

Parashah and Politics: How Torah Changed the World

Parashat Matot-Masei, Numbers, Chapters 30-36 | August 3, 2024

By Rabbi Meir Soloveichik

The People and the Golan

Following the horrific Hizballah missile strike that killed twelve Druze children in Majdal Shams, a phrase appeared in headlines and articles over and over: “Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.” The ubiquity of the phrase reflected how the American media were ignoring the fact that the U.S. government has recognized Israeli sovereignty over the Golan. But the precise choice of language, I believe, is even more pernicious than that. To speak of an “occupation” in the Golan is not only to deny the Israeli right to the region: it is also to imply dishonestly that the Israeli presence in the region is somehow linked to the current conflict, which of course it is not.

In response to these headlines, many noted that the Golan is not only a part of the State of Israel, but also that any visit to the Golan reveals the many centuries of Jewish life that unfolded there. This is of course correct; and there is, perhaps, even more to say. The area of the Golan, known as “Bashan” in the Bible, has a fascinating place in Jewish history, one whose story may well be linked to a largely forgotten chapter in the earliest era of the Jewish people, one with striking relevance to our own age. And the key to uncovering this chapter lies in our own *parashah*, in which the Golan appears.

As Moses prepares for his own death, and Israel’s crossing of the Jordan, he is suddenly approached by two tribes, Reuben and Gad, who are enamored with the land on the east side of the river, and request permission to build their lives there:

Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had a very great multitude of cattle; and they saw the land of Jazer, and the land of Gilead, and, behold, the place was a place for cattle. . . . And they said, If we have found favor in your sight, let this land be given to your servants for a possession, do not take us across the Jordan. (Numbers 32:1–5)

As I noted in Bible 365, we can easily imagine what must have gone through Moses’ mind at this moment. Rabbi Mosheh Lichtenstein cites his mother, Tovah Lichtenstein, who reflected on how he must have perceived this request. Moses’ deepest desire was to enter the Land of Israel, and this dream was denied him. The Almighty does not even accede to His servant’s plea merely to cross the Jordan and look at the land. Moses can 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. Yet Moses does not give voice to what must have been going through his mind, and instead he agrees that these two tribes can build their lives in the Transjordan, so long as they accompany their brethren into battle.

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The tribes of Reuben and Gad agree. Yet when it comes to the apportionment of the Transjordan, these two tribes receive only a part of this area. Much of it is given to part of another tribe, which has played no role in this episode thus far:

And Moses gave to them, to the sons of Gad, and to the sons of Reuben, **and to the half-tribe of Manasseh the son of Joseph**, the kingdom of Sihon king of the Amorites, and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land, and its cities with their territories, the cities of the land throughout the country. (Numbers 32:33)

Seemingly out of nowhere, another tribe appears. It is only the southern area of the eastern bank of the Jordan—what had been originally held by the kingdom of Sihon—that is given to Reuben and Gad. Bashan—the area now known as the Golan Heights—and Gilead—the area just south of it—are given to part of the tribe of Menasseh. Astonishingly, not only is Menasseh given this area; it also inherits a large portion of what is today the Galilee, inside the Promised Land, making its total portion far larger than that of any other tribe.



The puzzling nature of this decision is noted by Rabbi Yaakov Medan of Yeshivat Har Etzion, who asks what Menasseh's connection is to the story.

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and Gad receive relatively small portions of land, between Wadi Arnon (more or less parallel to the middle of the Dead Sea) in the south and Wadi Yabok (parallel to Kfar Saba) in the north. The kingdom of Ammon was also located within this area. The portion of these tribes also included a strip of the eastern Jordan Valley up to the Kinneret (Sea of Galilee). The half-tribe of Menashe received a portion that extended from Wadi Yabok to the Hermon in the north. Thus, this half-tribe received a portion much greater than that given to the tribes of Reuven and Gad together, along with the portion of the other half of the tribe, on the western side, stretching from the Jordan to the Mediterranean, and from Shekhem in the south to Beit Shean and Dor in the north—in total, an enormous area. Why is this so?

Nowhere does the tribe of Menashe appear in the negotiations between the tribes of Reuven and Gad and Moshe. Menashe never asks for an inheritance on the eastern bank, nor does this tribe possess “much cattle.” How, then, does half the tribe of Menashe become involved in this initiative?

In addition, we note that Reuven

Addressing this question in a fascinating and astonishing essay, Rabbi Medan notes that we have evidence from other books in the Bible that descendants of Joseph—of Menasseh and Ephraim—maintained ties with the region of the Promised Land even as Israel dwelled in Egypt. This is explicitly stated regarding the Ephraimites in Chronicles, which informs us that some children of Joseph died upon returning from Egypt to the Promised Land long before the Exodus, and that another descendant of Ephraim, a clearly remarkable woman named Sherah, built up the land during the time:

And the sons of Ephraim; . . . Zabad his son, and Shuthelah his son, and Ezer, and Elad, whom the men of Gath who were born in that land slew, because they came down to take away their cattle. And Ephraim their father mourned many days, and his brothers came to comfort him. And he went in to his wife, and she conceived, and she bore a son, and he called his name Beriah, because evil had befallen his house. And his daughter was Sherah, who built both the lower, and the upper, Beth Horon, and Uzzen-sherah. (1 Chronicles 7:20–24)

Here we are explicitly told of Ephraimites in the Promised Land, in the regions of Gath and Beth Horon, *after* Jacob had already arrived in Egypt, yet before the Exodus. Rabbi Medan uses this passage to transform our understanding of the centuries of Jewish history that unfolded between Jacob's reunion with Joseph in Egypt and the Exodus hundreds of years later. We tend to assume that during this period, the children of Israel had no presence in the land where Abraham walked. But in fact, Rabbi Medan argues, there were indeed Israelites dwelling in the Promised Land long before the Exodus:



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The sons of Ephraim held a portion in Canaan during the lifetime of Ephraim himself, and even before Ephraim had borne all of his children! Ephraim's daughter (or Beri's daughter) built cities in the south-western part of Mount Ephraim, close to the portion which the tribe of Ephraim was destined to inherit later on, in the days of Yehoshua. Those cities were probably inhabited by the children of Ephraim who went up to Canaan in earlier waves, prior to the Exodus—and perhaps even during the lifetime of Ephraim himself.

What this means, according to Rabbi Medan—who cites medieval commentators who share his view—is that there were previous *aliyot*, previous waves of immigration, to the land of Abraham from Egypt prior to the Exodus. They seem to have to have been limited largely to the descendants of Joseph—perhaps, we can speculate, because their ancestor was known for his vision and political gifts, or perhaps, as Rabbi Medan suggests, due to their own proximity to power in Pharaonic Egypt. Similar evidence from Chronicles can be discerned of a connection between the Josephite tribe Menasseh and this region, as we are told that one of Menasseh's sons had children with an Aramean woman, a woman from the region in modern-day Syria from which Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah hailed. Presumably, this would only have occurred if Menasseh also had some presence in or around the Promised Land.

Rabbi Medan draws the striking conclusion that migration by Jews to *Eretz Yisrael* in the modern age was, in a certain sense, a repetition of what had come before. Writing of the Ephraimites and the Menassehites, Rabbi Medan reflects:

The picture arising here is reminiscent of the modern Zionist renaissance. At the time of the establishment of the State of Israel, there were six hundred thousand Jewish inhabitants [in the land]. Most arrived in the country in two great waves of immigration following the two World Wars. However, they had been preceded by the smaller number of pioneers who comprised the First [1881–1903] and Second [1904–1914] Aliya, who in turn had been preceded by the disciples of the Vilna Gaon, the disciples of Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk [both in the early 19th century], and others.

Rabbi Medan, incredibly, even suggests that some of these Israelites were already in that area of the land waiting for their brethren to return, and met Moses upon his arrival. Whether or not we accept this aspect of his interpretation, we must also take note of another indication of a constant connection between the children of Joseph and the land. Rabbi Medan writes:

Of all of Yaakov's sons it is specifically Yosef who wishes to be gathered to his children and not only to his fathers, and he commands his brothers to bury him in the inheritance of his sons, in Shekhem.

We can thus understand, Rabbi Medan argues, why Menasseh would have been given Gilead and the Golan; this, it would seem, was land that some members of this tribe had already lived upon when most of Israel was still in Egypt. This was land that, even prior to the request of Reuben and Gad, was meant to be part of the first Israelite state, and part of Menasseh's territory. Moreover, an additional portion of the Promised Land was given to Menasseh as part of the larger national inheritance of Israel. "This," Rabbi Medan reflects, "may explain the disproportionality between the inheritance of Menashe and those of the other tribes."



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If this is the case, then the Golan, known in Numbers as the Bashan, is not merely bound up with the early history of Israel; its history is a testimony to the constant connection between the Israelites and the region, and the Israelite refusal to forget it even when it was far away in Egypt.

This, in turn, further increases our wonder at the fact that today there are farms and vineyards in the Golan cultivated by the descendants of ancient Israelites. The entire second part of our weekly reading—*Masei*, literally, “journeys”—describes the various sojourns of Israel in the desert. Read right after the biblical description of the Israelite preparation to enter the land, this passage provides a stark contrast between a people always on the move, rarely resting long in the same place, and a people focused on dwelling securely in its land. Of course, this contrast captures Jewish history in its entirety, a history that has had so many exiles and sojourns, a history that reminds us how remarkable a blessing it is to encounter Jews living, farming, and harvesting crops on the land of their ancestors.

Last week, prior to the reading of *Pinchas*, where the Bashan-Golan first appears, I received a wonderful email from a farmer in the Golan, thanking me for my podcasts, to which her family had listened as they worked. The email included attached photos of the farm/vineyard, along with, in part, the following:

I’m writing to you to say thank you and to send some positivity your way in these dark times. We are farmers in the southern Golan, and I’m sure you have heard and seen that the entire north is on fire. We’re on the border with Syria and Jordan and haven’t borne the brunt of it but we’ve had fires from rockets and I’m sure we will have more yet. Attached are the literal fruits of our labour of which I consider you a part. . . . As I was pruning our vineyards in March, your voice about Begin and the attack on Osirak filled the air on the edge of the El Al canyon as our fighter jets screamed overhead on missions to Lebanon.

The Golan goes back to the earliest history of the Jewish people in the Land of Israel, and we refer back to that remarkable history when we mark the fact that it is indeed part of the sovereign state of Israel today—as, thank God, it will continue to be. We pray this week for consolation from God for the Druze families in the Golan who are suffering so, for victory by Israel over all its enemies, and for security and restoration for all of its citizens in all of its territory.

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Additional Resources

Rabbi Yaakov Medan on Menasseh, Ephraim, and the Transjordan, “The Tribes Who Remained in Israel,” July 7, 2016. [Click here to read more.](#)

