

Torah Table Talk
Reuben, Gad and Manasseh:
Beyond the Jordan River
Parshat Mattot Numbers 30:2-32:42
Parshat Massay Numbers 33:1- 36:13

As the Children of Israel approach the land of Canaan and the end of their forty years sojourn in the wilderness, Moses prepares the people for their impending conquest of the land. He instructs the people to attack the Midianites who had tried to destroy their nation by seducing them and he teaches them the laws of oaths. Finally as the people approach the Jordan River, the tribes of Reuben and Gad come to Moses with a request. They ask for permission to settle on the Eastern Side of the Jordan River where there is ample grazing land for the flocks and herds. The tribes promise to aid the other tribes and offer to assist the other tribes in the conquest of the land before settling their territory.

Reuben, Gad, and half of the tribe of Manasseh became the first Diaspora. In exploring their motivations and responsibilities, maybe we can learn something about our own role as Diaspora Jews in relation to the land of Israel.

Numbers 32:16-25

And they came near to 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 people of Israel, until we have brought them to their place...we will not return to our houses, until the people of Israel have inherited every man his inheritance....”*

And Moses said to them, “If you will do this thing, if you will go armed before the Lord to war, And will go all of you armed over Jordan before the Lord, until he has driven out his enemies from before him, and the land be subdued before the Lord; then afterwards you shall return, and be guiltless before the Lord, and before Israel; and this land shall be your possession before the Lord. But if you will not do so, behold, you have sinned against the Lord; and be sure your sin will find you out. *Build cities for your little ones and folds for your sheep;* and do that which has proceeded out of your mouth.

And the sons of Gad and the sons of Reuben spoke to Moses, saying, “Your servants will do as my lord commands.”

1. Why did the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Manasseh ask to settle on the Eastern Side of the Jordan River? Why do you think Moses was not only reluctant but angry at the tribe for asking to do this?
2. What did the tribes offer to do in return for permission to settle outside the land of Israel?

Numbers Rabbah 22:9

The expression 'A wise man's understanding is at his right hand' (Ecclesiastes 10:2) applies to Moses, while 'A fool's understanding at his left' (Ecc. 10:2) applies to the children of Reuben and the children of Gad, who made the main thing the subordinate, and put the subordinate thing first, for they cherished their property more than life, saying to Moses: "We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our little ones" (Num. 32:16). Moses said to them: That is not right! Rather do the more important things first, "Build you cities for your little ones" (Num. 32: 24), and afterward "Folds for your sheep" (Num. 32:24.). The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: 'Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it.' Of them it says, "An estate may be gotten hastily at the beginning; but the end thereof shall not be blessed" (Proverbs. 20:21). In the same strain it says, 'Weary not thyself to be rich; cease from your own wisdom (Prov. 20:4). And who is rich? He that is content with his lot; as it says, "When you do the labor of your hands, happy shall you be, and it shall be well with you."' (Ps. 128:2)

Numbers 22:7

Likewise in the case of the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, you find that they were rich, possessing large numbers of cattle, but they loved their money and settled outside the Land of Israel. Consequently they were the first of all the tribes to go into exile; as is borne out by the text, "And he carried them away, even the Reubenites, and the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh" (I Chron. 5:26). What brought this on them: the fact that they separated themselves from their brethren because of their possessions.

1. What is the attitude of the sages to the wealth of the tribes of Reuben, Gad, and Manasseh? How did their great wealth affect their ability to make sound judgments?
 2. Look at the passage in Numbers Chapter 32 above. Note the words in italics. How are they different from one another? What do the sages conclude about the two and a half tribes from the different order of the two expressions in this phrase?
 3. Consider Jewish life in the Diaspora today. What motivates Jews to remain in the Diaspora rather than settle in the land of Israel? Is it all about material wealth? Are Diaspora Jews more concerned about their flocks and herds than they are about their children? What other factors influence people to remain outside the land of Israel when they could settle in the Promised Land?
 4. Make a list of all the positive reasons for settling in Israel and all the negative reasons for not settling in Israel today.
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Recounting Our Journey

The final Parshah in the book of Numbers opens with a list of all the places Israel visited during the sojourn in the wilderness. It concludes with a discussion of the boundaries of

the land of Canaan, how the land was to apportioned to the people of Israel and a description of the special cities that were given to the tribe of Levi and were to be used as cities of refuge. Finally in the last passage in the book we learn that the daughters of Tzolophehad who inherited their father's land married other members of their own tribe in order to insure that the land remained within their own tribe. The opening passage which contains the list of place names at first glance appears to be dry and uninteresting. What can we learn from this list?

Numbers 33:1-2

These are the journeys of the children of Israel who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by God. Their journeys, by starting points were as follows...

1. Look carefully at these verses. What was performed "as directed by God:" the points of departure or the recording of this information by Moses? Why is it important to tell us that the journey (or its record) was performed according to the directions given by God?
2. Why does the book of Numbers end with this list of place names? What does it add to our insight into Israel's sojourn in the wilderness?
3. Have you ever kept a diary on a special trip or vacation? Why? What did the record of your travels allow you to accomplish?

Rashi, Numbers 33:2

Why were these stations recorded? In order to publicize the loving acts of the Omnipresent; that although God decreed to move them about and make them wander in the wilderness, you should not think they wandered and moved from one stage to another the whole forty years and that they had no rest, for you see that there were only forty two stages...Fourteen of them were in the first year before the decree that they should die in the wilderness...and eight of them were in the end after the death of Aaron at Hor Hahar....(*Comment - This means that they only stopped at 22 places during the bulk of their 40 years in the wilderness.*)

Numbers Rabbah 23:3 (Also quoted by Rashi)

3. THESE ARE THE STAGES (33:1). It is like the case of a king whose son was ill. He took him to a certain place to cure him. On their return journey his father began to recount all the stages, saying: 'Here we slept; here we cooled ourselves; here you had a headache.' So the Holy One, blessed be He, said to Moses: 'Recount to them all the places where they provoked Me.' consequently it says, THESE ARE THE STAGES, etc.

1. How do these two texts differ in how they explain the reason for recounting the list of place names recorded in Chapter 33 of the book of Numbers? What is the purpose of the list according to Rashi and the Midrash
2. Is there anything in the verses in numbers that would appear to support either point of view?

3. How do each of these texts envision Israel's journey through the wilderness? What was accomplished through the forty years in the desert?

Looking at our Life as a Journey

Life can also be viewed as a type of journey, in which each event or milestone is a kind of resting point along the way. Here are some questions and activities that might help you think about life as a journey.

1. Make a time line of your own life, listing each of the years of your life starting at 0 and ending on your present age. Leave space by each year to write significant events and occurrences that took place.
2. Now under each year write down a list of 'events,' 'milestones,' that you experienced. What took place in your family, in your community, and in the world at that age? How did these events affect you, personally?
3. Make a list of all the moments in which you had meaningful spiritual experiences of one sort or another that you can recall? How did they affect you?
4. Look back over your personal journey time line. Where do you see it leading? What have you learned along the way? How have you changed and grown?
5. What have been the most significant events in your life that have made you the person you have become?

How to use Torah Table Talk

1. *Read the sheet out loud to one another. Discuss what it has to say.*
2. *Focus on the text in the box. It is taken from Biblical, post-biblical and modern Jewish sources. What does it mean? How does it make you feel?*
3. *Try to answer the questions following the text.*
4. *This is not a test and there are many correct answers and interpretations to each question. Share your ideas with one another. Be open and honest in sharing your ideas.*

***“All it takes to study Torah is an open heart, a curious mind
and a desire to grow a Jewish soul.”***

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