

Parashah One Hundred and Twenty-Two
Numbers 32:1–42; Joshua 22:7–9; Hebrews 10:26–31

notes by Tim Hegg

The commentators and Sages are divided on how to view this passage, with one exception—all of them interpret this text as teaching that Reuben and Gad were selfish in their request to inherit land in trans-Jordan. While the *parashah* has other lessons for us to learn, its primary and obvious teaching gives us insight into the whole matter of how community should work. Some have noted that the section begins with a description of how wealthy these two tribes were: “Now the sons of Reuben and the sons of Gad had an exceedingly large number of livestock....”

Mid. Rab. *Num* 22.7 makes this comment:

Three gifts exist in the world: wisdom, valor and wealth. Whoever has merited one, can attain all the world’s delights. When is this so? When these gifts come from Heaven by a means in keeping with the Torah. Otherwise, they are worthless. There were two wealthy men in the world, one of Israel—Korach—and the other of the nations—Haman— and both were destroyed. Why? Because their gift was not from Hashem, but something they grabbed for themselves. It is just so with Gad and Reuven. Rich, blessed with much flocks, they loved their wealth and dwelt outside the Land of Israel. Therefore they were the first tribes to be exiled.... What caused this if not their isolating themselves from their brethren for material gain?

When the Sages teach that Reuven and Gad were the first to be exiled, they mean that they were the first to reside outside of the Land. The first regions within the Land that were exiled were those of Zebulun and Naphtali (2Ki 15:29). But since Reuven and Gad never established their presence in the Land, they were considered as “exiled” from the very beginning.

Nowhere does God apportion tribal allotments in the trans-Jordan, nor did Gad and Reuven attain it through the lottery of lands allotted to the tribes. They “grabbed it for themselves.” Some of the Sages reason (though this is not specifically said in the Torah), that if they obtained the land they possessed without the sanctions of Torah, then it is most probable that they obtained their many flocks in similar, unrighteous ways. We should be reminded that the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil (1Tim 6:10). Paul further admonishes us that such a love may even cause us to be bankrupt in our faith. And the words of our Master are likewise germane:

And Yeshua said to His talmidim, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” (Matt. 19:23–24)

Moses makes a very interesting comment when first approached by Reuven and Gad. In v. 14 he refers to them as a “brood of sinners.” The word “brood,” תַּרְבִּיחַת, is formed on the verb רָבָה, “to multiply, become numerous, increase.” Moses sees that the sin of greed is one which is easily transmitted, and that given the opportunity, this sin would corrupt the entire nation. Left unchecked it would “multiply” in their midst.

It is interesting that in v. 24 Moses mentions their “children” before their “flocks”: “Build yourselves cities for your little ones, and sheep folds for your sheep; and do what you have promised.” In the opening words, Reuven and Gad appear to be more concerned about their flocks than their families, for they do not

mention their wives and children. Here, Moses asks them to get their priorities straight. Only if they put their families ahead of their flocks, will they evidence the kind of character needed to keep one's promises.

One Sage remarks that it is not in the "grabbing" of wealth that the problem lies, but in grabbing wealth "for oneself." Wealth must be seen as a means of serving Hashem, and if it is used or envisioned for other purposes, it will inevitably bring trouble. So it is not wealth that is the problem, it is the manner in which our possessions are used. Wealth can be a means to establish the kingdom of God if it is used for righteousness.

Other Sages do not dwell on the issue of greed, but on the apparent ungodly approach the two tribes had toward the Land. Throughout their appeal to Moses and Eleazar, they never mention their need for HaShem in their endeavors, but simply promise to do their duties. When Moses answered them, however, (vv. 20-23), he uses the name of Hashem (YHVH) five times!

If you go armed before Hashem to war, and all of your armed men cross over the Jordan before Hashem...and the land is subdued before Hashem, then...you will be guiltless before Hashem and Israel, and this land shall be for you an inheritance before Hashem.

After hearing Moses' response, Reuven and Gad's words change to include Hashem: "Your servants will go, every armed warrior, to war before Hashem" (v. 27). Since Reuven and Gad looked at the Land with entirely materialistic eyes, they did not consider it valuable in and of itself, but only in relationship to how it could benefit them. Since the land in trans-Jordan seemed more suitable for raising their many flocks, it was superior in their eyes to the Land which Hashem had promised to them by oath of covenant.

Still other Sages interpret the request of Reuven and Gad as indicating a wrong view of faith. They understand the text as indicating that Reuven and Gad had reasoned that since Hashem was promising to give the Land to the tribes of Israel, there was no need to fight for it. They were expecting entire divine intervention in obtaining the Land, and so were content not to go up with the rest since their military strength would not be needed. But apparently they had not carefully considered the word of God previously given:

I will fix your boundary from the Red Sea to the sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the River Euphrates; for I will deliver the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you will drive them out before you. (Ex 23:31)

The conquest of the Land would be done through God's mighty hand, but it would require warfare: "I will deliver the inhabitants of the land *into your hand*." To enjoy God's covenant promises requires obedient participation.

As noted above, the Midrash considers the sin of Reuven and Gad as that of separating themselves from their people, for it was on this basis that they were actually exiled first. While the reason for separating as far as Reuven and Gad were concerned was greed, the Sages teach that separation from community, even when it is based on pure motives, is an intolerable sin.

Why? Why is separation from one's community viewed as such a terrible thing in the eyes of the Sages? Because the very existence of Israel depends upon community. Thus anyone who shows a disdain for his or her community by forsaking it has essentially sided with those who would be happy if Israel ceased to exist. In other words, separation from the Jewish community for simply selfish reasons approaches one form of anti-Semitism. For this reason it has always been the perspective of the Jewish community throughout her history to do everything possible to encourage those who had assimilated into the Gentile population to return and take up their rightful place within the Jewish community. Thus, the Sages teach that Moses joins

Menashe with Reuven and Gad. Menashe is the half-tribe of Joseph, Ephraim being his counterpart. Moses reasoned that if Menashe remained in the trans-Jordan with Reuven and Gad, this would provide a regular contact with Ephraim as well as with other tribes that had gone into the Land, thus creating a natural bridge.

We may derive some lessons from this regarding our own community. Ultimately, any community will only be as strong as the commitment of individuals to the welfare of each other within the community. This is what Paul means when he writes, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves” (Phil. 2:3). Reuven and Gad both withdrew from their brothers based upon what they felt was to their own advantage. In their self-centeredness, they failed to consider how their leaving the larger community would affect others. Reuven and Gad had benefited from the community of Israel during the hardship of the wilderness. Now that they had reached the “promised Land,” they were initially unwilling to join in the difficult task of warfare to take the Land. *They wanted the benefits of the community without shouldering their fair share of the hardships.* Such a perspective was entirely unacceptable to Moses. Reuven and Gad would need to fulfill their obligations to the larger community by joining in the battle to take the Land. Only after they had done that could they settle peaceably in their chosen regions.

In our day, the “greener grass” mentality has become the norm for many people. They attend a church or synagogue in order to receive some personal benefit. They may contribute to some extent, but they never see themselves as a significant and important part of the whole. As long as they benefit from the community, all is well. But if the going gets rough, they look for something more to their liking.

A genuine community mentality is quite different. Each one who considers himself or herself a community member understands that the goal of the community is generational, not immediate, and he or she recognizes their personal role and responsibility in reaching that generational goal. Paul uses the metaphor of the human body, in which each part plays a vital role (Eph 4:16) in the maturing of the whole. Surely there are times when a person leaves one community to join another. But if this is to be done in a God-honoring way, they will make sure that others are able and willing to fill the gap their absence will create, and they will do so with a sense of having fulfilled their responsibilities, not simply abandoning them for “greener grass.”