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**PARASHOT MATOT-MASEI**

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**A Possession Before the Lord**

**(*Bamidbar* 32:22)**

**Rav Chanoch Waxman**

**I**

The initial encounter between the Sons of Gad and Reuven and Moshe did not go particularly well. Upon hearing their request to "not cross them over the Jordan" (32:5), Moshe responds extremely harshly. He immediately accuses them of abandoning their brothers. In addition, after his rhetorical question of "your brothers will go to war and you will stay here?" (32:6), and its implied accusation of cowardice as well as betrayal, Moshe accuses the tribes of "discouraging the hearts" of the Children of Israel and of dissuading them from entering the Land that God is about to give them (32:7).

Without pausing for response, as if his words so far were insufficient to communicate a negative response, Moshe then launches into a lengthy speech, part history lesson, part fury, part flashback, and all accusation (32:8-15). Moshe claims, "Thus did your fathers when I sent them from Kadesh Barnea to see the land" (32:8). From Moshe's perspective, the tribes of Gad and Reuven constitute the spiritual descendents of the spies sent to scout out the land thirty-eight years earlier. Just as the spies had discouraged the hearts of the Children of Israel with their tall tales of giants, heavily fortified cities (13:28) and a bizarre land that "consumes its inhabitants" (13:32), so too the tribes of Gad and Reuven now intend to discourage the hearts of the Children of Israel with their cowardice and desire to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan.

Immediately following this claim, in the second stage of his monologue, Moshe segues into a five verse long recap of the events of thirty-eight years past (32:9-13), including a cursory account of the spy mission and the people's discouragement (32:9), a mention of God's anger and a recounting of God's oath decreeing the death of the entire generation of evildoers in the desert (32:10-13). Finally, in a return to the present, Moshe finishes his speech off with a flourish.

And behold you have risen in place of your fathers, a brood of sinful men, to add yet more to the fierce anger of the Lord towards Israel. For if you turn away from after Him, He will yet again leave them in the wilderness. And you will destroy all this people. (32:14-15)

The tribes of Gad and Reuven are in fact worse than the spies and their evil greater. While the Sin of the Spies led to a forty year delay in the accomplishment of the divine promise and the death of but one generation, the sin of Gad and Reuven risks the complete and permanent destruction of the Children of Israel. God's anger will increase even more, and the people will be left in the desert again, but this time – they will be destroyed (32:15).

While Moshe certainly exhibits much rhetorical skill in structuring his "absolutely not" response to the request of Gad and Reuven, we should wonder whether the stimulus fully justifies the particulars of the response. On the surface, Gad and Reuven's request seems eminently reasonable. They possess much cattle (32:1), and the land on the eastern bank of the Jordan is good cattle land (32:1). As they succinctly put it to Moshe, Elazar and the leadership in making their request, the land "is a land for cattle and your servants have cattle" (32:4). Moreover, the Children of Israel, with God's help, had just conquered the lands lying on the eastern side of the Jordan. Or more precisely, these lands are not so much, the lands on the eastern side of the Jordan, but as Gad and Reuven phrase it in their request: "The lands which God smote before the Congregation of Israel" (32:4). If God has helped the Children of Israel to conquer these particular lands, he certainly intends for them to divide and inhabit them as well. In line with this logic, the tribes of Gad and Reuven present themselves as the natural occupants of the just conquered land. They are cattle people, and the land is cattle land.

In addition, even if Gad and Reuven's logic possesses some fatal flaw and their reasoning is incorrect, it seems problematic to accuse them of emulating the spies and their slanderous report. While their request may be inappropriate, they have not spoken of giants, heavily fortified cities or talked of a land that consumes its inhabitants.

Finally, and perhaps most interestingly, Moshe's response leaves us in a quandary regarding Gad and Reuven's original request. It never deals directly with the actual substance of Gad and Reuven's petition. While he raises the specter of a Sin of the Spies sequel and certainly says no, Moshe never addresses the actual contents of the two tribes' petition and their logic. Is discouragement of their brothers the only issue? Or is there a more fundamental problem with their request? Is their logic flawed, or were they in fact fundamentally justified in their request? In other words, we face a dual issue, not just the severity of Moshe's reaction, but also the evaluation of the validity, or lack of validity, of Gad and Reuven's request.

II

Taking another look at the motivation and particulars of Gad and Reuven's request should provide some insight. The two tribes seem to be motivated by concern for their cattle. The story opens with the statement that the tribes of Gad and Reuven possessed a lot of cattle, "A very great multitude of cattle" (32:1). As noted previously, upon seeing that the just conquered land is suitable for cattle (32:1), they request of Moshe that "this land" be given to them and that they not cross the Jordan (32:5). But this is not the first time that we have encountered a request by a particular group to inhabit a particular place due to a "cattle rationale."

In preparing his brothers to face Pharaoh, Yosef tells his brothers to inform Pharaoh that they are "men of cattle," that both they and their fathers have been herders of cattle from "our youth" (*Bereishit* 46:34). Consequently, they should request of Pharaoh to dwell in the land of Goshen, for shepherding is "an abomination" in the eyes of Egypt. Regardless of how we interpret the phrase "abomination of Egypt," the supposed rationale as to why the brothers request to live in Goshen as opposed to Egypt, the brothers petition Pharaoh to avoid settling in land 'x,' the Land of Egypt, and instead choose land 'y,' the Land of Goshen. The rationale is cattle. In this light, the story of Gad and Reuven appears as another example of avoiding settling in land 'x,' in this case the Land of Israel, and choosing instead to settle in land 'y,' in this case the Land of Yazer and the Land of Gil'ad (32:1).

This leads to a dual point. In making their request, the tribes of Gad and Reuven match the Land of Israel with the Land of Egypt. Just as Egypt was a place to be avoided if at all possible, whether because of a cultural clash or because of the difficulty of finding grazing area in the narrow area along the Nile delta that comprised the locus of ancient Egyptian society, so too the Land of Israel is a place to be avoided. But comparing the Land of Israel to the Land of Egypt and the operant assumption that life in the Land of Israel is untenable and needs to be avoided seems highly problematic.

Moreover, God had promised the Children of Israel in revealing Himself to Moshe at the burning bush to save the people from oppression of Egypt and "take them from that land to a good and wide land, to a land flowing with milk and honey, to the place of the Canaani, the Chiti, the Emori, the Prizi and the Yevusi" (3:5). The "wide" land of Israel is supposed to be different than the narrow, oppressive conditions of Egypt. It is intended as a good and fertile land, certainly sufficient for both agriculture and cattle-raising. In requesting the Land of Yazer and Gil'ad and presenting the rationale of cattle, the tribes of Gad and Reuven not only insult the Land of Israel, but contradict God's claim regarding the quality of the land and its difference from Egypt.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, they contravene the divine historical plan. While we do not often pay much attention to the lists of nations provided by the Torah to describe a particular locale, this information is not included without reason. In the verse cited above, God refers to the place of the Cana'ani, Chiti etc. This probably constitutes a specific reference to the west bank of the Jordan River. While the Emori, the inhabitants of the central area of the east bank of the Jordan River do in fact appear on the list of nations in God's statement, as well as on the list of nations mentioned in the covenant of the pieces (*Bereishit* 15:21), Yazer and Gil'ad are most probably not truly part of the Land of Canaan promised to the forefathers (see *Bereishit* 12:6-7, 17:8). It is not the land they "dwelt in" (*Bereishit* 17:8, 28:4, 28:13). In other words, in choosing the Land of Yazer and Gil'ad the tribes of Gad and Reuven reject the land of the forefathers, the divine promise and the divine plan for history. Not crossing the Jordan means not entering the Promised Land.

Another parallel to *Sefer Bereishit* adds further depth to this reading. As emphasized above, the Torah defines the cause of the two tribes request as their possession of "a very great multitude of cattle" (32:1). The exact term utilized by the text to introduce this notion is "*mikneh rav*." Interestingly enough, these two words and their conceptual implications play a key role in the narrative describing the separation of Avraham and Lot. Upon returning from Egypt, Avraham and Lot find themselves in a quandary. Like Avraham, Lot now possessed "flocks and herds," i.e. cattle (*Bereishit* 13:6). The Torah describes this situation as "*rechusham rav*," a multitude of wealth. But of course, the real "*rav*," and the eventual cause of the separation, is cattle. The very next verse makes this abundantly clear. A fight breaks out between the *ro'ei mikneh,* the shepherds, of Avraham, and the *ro'ei mikneh*, the shepherds of Lot. Whether the conflict is about access to the limited grazing land available given the presence of the Canaani and Prizi in the land (Ramban 13:7) or whether it is about the unethical activity of the shepherds of Lot and their allowing of Lot's cattle to graze on the land of the Canaani and the Prizi (Rashi 13:7), the conflict stems from the "*mikneh rav*," the multitude of cattle, possessed by Lot and Avraham.

As the narrative progresses, it seems to further foreshadow the latter events found in *Sefer Bamidbar*. After Avraham suggests splitting up to avoid conflict between brothers (13:8), the Torah describes Lot as "seeing" the plain of the Jordan River (13:10). After noting in a parenthetical comment that it was well watered and just like "the garden of the Lord" and Egypt, the text informs us that in light of this "seeing" Lot chose the plain of the Jordan and traveled "east," separating from his brother (13:11). To put this together, due to his multitude of cattle, and "seeing" of a place in the east appropriate for his wealth, Lot separated from his brother/clansmen. Needless to say, these latter three elements of "seeing," "east" and separation of brothers/clansmen are also present in the latter "*mikneh* *rav*" story found in *Sefer Bamidbar*. The Torah opens the story of Gad and Reuven's request by describing them as "seeing" the land of Yazer and Gilad (32:1). In a second and thematic point of parallel, just like Lot, the tribes of Gad and Reuven wish to be in the east. They request not to cross the Jordan, but to remain on its eastern bank. Finally, as the response and accusation of Moshe indicates, the story is primarily about separation and even abandonment of "brothers." Moshe immediately accuses the two tribes of wising to "remain here" while "your brothers" go to war (32:6).

What is the point of this fivefold parallel? The next two verses of the Lot and Avraham narrative provide the key. Following the separation the text informs us of the following:

Avram dwelt in the Land of Canaan and Lot dwelt in the cities of the plain, he pitched his tent toward Sodom. And the men of Sodom were wicked and sinners before the Lord exceedingly. (13:12-13)

While Avraham is described by the Torah as living in the Land of Canaan, Lot in contrast, lives in another place altogether. In other words, Lot does not just settle in the east. Rather, most likely he leaves the Land of Canaan. The Torah's specifying of Lot's journeying east is meant to signify leaving the Land of Canaan, of crossing to the eastern side of the Jordan. The identification of Lot's choice as the cities of the plain strengthens this point. The area is supposedly well watered and extra-Biblical evidence indicates that the southern and eastern edges of today's Jordan River were once well-watered. Although we tend to think of Sodom and its environs as being on the south and west sides of the Jordan, such is probably not the case. The environs of Sodom, the cities of the plain, most probably lay in the east.

Undoubtedly, the choice made by Lot surprised Avraham. In suggesting splitting up to avoid conflict, Avraham pointedly mentions to Lot that the "entire land" lies in front of you. He suggests that if Lot goes left he will go right and if Lot goes right he will go left (13:9). Given that Avraham and Lot are located between Beit-El and Ai (13:3), somewhere on the mountain ridge of Samaria, and directions are most often phrased as if the speaker faces east, Avraham offers Lot the choice of going either left, i.e. north, or right, i.e. south. In other words, Avraham fully expects his brother/clansmen to remain within the relatively narrow bounds of the promised Land of Canaan. But instead, Lot "lifts up his eyes" and "sees" the shining bounty of the Jordan River plain. From his perspective, telegraphed by the terminology of "lifting up of eyes" and "seeing," the river plain is a veritable Garden of Eden, it is the Garden of the Lord (13:10). It is even Egypt, the place where Lot most probably accumulated his wealth (see 12:16, 13:2, 13:5). It is a place where he can do well.

But what does Lot not see? In his vision of material and divine-like plenty, Lot does not see the character and culture of Sodom. The men of Sodom are wicked and sinful (13:13). They are exceedingly evil. But Lot does not notice or he does not care. He follows his vision and travels forward to the eastern side of the Jordan. He abandons the Land of Canaan, he abandons Avraham, he abandons his role as Avraham's potential heir and he abandons the ethical and moral inheritance of Avraham.

The long shadow cast by the Avraham-Lot separation narrative forces us to reconsider the dynamics of Gad and Reuven's request and how to read the story. As pointed out previously, in petitioning Moshe to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan the two tribes insult the Land of Israel and reject the divine plan for the Children of Israel. But in addition, they emulate Lot. In their material obsession, signaled by the terms "*mikneh* *rav*" and their concern for their wealth they parallel Lot. Like Lot they choose the east and wealth. Like Lot they abandon their brothers/clansmen. In doing so, they opt out of not just the Promised Land but also the entire heritage of Avraham. On the metaphorical and even practical plane, they are no longer the inheritors of Avraham. Like Lot and his eventual descendants, the nations of Amon and Moav (see *Bereishit* 19:37-38), they too wish to reside on the eastern side of the Jordan. Like Lot and his eventual descendants they too station themselves not to far off from Sodom and all it represents (see *Devarim* 23:4-5).

To put this together, we should no longer be surprised by Moshe's reaction or even hyperbole in responding to the first request of Gad and Reuven. Their request signals an outsider status. They define themselves as wishing to be outside of the Promised Land, outside of God's plan for history, and even outside of the heritage of Avraham. While we may argue that ideally Moshe should seek to educate the tribes of Gad and Reuven as to the error of their ways, Moshe's first response seems to play off of this "outsider" status.

Immediately, after accusing the two tribes of abandoning their brothers (32:6), Moshe berates them as to "why do you discourage the hearts of the Children of Israel from crossing to the Land that the Lord is giving them" (32:7). From Moshe's perspective, in light of the betrayal of abandoning their brothers and their desire to stay outside of the Promised Land, the tribes of Gad and Reuven are no longer really part of the Children of Israel. Consequently, Moshe differentiates between "you" and "them." He distinguishes between Gad and Reuven, whatever their identity, and "The Children of Israel," the group ready to cross the Jordan and inherit the promised land given them by God.

All of this should go a long way to resolving our earlier perplexity regarding Moshe's initial reaction. In fact, we should no longer be particularly puzzled by Moshe's relative inattention to the substance of the two tribes' request and his sole focus on the effect of the request on the other tribes. If Gad and Reuven have opted out of the collective and the joint heritage of the Children of Israel, there remains little to be done other than to be concerned about the effect of these outsiders actions and attitude on the remaining Children of Israel. They cannot be redeemed. But they must be silenced before they affect the others, lest their speech and actions discourage the others and lead to disaster. In sum, Moshe treats the tribes of Gad and Reuven as disruptive outsiders, exactly as they have portrayed themselves with their original request.

In addition, we cannot forget the context. Just prior to the story of Gad and Reuven's request (32:1-15), the Torah relates the story of the punitive war against Midyan (31:1-54). The text prefaces the main body of the war narrative with God's command to Moshe to launch the attack. God informs Moshe to execute the "vengeance of Israel" upon the Midyanites and then "you will be gathered to your people" (31:2). In other words, the operation against Midyan is intended as Moshe's last action as political leader. Upon completion of the war, he will deliver his last words, the set of farewell speeches found in *Sefer Devarim*,and depart forever. His mission will be accomplished. He will ascend to his well-deserved reward confident in a job well done and full of hope for the future of the people he has led so faithfully. Moreover, he will finally be free of the complaints, difficulties and sundry rebellions of the people of Israel. Yet at this very moment, when all is about to be behind him, the tribes of Gad and Reuven present themselves and suggest not entering the land. They stand against the divine promise, and in their apparent abandonment of their brothers threaten to shatter the very nationhood of the Children of Israel.

At the very last moment, even after all that has passed, all may yet still be lost. Moshe's mission may yet collapse, and his life's work go to waste. Is it any wonder that Moshe seems haunted by the specter of the critical juncture in history at which the divine plan was openly challenged (14:1-4) and the people's existence as a nation was placed in doubt (14:11-12)? Is it any wonder, that Moshe seems haunted by a possible repeat of the great tragedy of the spies? He has been here before.

III

As the narrative progresses, the story of Gad and Reuven's request undergoes a radical turn. By the end of the story, Moshe acquiesces to their request, and Gad and Reuven are granted the lands they desire (32:33-42). The story of this turn and the intricacies of this development constitute a fascinating story in their own right. How can such a problematic request eventually be accepted? How can we reconcile Moshe's original response with his eventual acceptance? In fact, the answer provides a fascinating window of opportunity to view the leadership style of Moshe in operation. With this in mind let us turn our attention to some of the details.

In response to Moshe's sharp accusation of abandoning their brothers, the tribes of Gad and Reuven present a proposal. The proposal consists of three fundamental points presented in chronological order. First, the two tribes will build corrals for their cattle and cities for their children (31:16). Second, the tribes will serve as a fighting vanguard for the Children of Israel "until they have been brought to their place" (32:17). During the duration of the fighting men's service in conquering the land, their families and possessions will remain behind in the fortified cities they have built (32:17). Finally, upon completion of the war and the reception by the Children of Israel of their "inheritance," the two tribes will return to the eastern bank of the Jordan to their "inheritance" (32:18-19). In sum, rather than staying behind on the eastern bank while their brothers go off to fight, the two tribes propose that they too will fight, indeed, they will even serve as shock troops for the fight. They have no intention of abandoning their brothers, do not exhibit cowardice, and have no intention of sparking another round of discouragement and a Sin of the Spies sequel.

By clarifying their intentions regarding the Children of Israel and declaring their readiness to fight, Gad and Reuven defuse Moshe's original objection. Their profession of courage and mettle leads to Moshe's conditional acceptance of their request (32:20-24). They do not intend to discourage their brothers, they will not cause a repeat of the spies incident, and they do not stand to abandon their brothers. To put this in the language used previously, they do not oppose the divine plan of entering the Promised Land or threaten the very existence and nationhood of the people. Yet all is not settled. Moshe's response is subtly different from the two tribes proposal. He states the following:

If you will do this thing and go as a vanguardbefore the Lord to war; And you will go all of you as an armed vanguard over the Jordan before the Lord, until He has driven out His enemies before Him, and the land shall be subdued before the Lord: then afterwards shall you return and be guiltless from the Lord and from Israel; and this land shall be your possession (*achuza*) before the Lord. But if you will not do so, behold you have sinned against the Lord…Build cities for children and corrals for your sheep; and do that which comes from your mouth. (32:20-24)

While the two tribes had offered to serve as conquering vanguard (*neichaletz chushim*) before the Children of Israel (32:17), Moshe specifies that the function of armed vanguard (*im teichaltzu*)constitutes service "before the Lord" (32:20). In fact, in conditionally accepting the proposal of the two tribes, Moshe twice repeats the fact that their service as a "vanguard" will be *lifnei Hashem*, before the Lord (32:20-21). While the term perhaps should be translated as "in front of the Lord," a more suitable phraseology for the military context, the translation here of "before the Lord" captures the covenantal and religious overtones certainly intended by Moshe. The term "*lifnei Hashem*" is utilized throughout the desert narrative as a specific term for the Tent of Meeting or a place therein or about (see *Shemot* 16:33, 29:42, *Vayikra* 10:1-2, *Bamidbar* 16:7, 16-17). When not connoting a specific place literally before the Lord, it carries general connotations of either divine service (*Vayikra* 1:3), or of something momentous and covenantal occurring under the eyes of the Lord (*Bereishit* 27:7).

In addition to these first two usages of *lifnei Hashem*, Moshe utilizes this term or some slight variation, another four times in his response to Gad and Reuven's proposal. Gad and Reuven must serve until the land is "subdued before the Lord" (32:22). Then they will be "guiltless from the Lord" and the land shall be their "possession before the Lord" (32:22). Almost needless to say, failure to keep their side of the bargain will result in Gad and Reuven "sinning to the Lord" (32:23). Gad and Reuven's responsibility is not just to their brothers and the nation of Israel. Their responsibility is also to God.

The point seems to be as follows. Lack of opposition to the divine plan, lack of abandonment of one's brothers and lack of threatening the nationhood of the Children of Israel is not enough. The conquering of the Land of Canaan is not just the battle of the Children of Israel. In a certain sense, it is not their battle at all. Rather, it is God's battle. As Moshe formulates it, God intends to drive out His enemies "from before Him" (32:21). To put this slightly differently, God has promised to conquer the land. This conquering constitutes the process by which His will is manifested in history. Gad and Reuven are bound by a covenantal responsibility and duty to help fulfill this divine plan. They must demonstrate loyalty not just to their brothers/clansmen, but also to God and His plan for history. As such, Moshe specifies that the issue is about being guiltless, i.e. virtuous, before the Lord or sinning, i.e. violating one's obligations and responsibilities to God.

Realizing that the issue is not just the relation of Gad and Reuven to their brothers but also their relationship to God and loyalty to God, their religious ethics, brings us to a second difference between the two tribes' proposal and Moshe's response. In the first element of their proposal, Gad and Reuven offer to build "corrals for our cattle" and "cities for our children" (32:16). Not surprisingly, in the text's report of Gad and Reuven's proposal, the two tribes place their cattle ahead of everything else. After all, this is a story about *mikneh rav*, a multitude of cattle (32:1). As analyzed above in light of the parallel to the Lot-Avraham narrative, it is a story about material obsession and the slippery slope to leaving the land promised to Avraham, the people of Avraham and the religious-ethical norms of Avraham. To repeat, by no surprise, Gad and Reuven, in line with their being lured after the ideological inheritance of Lot, place their cattle ahead of their children. In the worldview of Lot and like-minded thinkers, wealth is certainly the paramount value, perhaps even of greater importance than children, future and nationhood.

In pointed contrast, Moshe's recapitulation of Gad and Reuven's offer differs exactly on this point. In closing out his response, and following upon the heels of emphasizing the loyalty to God theme, Moshe commands the two tribes to "build cities for your children and corrals for your cattle" (32:24). In short, he reverses the order of Gad and Reuven's original offer. For emphasis, knowing full well this is not exactly what Gad and Reuven had proposed, Moshe closes with the imperative: "To do that which has proceeded from your mouth" (32:24). In other words, Moshe differs with Gad and Reuven not just on the question of to whom they are due loyalty. He differs with them regarding their most fundamental values. By inverting the sentence Moshe inverts the entire axiology, the overall value system of Gad and Reuven. Cattle cannot be placed ahead of one's children. In doing so, Moshe sends a message regarding the fundamental motivation of Gad and Reuven, the dynamic of *mikneh rav* that underlies the story and the motivation of Gad and Reuven.

Concern for cattle, i.e. wealth, must be secondary rather than primary. It cannot be allowed to lead to disloyalty to one's brothers, one's nation and the covenantal relationship with God. To put this slightly differently, the ideology and values of Lot are incompatible with the covenantal values system. Material obsession inevitably leads to disloyalty to ones brothers, land and God. Loyalty to God requires and demands a particular hierarchy of values. Cattle cannot be placed first.

Placing the reply of Moshe in a God oriented and covenantal context brings us to a related point, a third obvious contrast between Gad and Reuven's proposal and Moshe's response. In phrasing their proposal, the two tribes equated their eventual "inheritance" on the eastern bank with the "inheritance" on the western bank of the remaining ten tribes. The exact term used is *nachala*. While this may seem innocuous, in actuality, the term packs quite a punch. The second census found in *Sefer Bamidbar* (26:1-51), conducted as preface for dividing the Promised Land, utilizes this term repeatedly to describe the process of dividing the land (26:52-56). In other words, the term carries a covenantal meaning, the land inherited by virtue of God's grant, by virtue God's promises to the forefathers. Utilizing the stem *n.ch.l.* four times, the two tribes state that they will not return to their homes until each member of the Children of Israel has inherited his inheritance, i.e. received his portion of the Promised Land (32:18). They will not receive an inheritance on the western side, "For our inheritance comes to us on this eastern side of the Jordan" (32:19). For Gad and Reuven, just as the western bank constitutes something one receives as a grant, an inheritance from one's forefathers and God, so too the eastern bank. It too can be granted by God, it too can be an inheritance received by virtue of the forefathers and covenantal membership in the people of Israel.

Here too, Moshe differs from, and implicitly chastises, the tribes of Gad and Reuven. As opposed to utilizing the term *nachala*, or inheritance, Moshe utilizes the term *achuza*, best translated as meaning "possession" (32:22). While they may be well intended, indeed wishing with all their might to remain part of the covenant and receive a covenantal inheritance, this is in fact impossible. While they may wish to somehow "trade in" their portion in the land for something just over the river, the land over the river can never be a *nachala*, a grant given by God as part of his promises to the forefathers. It is just a possession. At the same time, Moshe conjoins the term "possession" with another key marker of his response, the term "before the Lord." He offers, Gad and Reuven, the strange new entity of "a possession before the Lord" (32:22).

IV

What is the meaning of this new conjunction? For that matter, what constitutes Moshe's purpose in modifying Gad and Reuven's request? To put this slightly differently, membership in the covenant, inheritance of the Promised Land, the inheritance of Avraham vs. the inheritance of Lot and the like seem to be a matter of an either/or choice. One is either in, or one is out. One either chooses to enter the land or remains outside of it, with all the covenant breaking and nation busting implications that this action implies.

But apparently, this is not the opinion of Moshe. In light of Gad and Reuven's ongoing loyalty to their brothers and willingness to physically support their brothers in battle, Moshe designs a new paradigm, a model that may be thought of as creating a new intermediate status. The place they will live, while "smote by God before the congregation of Israel" (32:4) will never be the Land of Israel. It will never constitute a *nachala,* a covenantal inheritance. Existence there will never comprise a fulfillment of the divine promises or the full covenantal mode of being. Yet at the same time, existence there must remain "before the Lord," engaged with God, engaged in God's plan for history and based upon a proper value matrix. To put this a little bit differently, the concept of *achuza lifnei Hashem,* the intermediate status offered by Moshe in response to Gad and Reuven, revolves around the theme of loyalty. Gad and Reuven must remain loyal not just to their brothers but to the land God has promised them. Gad and Reuven must remain loyal not just to their brothers receiving their inheritance, but also to God, God's plan for history and their covenantal responsibility to God. They must act, not out of mere material avarice but in accord with a covenantal value system and a proper hierarchy of values.

V

To close the circle, let us try to situate the story of Gad and Reuven's request and Moshe's response in the context of *Sefer Bamidbar.* Much of the latter portion of *Sefer Bamidbar*, that describing the events of the fortieth year, can be thought of as depicting the descent and perhaps even the deterioration of the leadership of Moshe. At Mei Meriva, Moshe sins and is stripped of the leadership (20:1-13). God explicitly accuses him of failure to sanctify him (20:12). At Shittim (25:1-18), while Pinchas takes action and achieves atonement for the Children of Israel (25:7-11), Moshe seems to do not much more than stand and watch (25:6). In their own way, each of these stories can be read as narratives depicting a great and aged leader whose time has past. He is a leader who has become detached from his flock; he no longer has what it takes to move the people, to influence and to guide.

While there is some grain of truth hidden within this radical reading, and the latter part of *Bamidbar* is certainly about leadership transition, the story of Gad and Reuven provides an important corrective. It should prevent us from over reading the leadership errors and imperfections of Moshe.

A quick look at Gad and Reuven's response to Moshe, what might be thought of as the two tribes' amended proposal (32:25-26), indicates that Moshe's words have made a difference and his perspective now permeates their new and improved proposal. Let us take a look at some of the details. Defining themselves as Moshe's "servants," a formulation carrying connotations of loyalty and fidelity, they agree to do as their "master commands" (32:25). Their children, women and cattle will remain on the eastern bank while they pass over as a vanguard "before the Lord" (32:26). They place their families ahead of their cattle, their family and future ahead of their wealth. They now recognize that their responsibility is to God and their loyalty must be to his plan and people. Finally, in their formal response to Moshe's reiteration of the deal in front of Yehoshua, Elazar and the entire leadership (32:32), Gad and Reuven once again reiterate the key term "before the Lord" and echo Moshe's terming of the land they receive as a possession. In sum, they accept Moshe's terms, and the deal is sealed.

In marked contrast to Mei Meriva and Shittim, Moshe's leadership shines in the story of Gad and Reuven's request. In negotiating a compromise with Gad and Reuven he educates and rebukes, he teaches and he leads. He prevents a rupture in the people, and preserves Gad and Reuven's inclusion in the nation. He furthers his mission, continuing to lead the people on to their inheritance and maintaining the entire people's covenantal relation with God.

Further Study

1)      The *shiur* above adopts a particular approach regarding the borders of the Land of Canaan. a) Read *Bamidbar* 21:21-35 and *Devarim* 2:26-30. Formulate how/if these verses support this approach. Now review *Shemot* 3:17 and see *Bereishit* 15:18-21. What is the obvious problem? See Ibn Ezra *Bamidbar* 32:41 for a resolution. b) See the Ramban on *Bamidbar* 21:21. Compare and contrast his approach to that taken in the *shiur*. c) Review *Shemot* 3:17 and *Bereishit* 15:18-21. Compare the two lists. Now see Rashi *Bereishit* 15:19. How does Rashi resolve the problem? See *Bamidbar* 24:14-25. Do these verses support or undermine Rashi's approach. Try to think of an alternative approach.

2)      Read *Yehoshua* 22:1-34. a) Pay careful attention to 22:21-25. Consider the fact that in the Ancient Near East divinities were associated with particular lands. Try to reformulate the joint legacy of Moshe and the two and a half tribes settled on the eastern bank of the Jordan. b) Reread *Yehoshua* 22:10-12, 15-17, 30-32. Now see *Bamidbar* 25:1-9. In what way are these two *parshiyot* linked?

3)      Review 32:3-5 and 32:17-19. Now see 32:22, 28-29 and 31-32. Try to explain the usages of *achuza* and *nachala* according to the theory presented in the *shiur*. Can the theory be maintained? Now see 32:30 and Ramban 32:29. Try to integrate this with the theory adopted in the *shiur*.

4)      See *Bereishit* 36:6-8. Review *Bereishit* 13:5-13 and *Bamidbar* 32:1-5. a) Explain how the connections strengthen the claim that Lot settles outside of Canaan and the problematic nature of Gad and Reuven's request. b) Now see 32:33. See Ibn Ezra and Ramban 32:32-33. Note their respective theories as to the entrance of Menasheh. For an alternative note the presence of the descendants of Lot and Eisav on the eastern bank of the Jordan and see *Bereishit* 49:2-4, *Bereishit* 30:9-11 and 48:12-19.