

LESSON 5

WERE THEY A UNITED PEOPLE?

I. What is the Aim of this Lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to see to what extent the People of Israel were able to stay unified as a people once they entered the Land.

II. Why is this Lesson Important?

Maintaining the unity of the Jewish people is one of the central problems that the Jewish community faces today. Jews are scattered throughout the world and even within a particular geographic location such as North America, Jews are often divided along religious, cultural and ethnic lines. Even in Israel, where they are sovereign in their own land, and perhaps because of that fact, tensions between various religious and political factions threaten to tear the country apart. Despite these divisions there is a yearning to find a common bond that unites us all. Exploring the ways in which our people contended with this problem in the past may help shed light on the ways we may be able to deal with this problem, both in the land and outside of it, in the present.

III. Texts, Questions and Central Ideas of the Lesson:

Text 1 – A. Numbers 26:52-56 and B. Joshua 18:1-10 - The Division of the Land

How should the land be divided? Who should get what?

As we learned, God promised that Abraham's descendants would inherit the Land of Israel. The problem was that his grandson Jacob/Israel had 12 sons who became the leaders of twelve tribes. Thus, the question was how to divide up the land.

Now, a reasonable solution is to divide the land evenly among the tribes. One problem with this solution is that not all the tribes were the same size (see the numbers of each tribe as they are listed in the census in the first part of the chapter). Another problem is that the land consists of different regions, some more fertile and desirable than others. There is the fertile area along the coast and in the North, the mountains in the center and the desert in the south and the east. Would it be fair to assign desert land to one tribe and fertile agricultural land to another?

In text 1A the Torah provides a solution to the above problems. The first principle is that "larger groups increase the share, with smaller groups reduce the share." In other words, since the Torah wants all the

tribes to benefit from the Land equally the larger tribes will have to receive a larger portion of the Land than the smaller tribes. This, however, does not resolve the problem of the choice of regions. If the larger tribe receives a greater portion in the desert, that could not be considered a fair correction of the numerical imbalance. In order to solve this problem the Torah introduces another principle: The land... is to be apportioned by lot." The location of the tribal territory is to be determined by lot. (We are following the approach of the *JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*. Rashi, Ramban and others interpret this text differently.)

Did this solution work in the actual conquest? Were they able to avoid internal tension and strife?

The Book of Joshua which tells the story of the conquest of the Land in detail tells us in text 1B that when the land (or most of the land) was controlled by the People of Israel the "whole community assembled at Shiloh and set up the Tent of Meeting there." Now this text alone gives us a sense of the relations among the people. They are described as "the whole community of the Israelite people". Furthermore, the setting up of the Tent of Meeting has extreme importance for nationhood and unity. The Tent of Meeting (*Ohel Mo'ed* also known as the *mishkan* – the Tabernacle) was the place where God appeared and spoke to Moses in their journey through the desert (see Exodus 29:42) and which housed the Tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed. The Tent of Meeting had been placed in the midst of the Israelite camp and represented their religious and spiritual center. In working together to set up a permanent residence for the Tent of Meeting - which in the desert had been a portable sanctuary - in Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim, the people were in effect setting up a religious center that would serve the entire community.

The text then continues and tells us how seven of the tribes had yet to receive their portions in the land. Joshua assigns three men from each of the seven tribes to traverse the land, provide a written description of the regions and then to divide it into seven parts. Once they have done so Joshua will draw lots to determine who gets what. The text then describes how they proceeded to do exactly as they were told. No one complained about the proposed method of dividing the land despite the immense historical importance and the long term economic, political and military consequences, and no one complained once the lots were cast, even though it is hardly possible that they were all equally satisfied with the results of the lot (The truth is that the tribes of Ephraim, Reuben, Gad and Manasseh, who were not included in these 7, had voiced some reservations about territory in the Land. See our questions for further study.). It seems that for the people of Israel at the time the unity of the people took precedence over the particular needs and interests of individuals, families or tribes.

Text 2 - Judges 3:12-30 or 4:1-24 – Unity after Settlement in the Land

The first period after the death of Joshua when the people had already settled in the Land is called the “Period of the Judges”, which lasted from roughly 1200 until 1020 BCE, and is described in detail in the biblical book of “Judges”. Although the Bible describes a number of episodes during this period, the two that we have selected may be said to represent (from the perspective of the Bible) the era as a whole.

Were they able to maintain their unity as a people during the period of the Judges?

The two stories told in these texts begin with a summary of the behavior of the people: The “Israelites again did what was offensive to the Lord”. In both stories this behavior led to the defeat and subjugation of the people to a foreign power (Moab and King Jabin of Canaan) which led to their crying out to God. In both stories God responded by providing them with a charismatic figure (the chief connotation of the term “judge” in the Book of Judges) to lead them in battle over the enemy. The successful overthrow of the enemy led to a period of quiet and tranquility until the people once again behaved in a manner that was deemed offensive, which in turn led to their defeat at the hands of a foreign nation.

While the cycle of sin-punishment-repentance-deliverance is a subject of interest, in and of itself, our concern is with the internal dynamics among the people. And it is here that the Bible describes the people as a unified front. The “Israelites” did what was offensive, the “Israelites” were defeated, the “Israelites” cried out to God, and God delivered the “Israelites” from their enemy. They sin together, they pray together and they celebrate God’s deliverance together. While their behavior may not have always been a source of pride and joy they, nonetheless, behave as a united people. Now it is true that the Book of Judges records some cracks in the unity of the people when it tells us about two ugly incidents of warfare among the tribes – against the tribe of Ephraim (Judges 12:1-6) and against the tribe of Benjamin (Judges 19-21) – the essential unity of the people was never seriously called into question. Indeed, even in the midst of a war against the Benjaminites they refer to the latter as “our kinsmen” (Judges 20:23, 28) and after their victory over them they bemoan the fact that “This day one tribe has been cut off from Israel” and eventually offer them terms of peace so that “a tribe may not be blotted out of Israel.”

Although this was true throughout the period of the Judges, things took a change for the worse in the period of the monarchy that followed.

Text 3 - II Samuel 2:1-17 – Unity No Longer

Background

When would the unity of the people be absolutely essential? What would it take to solidify the sense of unity?

Although, as we mentioned above, the People of Israel could be described during the period of the Judges as a unified people the fact is that they were never really forced to act as a unified front. The numerous wars that they fought were mostly of a local nature. The enemy waged war on a particular region and the tribes in that vicinity responded to the threat under the military command of a local “judge” who disappeared from the scene when the enemy was defeated. Circumstances changed however with the increasing strength of the Philistines and the threat that they posed to the existence of the nation as a whole. The people realized that local “judges” would not suffice to defeat the Philistines and so they asked for a king who would be responsible for the welfare of the nation as a whole. The prophet Samuel granted them their request (his initial reluctance will be discussed in lesson ?) and appointed Saul from the tribe of Benjamin as the first king over the People of Israel. Saul successfully united the people and led them in battle over their enemies.

What problem would likely arise after his death?

The problem after Saul’s death would be finding a successor who enjoys the consensus of the people. But what if so such person could be found? That is the subject of our text.

During the reign of Saul, David from the tribe of Judah became a successful and highly popular military leader. Although David spent years fleeing Saul who felt threatened by him, Saul’s death provided David a perfect opportunity to return to his people, not as a fugitive, but as their leader. Now the notion that he would succeed Saul as king is not necessarily a reflection of his visions of grandeur: Samuel the prophet had informed him during Saul’s lifetime that he would one day ascend the throne (I Samuel 16). The question for David was whether, now that Saul had died, the time had come. David therefore asks God for His approval. God approves and instructs him to go to Hebron the capital city of Judah. Interestingly, when David arrives in Hebron, the people anoint him as king on their accord without being solicited by him. Perhaps they knew about God’s promise and realized the time for its fulfillment had come or perhaps they were eager for a leader from their tribe who would naturally be inclined to take a greater interest in their affairs over the affairs of other tribes.

Why does David contact the people of Jabesh–gilead?

On the surface it appears that he is praising them for risking their lives in arranging for a proper burial of Saul and his sons after they were killed on the battlefield (see I Samuel 31:11-13). A careful reading of this text however will reveal that David is really making a subtle pitch that they accept him as king as a

successor to Saul, following the lead of his tribe of Judah. In other words, David is trying to broaden his power base and to extend his control beyond his own tribe.

But what was the problem with David's efforts?

David was not the only one competing for the throne. After David was anointed king over Judah, Abner, Saul's army commander, decided to anoint Saul's son Ish-bosheth as king over the other tribes (see map). One can easily imagine the devastating effects that this would have on the unity of the people.

How can a people stay unified if one segment of the population is ruled by one king and the other is ruled by another? Furthermore, since both kings are vying for power would they be satisfied with only limited control over the people? Wouldn't each seek to expand his reign by challenging the other? Under such circumstances, could civil war be avoided?

Unfortunately, that is exactly what occurred. The forces confronted each other at Gibeon in the territory of Benjamin and engaged in a violent competition ("sport") aimed at preventing all out warfare. A group of 12 young fighters from each side would battle each other: the victory of one group would symbolize the victory of the entire army and the other army would be forced to surrender. However, since all the young fighters were killed in this competition there was no indication which army was victorious. Thus, a full-fledged war broke out between the two forces causing a large number of casualties, leading to the eventual downfall of Abner and the victory of David.

What was the problem that David would have to face in trying to gain control over the entire people?

Although David emerged victorious in his battle with Abner he would have a very difficult time asserting his authority over the other tribes because by this time the People of Israel were no longer a coalition of tribes but a nation divided into the South (the tribe of Judah) and the North (the other tribes). Indeed, not only were they divided along geographical lines; as verse 9 indicates the tribes of the North came to be perceived as "all Israel" as though the tribe of Judah in the South didn't count. How would a king from the outsider tribe of Judah be able to win the support and the following of "all Israel"? This would seem like a formidable task. In our next lesson we will see to what extent David was successful in achieving this task.

IV. Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It is recommended to begin by discussing some of the central challenges to Jewish unity in North America today. Then shift the discussion to the challenges to Jewish unity in the State of Israel. Does Jewish sovereignty and statehood contribute to, or detract from, Jewish unity? How does the fact that Jews in Israel come from different countries with distinctive cultures, languages, values and lifestyles affect Jewish unity?

At this point it is important to mention that the challenge of maintaining Jewish unity in the Land is not unique to the contemporary State of Israel. From the very first time that the people entered the Land they had to deal with a host of issues that threatened the fabric of the people and their sense of unity, despite the fact that they had emerged as a people in Egypt, that they had been together and they had shared common experiences in the forty plus years since their departure from Egypt. We will address some of these issues in this lesson.

Step 2

It may be helpful to pose the following question: What often happens when inheritances are divided among the children? There are often disputes about who gets what. Similarly, the People of Israel were a nation divided into twelve tribes about to take possession of their divine inheritance, the Land. The question was who gets what? Read and analyze text 1 to see the answer prescribed by God. Ask: In general, was the division of the Land a source of tension and conflict among the tribes?

Step 3

It may be helpful to pose the following question: After they had settled in the Land what might have threatened their unity as a people? Perhaps the fact that each tribe settled in its own territory would lead to a sense of isolation from the others. This would be particularly true given the fact that the land is divided into different regions with different topographies and different natural resources leading to different patterns of behavior and lifestyles. Would they be able to maintain their unity as a people? Study and analyze text 2.

Step 4

What circumstance led to the creation of a national unity government in the State of Israel? Why was unity so widely viewed as essential at the time? Many Israelis felt that the best way to deal with the threat of the *intifada* was to put aside their internal divisions and to create a unified front. In what way were the circumstances and the will of the people similar in the first State of the People of Israel? But

what went wrong? What were the consequences? Why would it be difficult to restore the sense of unity? Study and analyze text 3.

Step 5

Summary and questions for thought: What do you think about the actions of David and Abner? Should one of them have backed down? At what point should politicians withdraw from the race? At what point should we back down from our ambitions and the fulfillment of our dreams? Is civil war ever justified?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Read Numbers 32:1-42. What was the particular territorial request of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Manasseh? What was the response of Moses? What did they offer to do in order to convince Moses to grant them their request? Did Moses ultimately grant them their request?
2. Read Joshua 17:14-18. What was the complaint of the Josephites in relation to territory? What was Joshua's response?

VI. Literature for Further Reading

Ben Sasson, H.H. (ed.), *A History of the Jewish People*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, pp. 47-96

Liver, J. "The Israelite Tribes", in *The World History of the Jewish People*, vol. III: Judges, ed. Mazar, B., New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, pp. 183-211.