

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

MATOS

Staying on the East Side: The Episode of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven

BACKGROUND

The final section of our parsha is devoted to the request of the two tribes of Gad and Reuven to stay on the east side of the Jordan River, on account of the large amount of cattle they possessed and the suitability of that land for grazing. Moshe initially castigates them for their avoidance of participating in the wars of conquest of Eretz Yisrael, at which point they offer to go first in the war and only then settle on the east side.

WHAT ABOUT THE MITZVAH OF LIVING IN ISRAEL?

There is a basic difficulty that seems to run through this entire parsha. How can these two tribes ask to settle on the east side of the Jordan? Is there not a mitzvah to live in the Land of Israel? How can they simply neglect that mitzvah? Moreover, even when Moshe raises his objections to their request, it is only over the implication that they will not take part in the war. Why does Moshe not also mention that the request itself is objectionable, given that it will leave them outside of the Land of Israel?

Apparently, it was understood that these tribes would indeed be able to fulfill the mitzvah of settling in Israel even on the east side of the Jordan, for that area, too, is considered part of Eretz Yisrael. This idea can be perceived and demonstrated from a number of angles:

- ▷ The land-based mitzvos such as terumah, maaser and shemitah apply there, as stated in numerous places in the Talmud.¹
- ▷ The mitzvah of Ir Miklat (cities of refuge for an accidental killer) applies specifically to the land of Israel, yet three of the six cities were set up on the east side of the Jordan.²
- ▷ The Mitzvah of Yovel (Jubilee Year) applies only when all the tribes are in the Land of Israel.³ Evidently, the presence of the tribes on the east side was sufficient for all the tribes to be considered “in the land”.⁴

¹ See e.g. Mishnah Shevi'is 9:2 and Bava Basra 56a.

² Bamidbar 35:14.

³ Arachin 32a, based on Vayikra 25:10.

⁴ Indeed, the Yovel count ceased at the time when those tribes were exiled from their lands, a number of years before the rest of the tribes on the west side were exiled (Arachin ibid.).

In light of the above, it appears that the tribes of Reuven and Gad were in fact capable of fulfilling the mitzvah of living in the Land of Israel even if they would stay on the east side of the Jordan. As such, any discussion pertaining to the validity of their request would have to be in terms of other considerations, such as whether they would be involved in the wars of conquest.⁵

THE PROMISED LAND

Even after having seen that the east side also enjoys the status of Eretz Yisrael, the question remains: How could this be so? Surely they are on the wrong side of the river for fulfilling that mitzvah!

FIRST APPROACH: RASHI AND RAMBAN

Actually, both Rashi and the Ramban⁶ are of the view that those territories on the east side are, in fact, also part of the land as promised to Avraham! In the Bris Bein Habesarim (the Covenant Between the Pieces), the verses list the lands that were to be inherited by Avraham's descendents.⁷ One of those territories is called Refaim.⁸ Rashi identifies that territory as that of Og, king of Bashan, whose lands on the east side of the Jordan were captured by the Jewish people, and in which the tribes wished to settle. As a source for this identification, Rashi refers to the verse in Devarim,⁹ where Moshe states describes apportioning the kingdom of Bashan to those tribes and concludes, “ההוא יקרא ארץ רפאים” – *that is called the Land of Refaim.*” Additionally, another king whose territory was conquered was Sichon, king of the Ammorites,¹⁰ whose land was also promised to Avraham.¹¹

SECOND APPROACH: RADAK

Other Rishonim adopt a different approach to this matter. In their view, the territories on the east side were not those originally promised to Avraham. However, there is a concept of extending the boundaries of the Land of Israel to include other lands. It was through this concept that these lands attained the status of Eretz Yisrael.

Now, even after recognizing this idea, we will appreciate that this case was nevertheless highly unusual. The notion of expanding the sanctity of the land of Israel presumably begins with the Jewish people entering the land itself, after which time they can spread outwards. In this case, however, the two tribes were seeking to ascribe that expanded status to these lands *before* the people had settled on the west side – i.e. in advance!

5 See also Meshech Chochmah, beginning of Parshas Re'eh.

6 Commentaries to Bereishis 15:20. See also Ramban to Bamidbar 21:21 and 31:23.

7 Bereishis 15:18-20.

8 Verse 20.

9 3:13.

10 Bamidbar 21:21-25.

11 Bereishis 15:21. Nevertheless, the Ramban cites numerous sources to the effect that that even though these territories were also part of the land originally promised to Avraham, the territories on the west side of the Jordan are possessed of greater sanctity. For further discussion of this matter, see R' Ishtori HaParchi, Kaftor va'Ferach chap. 10, Responsa *Tashbetz*, 3:198 and R'Yechezkel Abramsky, *Eretz Yisrael, Nachlas Am Yisrael*, sec. 102-108.

LESSONS IN PSALMS: BETWEEN “NACHALAH” AND “LE’NACHALAH”

In Tehillim chapter 135, it states:

וְהָרַג מְלָכִים עֲצוּמִים... לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי וְלִעֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן וְלְכָל מַמְלָכוֹת כְּנָעַן

Who killed mighty kings... Sichon, king of the Ammorites, Og, king of Bashan and all the kingdoms of Canaan. 12

Interestingly, in the very next chapter, we find:

לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ. וְלִעֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ.

Sichon, king of the Ammorites, for His kindness is forever. And Og, king Bashan, for His kindness is forever. 13

Why are the other kings of Canaan not also mentioned in the second chapter, as they are in the first?

Additionally, if we look closely these two chapters, we will notice another, more detailed difference. In the first chapter it says, “ונתן ארצם נחלה” – He gave their lands, an inheritance,” while in the second chapter it says, “ונתן ארצם לנחלה” – He gave their lands as an inheritance.” Why does the first time not have the letter lamed while the second time does, and what is the difference between them?

The Radak¹⁴ explains that the answer lies in the distinction between these two chapters of Tehillim. The first chapter enumerates all of the good things that Hashem did for us at various significant times, and thus mentions all of the kings that He conquered. The second chapter, however, has a specific focus, as is evident from the way that each verse concludes ‘כִּי לְעוֹלָם חֶסֶדּוֹ’ – for His kindness is forever.’ The matters mentioned in that chapter are specifically those that are defined as חסד – acts of kindness. The reason why the kings of Canaan do not fall into this category is because Hashem had promised that land to Avraham. It is true that original promise was an act of kindness, but once it has been promised, the giving over of the land is henceforth considered an act of truth.

The countries of Sichon and Og, in contrast, were not included in the original promise to Avraham. The reason why the Jewish people attained these two additional territories is because Sichon and Og came out to war against them and were delivered in their hands by Hashem, thereby enabling them to be attached to the land of Israel. Therefore, the gift of these two Lands specifically is mentioned again in this chapter among Hashem’s kindnesses towards the Jewish people.

This explanation of the Radak will also help us answer the second question we raised. Most of the land mentioned in the first chapter was actually the inheritance of the Jewish people, i.e. it was included in Hashem’s promise to Avraham, and thus the verse refers to them simply as נחלה - inheritance. Our chapter, however, deals specifically with two lands which were not part of the original inheritance, but subsequently became so. Therefore, when the verse refers to Hashem giving them to us it uses the term לנחלה – as an inheritance.¹⁵

12 Verse 11.

13 Ibid. 136:19–20. Both of these chapters are recited consecutively in pesukei de’zimra on Shabbos and festivals.

14 Commentary to Tehillim ibid.

15 R’ David Tevel, Derashos Beis David, drush 12.

WAGING WAR BEFORE WHOM?

After Moshe censures the two tribes for what appears to be their reluctance to participate in the wars of conquest on the land of Canaan, they approach him and offer to go first in battle. Over the course of the numerous ensuing verses, Moshe responds to their offer and they then confirm it. Interestingly, the specific way in which their role in the war is described shifts throughout these verses, as follows:

- ▷ The tribes offer: “וַאֲנַחְנוּ נַחְלֵץ חַשִׁים לְפָנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל” – *We will mobilize ourselves swiftly before the Children of Israel.*¹⁶
- ▷ Moshe responds: “אִם תִּחְלְצוּ לְפָנֵי ה' לְמַלְחָמָה” – *If you will mobilize yourselves before Hashem for the battle.*¹⁷
- ▷ The tribes confirm: “וַעֲבָדֶיךָ יַעֲבֹרוּ כָּל חַלּוּץ צָבָא לְפָנֵי ה' לְמַלְחָמָה” – *And your servants will cross over – every armed person of the army – before Hashem, to do battle.*¹⁸

What is behind these shifts? Are both descriptions not equally true? They will be going into battle before Hashem *and* before the Jewish people!

To answer this question, we need to preface with a more basic one: Were the tribes originally intending to participate in the wars? If not, why not?

The *Ohr Hachaim*¹⁹ explains: When these tribes saw the miraculous way in which the territories had been conquered before them, they clearly saw that this was the hand of Hashem. This is what they are initially expressing when they refer to the conquered territories as “הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הִכָּה ה'” – *the land that Hashem smote.*²⁰ The tribes assumed that this would also be the way the subsequent wars in the Land of Canaan were conducted; as such, they didn't see it as necessary for them to be involved. Their approach in this matter was, “Hashem is clearly fighting the battle for us, He doesn't need us!”

When Moshe responded to their request by chastising them for planning on not being involved in the wars, the tribes figured that they had made a basic mistake regarding the essential nature of these wars. If it was required for them to be there, apparently Hashem would *not* be fighting those wars, which is why *they* would need to fight them. Having been apprised of their mistake, they express that they are more than ready to “go forth before the Children of Israel.” They do not mention Hashem in their proposal, for they conclude that if they need to be there, it is because He won't be.

Moshe addresses this fundamental error by rewording their proposal. He says to them, “Don't think that your presence in the war is due to Hashem's absence. Trusting in Hashem and investing effort are not binary values, they are a blend. You will be going forward into battle 'before Hashem.' Your efforts and His salvation will go together.” The tribes duly note this major emendation, and proceed to incorporate it into their proposal.

The Torah devotes many verses to the discussions between Moshe and the tribes on this occasion. Imparting this crucial lesson regarding the nature of *bitachon* is one of the reasons why. Indeed, while the question of on which side of the Jordan River to settle was of relevance to those specific tribes at that particular time, the lesson Moshe imparted about the harmony of human involvement and Divine blessing, is of central relevance for all Jews at all times.

16 Verse 17.

17 Verse 20.

18 Verse 27.

19 Bamidbar 32:3.

20 Verse 4.