

PARASHAT HASHAVUA

PARASHAT MATOT

Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise, whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz.
Y'hi Zikhro Barukh.

The Inauguration

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I. The War Against Midian

In *Parashat Matot*, we once again encounter an exhaustive list of seemingly trivial statistics. The Torah extensively details the spoils captured in the war against Midian and then computes precisely how these spoils were divided. We are given no more than a hint as to why these statistics are important enough to have been included in the Torah and what message they convey. In order to try to decipher this message, let us take a closer look at the battle with Midian:

Moshe spoke to the people saying, "Let men be picked out from among you for a campaign, and let them fall upon Midian to wreak Hashem's vengeance on Midian. You shall dispatch to the campaign a thousand men from each tribe of Yisrael." (*Bamidbar* 31:3-4)

Moshe's decision to recruit one thousand men from each tribe reflects their representative role, more than their military capacity. In other words, the army chosen to attack Midian is perfectly balanced from a national perspective, although not necessarily from a military one. This supports our thesis, developed in last week's *shiur*, that the war's aim – namely, to attain "*nikmat Bnei Yisrael*," the vengeance of *Bnei Yisrael*, which is also "*nikmat Hashem*," the vengeance of God – is achievable only if the people act as an organic whole, thus assuming their role as a covenantal community. In fact, we find that the representative army is complete and perfectly balanced upon their victorious return from its war against Midian as well:

The commanders of the troop divisions, the officers of thousands and the officers of hundreds, approached Moshe. They said to Moshe, "Your servants have made a check of the warriors in our charge, and not one of us is missing." (*Bamidbar* 31:48-49)

Moreover, it seems that the significance the Torah attributes to the war with Midian is rooted in the national agenda. The Torah downplays the military aspect in its account of the war; after all, victory in a battle commanded by the Almighty is a foregone conclusion. However, given the religious implications of the totally one-sided campaign (see 31:48-50), it is surprising that the Torah focuses specifically on the non-military aspect of the battle – the division of the spoils between the twelve thousand soldiers who fought the Midianites and between the remainder of the people who stayed in the camp.

The Seforno explains that the Torah is stressing that the entire nation enjoyed the spoils of the Midianite war, due to the national character of the battle:

“And divide the booty equally” [between the combatants who engaged in the campaign and the rest of the community] – Since the war was one of revenge for what had been done to the entire nation, He desired that the *pasuk*, “You shall devour your enemies’ spoil,” be fulfilled with regard to them all. (Seforno, *Bamidbar* 31:27)

The nation in its entirety battles the Midianites. One group, consisting of a perfectly balanced representation of the tribal units, actually goes to war, but the remainder of the nation must be involved as well. The sharing of the spoils equally between the active participants and the rest of the nation is an expression of the communal participation in the campaign. This was the practice later adopted by David as well:

“...The share of those who remain with the baggage shall be the same as the share of those who go down to battle; they shall share alike.” So from that day on it was made a fixed rule for Yisrael, continuing to the present day. (I *Shmuel* 30:24-25)

However, the detailed account of the respective percentages of the spoils that were consecrated to God (perhaps referring to the *kohanim*; see Ramban) and awarded to the Levites remains problematic. This seems to imply additional significance to the communal emphasis. I would suggest that the war with Midian not only required the participation of the community as a whole, but also was instrumental in its crystallization.

From this perspective, the battle is to be viewed as a concrete step in the national formative process. It is the inauguration of *Knesset Yisrael* as an organic religious communal unit. In last week's *shiur*, we noted the theoretical re-establishment of the community with its subdivisions prior to the battle via the census. In our *parasha*, we witness the various communal organs in action. Aside from the harmonious contribution of the twelve tribes and the involvement of the entire nation in the battle, the respective roles of the Levites and Priests are activated as well. In this trial run of the reestablished *machane*, we are also introduced to Eliezer functioning as the high priest and Pinchas as the “*mashuach milchama*,” the anointed priest charged with joining the army.

Within this context, the reference to the trumpets (31:6) is noteworthy. The only other time in the Torah that they are mentioned is at the end of the first section of *sefer Bamidbar* (ch.10), when *Benei Yisrael* are poised to begin the epic journey from Sinai to Canaan. The nation is now ready to complete the journey begun by their parents forty years earlier.

II. Two Shores of the Yarden

Following the victory against Midian, the Torah relates the request of the tribes of Gad and Reuven to receive their portion in *Eretz Yisrael* from the territories east of the Yarden River, which had already been conquered from Sichon and Og. Their request is rejected by Moshe, who (remembering the sin of the spies) wanted to ensure that there would be no weakness among the ranks that might lead to a collapse of national resolve to conquer *Eretz Yisrael*. However, once Gad and Reuven offer to leave their families east of the Yarden and lead the Israeli forces in the military campaign against the Canaanite armies, Moshe accepts their request.

The section concludes:

So Moshe assigned to them –to the Gadites, the Reuvenites, and the half tribe of the Menashe son of Yosef – the kingdom of Sichon king of the Amorites and the kingdom of Og king of Bashan, the land with its various cities and the territories of their surrounding towns. (*Bamidbar* 32:33)

The inclusion of half of the tribe of Menashe is surprising, as there is no mention that they joined Gad and Reuven in their request. Why, then, did Moshe choose to place them east of the Yarden, despite his negative attitude towards the appeal of Gad and Reuven?

A closer look at the biblical description of this episode highlights additional issues raised by the request of Gad and Reuven. The scriptural description of the Reuven-Gad episode is quite redundant; following Moshe's initial protest, Gad and Reuven propose a seemingly acceptable solution, which is repeated by Moshe and then echoed by Gad and Reuven.

The commentators note that Moshe does not merely repeat the proposal, but rather modifies it. In his response, Moshe introduces a number of changes. First of all, Moshe insists that Gad and Reuven be "armed before Hashem," while the initial proposal had been to go "armed before Yisrael." It was important for Moshe to emphasize the religious nature of the battle for *Eretz Yisrael*, especially within the context of the request of Gad and Reuven (see Abarbanel).

Furthermore, in contrast to Gad and Reuven, who mention their flocks before their children, Moshe switches the order and places the children first. The significance of the switch was noted by Rashi:

"We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks" – They cared more about their flocks than about their sons and daughters, for they mentioned their flocks before their children. Moshe said to them: Not so; make significant what is significant, and make insignificant what is insignificant. First build cities for your children, and then build sheepfolds for your flocks.

In fact, the entire proposal of Gad and Reuven reflected a warped sense of priorities. For the economic benefit of better grazing land, they were prepared to leave their families for fourteen years. The prolonged lack of paternal influence was clearly not in the best interest of their families. Although Moshe does not reject the proposal, he demands a reevaluation of the priorities that it indicated.

Bnei Gad and Reuven appreciate and accept both of these corrections. They therefore repeat the proposal, stressing the innovations imposed by Moshe:

The Gadites and the Reuvenites answered Moshe, "Your servants will do as my master commands. Our children, our wives, our flocks, and all our other livestock will stay behind in the towns of Gilad, while your servants, all those recruited for war, will cross over before the Lord to engage in battle – as my master orders." (*Bamidbar* 32:25-27)

However, Moshe introduced a third modification as well. Gad and Reuven had volunteered to remain in *Eretz Yisrael* proper until the remaining tribes were settled in the land. Moshe, on the other hand, thought it sufficient that Gad and Reuven remain with the rest of the tribes only until the end of the fighting. The reason for Moshe's final modification is obvious. Benei Gad and Reuven were required to participate in the battle against Canaan, and it was therefore sufficient that they join the rest of the tribes only during the seven years of war. In fact, it is difficult to understand why Gad and Reuven voluntarily agreed to remain on the western side of the Yarden after the end of the military campaign. Nevertheless, according to Rashi (32:24), the position of Gad and Reuven ultimately prevailed in this matter. (Abarbanel disagrees with Rashi on this point.)

III. Building a Bridge

A glance at *Sefer Yehoshua* sheds light on this issue. When Yehoshua eventually allowed Gad and Reuven to return to their families on the east bank, they built a large altar on the banks of the Yarden. The rest of Yisrael immediately perceived this act as mutinous, and civil war seemed inevitable:

A report reached the Israelites: "The Reuvenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Menashe have built an altar opposite the land of Canaan, in the region of the Yarden, across from Yisrael." When Yisrael heard this, the whole community of Yisrael assembled at Shilo to make war on them. (*Yehoshua* 22:11-12)

Pinchas headed a diplomatic mission to Benei Gad and Reuven aimed at avoiding fraternal violence:

But [first] Yisrael sent the priest Pinchas son of Elazar to the Reuvenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Menashe in the land of Gilad, accompanied by ten chieftans, one chieftan from each ancestral house of each of the tribes of Yisrael; they were every one of them heads of ancestral houses of the contingents of Yisrael. (*Yehoshua* 22:13-14)

Benei Gad and Reuven offered a revealing justification for building the altar:

We did this thing only out of our concern that, in time to come, your children might say to our children, "What have you to do with Hashem the God of Yisrael? Hashem has made the Yarden a boundary between you and us, O Reuvenite and Gadites; you have no share in Hashem!" Thus, your children might prevent our children from worshipping Hashem. So we decided to provide [a witness] for ourselves by building an altar – not for burnt offering or [other] sacrifices, but as a witness between you and us, and between the generations to come – that we may perform the service of Hashem before Him with our burnt offerings, our sacrifices, and our offerings of well-being; and that your children should not say to our children in time to come, "You have no share in Hashem." (*Yehoshua* 22:24-27)

From the episode in *Yehoshua* we see that the natural geographic border separating the two sides of the Yarden endangered the unity of *Kenesset Yisrael*. The tribes on the west of the Yarden worried that Benei Gad and Reuven might break away. For their part, Benei Gad and Reuven were concerned that their national affiliation might, at some point, be challenged by the majority of the nation residing west of the Yarden.

Based on this, it seems clear that Benei Gad and Reuven's decision to remain on the west side of the Yarden until the rest of Yisrael was settled was as an act of solidarity. They felt it was improper to return to their portion and begin to develop it before the rest of Yisrael received their estates. They feared that such behavior could cause jealousy, which could lead to division. Although Moshe would have been satisfied had Gad and Reuven returned to the east bank immediately after Canaan was conquered, he appreciated the sensitivity displayed by their offer to remain for an additional seven years. He therefore accepted their proposal, despite the high price paid by the families still waiting east of the Yarden.

Now we can also appreciate why Moshe chose to include half of the tribe of Menashe east of the Yarden. Both in the request of Tzelofchad's daughters (ch. 27) and in the counter-request of the rest of the tribe (ch. 36), the tribe of Menashe is singled out in their concern to attain and retain their portion in *Eretz Yisrael*. The actions of Makhir, Yair, and Novach, members of the tribe of Menashe, attest to this attitude as well:

The descendents of Makhir son of Menashe went to Gilad and captured it, dispossessing the Amorites who were there. So Moshe gave Gilad to Makhir son of Menashe, and he settled there. Yair son of Menashe went and captured their villages, which he renamed Chavvot Yair [the Villages of Yair]. And Novach went and captured Kenat and its dependencies, renaming it Novach after himself. (*Bamidbar* 32:39-42)

In an attempt to connect the tribes east of the river with the rest of the nation on the west, the tribe of Menashe, whose devotion to *Eretz Yisrael* was unquestioned, was chosen to bridge the Yarden.

IV. Summary

We began this *shiur* by analyzing the significance of the battle against Midian. We tried to show how this battle and its aftermath was instrumental in the formation and crystallization of the religious national entity. The detailed description of the division of the spoils of war is an expression of the harmonious national state that Yisrael had reached.

The subsequent section of Gad and Reuven raises various issues. Among those issues is the threat to unity posed by the natural barrier separating the nation, and this dilemma thematically connects this episode to the beginning of the *parasha*. Two solutions are suggested to deal with this problem. Gad and Reuven commit to stay an additional seven years so as not to create tension by settling their portion before the rest of the nation, and Moshe divides the tribe of Menashe, forming a human bridge over the Yarden.

Ultimately, however, the question of unity will have to be played out by the tribes themselves once settled in *Eretz Yisrael*. When studying the books of the *Nevi'im* (Prophets), it is instructive to keep this issue in mind.