puts it,

Israel’s distinctive identity, history, and geopolitical position—perpetually threatened, perpetually mobilized—creates very different attitudes toward the self-sacrifice involved in parenthood than the less existentially shadowed culture of other rich societies.

There may be something to his explanation, but it may just be that the love of children is ingrained in the fiber of the culture of the Jewish state. This love, this comfort with, and celebration of, children highlights precisely for whom the state of Israel is supposed to be flourishing.

Reuben and Gad appear to understand the lesson, for they respond to Moses with their original clauses now reversed:

Our little ones, our wives, our flocks, and all our cattle, shall be there in the cities of Gilead:

But thy servants will pass over, every man that is armed for war... (Numbers 32:26-27)

Moses thus implicitly emphasizes the centrality of children to the future of Israel. But the other lesson of which he speaks, of Israelite interdependence and covenantal responsibility, he makes eloquently explicit. Reuben and Gad must battle with their brethren or the moral and spiritual stain will be dire.

But if ye will not do so, behold, ye have sinned against the Lord: and know ye that your sin will find you out. (Numbers 32:23)

It is a curious phrase that Moses utters. The Hebrew here is hard to translate: “*u’de’u chatatchem asher timtzah etchem.*” He seems to say that if these two tribes do not do as they promise, do not fight side by side with their brothers, then their sin will somehow stalk them and condemn them in the future. Thus does this great leader, who himself cannot enter the land, ensure through his strong language that these two tribes bind their very souls to their brothers who will be fighting for the land *and* dwelling in the land. Moses’ stringency in invoking this charge, his reference to the sin of disunity stalking the possible sinners, also highlights an implicit and profoundly prescient fear.

The truth is that the Jewish people throughout the ages were not always united. Jerusalem fell during the Second Temple period because of the infighting within the city that undid the Jewish defenses against the Romans. Thus, Moses’ words set a standard and a warning for the future.

In these actions on the eastern bank of the Jordan, Moses sets the stage for the way that Jews are called to feel bound to one another. But the final act of Moses’ tale here is yet to come. As he bequeathed the land to these two tribes, Moses suddenly added half of another tribe:

And Moses gave unto them, to the children of Gad, and Reuben, and unto half the tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan... (Numbers 32:33)

Where did Manasseh come from? Manasseh did not ask for this land, and if Moses is giving the land also to Manasseh, why is he giving it to half of Manasseh? Why does the other half of Manasseh end up on the other side of the Jordan? Moreover, as Rabbi Yaakov Medan notes, Manasseh’s land on the east side of the Jordan ends up larger than that of Reuben and Gad, even as Manasseh has also been given a large portion of land on the other side of the Jordan. What is Moses doing?

Rabbi Medan has his own fascinating suggestion, but perhaps Moses is making Reuben and Gad subordinate to Manasseh, which will have the larger territory on the eastern side. In dividing Manasseh’s portion, Moses is ensuring that all those on the east bank will never forget their brethren in the destined Promised Land. In ensuring that the largest tribal territory on one side of the Jordan has half its brethren on the other side of the Jordan, Moses is expressing that a part of the people east of the Jordan remains bound up in the fate of the Israelites on the other side

Jewish solidarity is thus the central message of this incredible tale, and Moses’ vision imprints itself on the Jewish spirit, and has been made manifest throughout Jewish history in remarkable and often unexpected ways.

The documentary *Above and Beyond*, which is about the origins of the Israeli Air Force, describes how many of the first pilots of Israel were not Israelis. We are told of Jews from America, Canada, South Africa, who were trained during World War II to fly and who signed up then to serve the nascent Jewish state. One of these men was Milt Rubinfeld. On his first mission, Rubinfeld was shot down over the Mediterranean, and he swam ashore. The problem, the documentary tells us, was that the Israeli Air Force had not only been kept as a secret from the enemies of Israel; it was also something that was not known about by many Israelis. Thus, as the Israelis on the shore saw a pilot who had been shot down swimming toward them, they assumed that he was Egyptian, so they began shooting at him. Rubinfeld, furthermore, an accultur-

ated American Jew, knew very little Hebrew. He had to somehow tell them that he was Jewish and fighting for Israel. Thus, while they were firing at him, he reportedly shouted whatever Jewish words occurred to him. In one version of the story, as the bullets rained down on him, he was yelling at them something like “*Shabbos, gefilte fish! Shabbos gefilte fish!*”

The story is striking. What motivated a man who had already served so many years in a war to travel to the other side of the world to risk his life to defend Jews whose language he did not speak, with whom he seemed culturally to have so little in common? Rubinfeld did not intend to stay in the State of Israel; he returned to America after the War of Independence. Why then was he willing to risk his life in this way? The answer, of course, lies in Moses’ message. Rubinfeld revealed that thousands of miles away from the Middle East, he was somehow stirred by an incredible sense of responsibility that he and his fellow pilots reflected; men who had already risked their lives to fight for the Allies, who could so easily have embraced retirement, but yet somehow heard deep within them Moses’ voice saying, “*Shall your brethren go to war, and you shall stay here?* We know the answer these pilots gave, an answer that revealed how a few words, uttered thousands of years ago on the east bank of the Jordan, remained generations later a clarion call in their souls.

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some of the ways that Jewish law seeks to inculcate in us the lesson of Moses that progeny must always take priority over prosperity? To what aspects of contemporary life does Moses' implicit warning speak most clearly?

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