

*Lessons Learned From The Tribes of Gad and Reuven*

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, and the refuah shlaimah of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and to the safety of the soldiers of Tzahal in their holy mission to protect the Jewish people.

The tribes of Gad and Reuven are the main protagonists at the end of our *parasha* (Torah portion). The Torah describes them as having a great deal of livestock: “The descendants of Reuben and Gad had an abundance of livestock very numerous...” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 32:1, this and all Bible and Rashi translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*) Moreover, they were singularly focused on their animal husbandry needs:

... they saw the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead, and behold, the place was a place for livestock. The descendants of Gad and the descendants of Reuben came, and they spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the Kohen and to the princes of the community, saying, “Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, and Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon, the land that the L-rd struck down before the congregation of Israel is a land for livestock, and your servants have livestock.” They said, “If it pleases you, let this land be given to your servants as a heritage; do not take us across the Jordan.”

The phrase, “do not take us across the Jordan [River]” is at once striking and disconcerting. G-d was on the cusp of fulfilling the promise to the Jewish people that He had proclaimed immediately prior to the Exodus: “I will bring you to the land, concerning which I raised My hand [i.e. made oaths] to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you as a heritage; I am the L-rd.” (*Sefer Shemot* 6:8, brackets my own) It is almost inconceivable that the tribes of Gad and Reuven repudiated the gift of the Land and its glorious promise. Yet, sadly these tribes myopically focused upon the needs of their animals: “They approached him [Moshe] and said, ‘We will build

sheepfolds for our livestock here and cities for our children.” (Sefer Bamidbar 32:16) As Rashi famously noted in his Midrashically-inspired comment on this verse, “They were more concerned about their possessions than about their sons and daughters, since they mentioned their livestock before [mentioning] their children.”

Moshe was legitimately concerned that the tribes of Gad and Reuven were so enamored with the lush pastures of Jazer and Gilead that they would refuse to join their fellow tribes in conquering of the Land of Israel. As a result, he spent no less than 10 verses berating them and deriding their self-centered request - all in the context of demonstrating the destructive nature of their plan. The last two of these verses are particularly powerful since they encapsulate his contention that the tribes of Gad and Reuven were not only turning away from the Land, but from G-d, as well:

And behold, you have now risen in place of your fathers as a society of sinful people, to add to the wrathful anger of the L-rd against Israel. If you turn away from following Him, He will leave you in the desert again, and you will destroy this entire people. (Sefer Bamidbar 32:14-15)

This passage is followed by 17 verses of back and forth statements and counterstatements between Moshe and the tribes of Gad and Reuven. In the end, they recognized their obligation to help *klal Yisrael* (the Jewish people) conquer *Eretz Yisrael* (Israel), and accepted the condition that their future possession of Jazer and Gilead would be contingent upon their active participation in the impending military campaign. In the midst of this protracted conversation, we are met with the phrase: “...and you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the L-rd and from Israel...” (*v’heyitem nekiyim mei’Hashem u’mi’Yisrael*, Sefer Bamidbar 32:22). While this expression specifically refers to the tribes’ complete fulfillment of their promise, *Chazal* (our Sages) view it in a

much broader ethical context – namely, the manner in which we are required to relate to others.

Our *pasuk* (verse) is the source text upon which *Talmud Yerushalmi, Shekalim 3:2* formulates the principle that man is obligated to deal with his fellow man with the same degree of honor, respect, and dignity he shows his Creator:

Rabbi Shemuel bar Nachmani said in the name of Rabbi Yonatan: We find (i.e. recognize) the concept that a person is obligated to treat his fellow man in the same manner he treats G-d. This notion is found in the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings. In the Torah: "...and you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the L-rd and from Israel..." (*Sefer Bamidbar 32:22*), in the Prophets: "G-d, G-d, the L-rd, G-d, G-d, the L-rd, He knows, and Israel, he shall know..." (*Sefer Yehoshua 22:22*), in the Writings: "and find favor and good understanding in the sight of G-d and man." (*Sefer Mishle 3:4*) Gamliel Zuga asked Rabbi Yossi bar Yossi: "Which one of these verses is the clearest and most direct [regarding our concept]?" Rabbi Yossi bar Yossi responded: "...and you shall be freed [of your obligation] from the L-rd and from Israel..." (Translation, parentheses, and brackets my own)

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his commentary on the Torah, "*Torah Temimah*," offers two explications of our Talmudic passage. I would like to emphasize his second explanation, wherein he suggests that the essence of our passage is man's nearly absolute obligation to act in a pleasant and pleasing fashion with his fellow man. In support of his contention, he references the following section from *Talmud Bavli, Ketuvot 16b-17a*:

Our Rabbis taught: "How does one dance before the bride?" [i.e. What is the degree of honesty demanded in recounting the beauty and positive characteristics of the bride when you are before her?] Beit Shammai said: "Describe the bride as she actually is." Beit Hillel said: "Beautiful and kind [Rashi] bride!" Beit Shammai said to Beth Hillel: "If she was lame or blind, does one say of her: 'Beautiful and graceful bride?' Did not the the Torah say, 'Distance yourself from a false matter.'" (*Sefer Shemot 22:7*) Beit Hillel said to Beit Shammai: "According to your words, if one has made a bad purchase in the market, should one praise it in his [friend's] eyes or deprecate it? Surely, one should praise it in his eyes [since his friend clearly thought it was a good purchase - Maharsha]." Therefore, the Sages said [based upon the words of Beit Hillel, Rashi]: "One should always have a pleasant disposition with his fellow man [in order to honor and meet each person's needs, Rashi]." (Translation, *The Soncino Talmud*, with my emendations and added explanations)

I believe our two Talmudic passages speak volumes about the preciousness of each individual and how he or she deserves to be treated. Indeed, they remind me of the famous Mishnah in *Pirkei Avot* 3:14 that speaks about our beloved status before Hashem: “He [Rabbi Akiva] would also say: ‘Beloved is man, for he was created in the image [of G-d]; it is a sign of even greater love that it has been made known to him that he was created in the image, as it is says, “For in the image of G-d, He made man.”’” (*Sefer Bereishit* 9:6, translation, Chabad.org)

In conclusion, I believe we can view the narrative depicting the initial behaviors of the tribes of Gad and Reuven as describing a series of misguided and misplaced priorities in regards to their national and familial responsibilities. Fascinatingly, *Chazal* utilized this negative incident to give voice to our responsibility to act respectfully and with dignity toward our fellow man. May we, too, learn and internalize these lessons as we continue on our journey of introspection during the period of the Three Weeks. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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