

LESSON 4

WOULD ALL THE PEOPLE ENTER THE LAND?

I. What is the aim of this lesson?

The aim of this lesson is to understand the request of two of the tribes of Israel to settle outside the Land, the negative reaction of Moses that this request generated and the compromise that they eventually worked out.

II. Why is this lesson important?

Despite the fact that the contemporary State of Israel has attracted Jews worldwide, the majority of the Jewish people still live elsewhere. This fact begs two important questions: Why don't we come? What should our relationship to Israel be while living abroad? The story that we will study in this lesson offers insight into both of these important questions. It describes the request of two of the tribes of Israel to remain outside the Land, and the responsibilities that they had to assume in order to be granted their request. Although the story takes place in the context of ancient Israel, much of it still rings true today.

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

Text 1 – Numbers 32:1-5 – The request

Background

After the 40 year journey through the desert and the death of the generation of the Exodus as a result of the sin of the scouts, the time to enter the Land had finally arrived. As the map shows (Macmillan Bible Atlas, map 52), the route that they took toward the Land was to the east (apparently it was not feasible to enter the Land directly via the northern route) and then to the north skirting the land of Edom (see Numbers 20:14-21) and Moab. They arrived at the border of the land of the Amorites from where they sought safe passage into the Land. Unfortunately, the Amorites refused to grant them passage and launched an attack against them instead. The People of Israel fought back and successfully defeated the Amorites and took possession of their land (Numbers 21:21-25). They then camped at the steppes of Moab on the east bank of the Jordan River which marked the border of the Promised Land (Numbers 22:1). Their long awaited entry was finally within reach.

Yet, just when everything seemed to be in place for their imminent entry into the Land, just when the anticipation, the suspense and the excitement were building, something happened that again put the future of the People in the Land in jeopardy.

What did the tribes of Reuben and Gad request of Moses (as well as Eleazar the priest and the leaders of the community)?

The tribes of Reuben and Gad who owned “cattle in very great numbers” looked at their immediate surroundings and saw something appealing in the extreme. The land previously occupied by the Amorites and which the People of Israel had just conquered was “cattle country” and answered their physical needs, far more than the Land of Israel across the Jordan. They therefore turned to Moses (as well as Eleazar and the leaders of the community) and asked that that land be given to them as their permanent holding rather than to assign them territory to the west of the Jordan in the Land of Israel proper.

How do they try to justify their request?

They argue that since “the *Lord* has conquered” the land of the Amorites it must be treated as a full-fledged conquest which implies possession and eventual settlement, similar to the land to the west of the Jordan.

How can we evaluate this request?

On the one hand it is possible to understand their plight. Why should they have to leave an area where they are currently situated, an area so well-suited for their material well-being and so promising for their economic future? Furthermore, wasn't the point to bring them to a land “flowing with milk and honey”. i.e., a fertile land that will be a source of material blessing to the People? If so, here is a region that, at least for these two tribes, was the ultimate source of material blessing. Finally, this wasn't a faraway land that would separate them from the rest of the People: it was just across the border, just next-door. Indeed, given their proximity to the Land one could argue that they are *virtually* in the Land already!

On the other hand, was this the purpose of the Land of Israel? True, if the People were merely meant to occupy and inhabit a rich and variegated land, to sit back and enjoy its manifold blessings, then perhaps the idea of settling in an adjacent land known for its excellent pasture made sense. However, as we discussed in lesson 1, this was *not* the central purpose of the Land. The goodness and bounty of the Land was not the *reason* the land was given to the People, not the *end*, but the *means to the end*. We have argued that the Land was given to them so that they can fulfill the spiritual mission assigned to Abraham and his descendants. Thus the difference, in a religious sense, between the one side of the Jordan and the other, is the difference between day and night. The west of the Jordan is the Promised Land; the east of the Jordan is merely a land of promise. The former has religious meaning and significance whereas the latter has none. The two lands may be merely separated by a narrow river but between them lay a spiritual abyss.

The problem, however, runs deeper. The request of these two tribes is not just disturbing because it reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of the purpose of material wealth and the Land in the divine scheme of things; it has the potential to create a crisis of national proportions. If two tribes are granted the right to settle in a convenient region outside the Land and are absolved of the responsibility of taking part in the conquest and the fulfillment of the national goal, what is to stop the other tribes from seeking the same right? Indeed, this concern isn't merely hypothetical; the last time an opportunity arose to avoid proceeding onward into the Land – after the report of the scouts (see our previous lesson) – everyone jumped on the bandwagon. What is to stop the People from using a deal with Gad and Reuben as a pretext to shirk their responsibility once again?

Text 2 – Numbers 32:6-15 – The reply of Moses

How did Moses respond?

Moses responds with an outburst of anger and a bitter denunciation of their request. He says in effect, how can they abandon their moral responsibility by allowing their brothers to go to war while they stay behind! Should their brothers be forced to sacrifice their lives while they remain free to enjoy the good life? Furthermore, what effect might their staying behind have on the morale of the People? Would the People be willing to fight if there is a convenient alternative? To make matters worse, the People might interpret their request as a reflection of their fear of the overwhelming might of the nations of the Land. If their request is granted the entire nation might rebel as they had after the report of the scouts. Would God tolerate another revolt and rejection of the Land? Certainly not!

Thus, we see that Moses chastises them for placing their own material concerns above their responsibilities to the People and above the fulfillment of their national goals, and he emphatically rejects their request. The question is would they back down and forget the whole affair?

Text 3 – Numbers 32:16-19 – The counter-proposal

Apparently the opportunity to acquire excellent pasture-land was so appealing that they were unwilling to simply drop the idea despite Moses' adamant objection. They were determined to find a way to make it work. **But how could they make it work given the fierce opposition of Moses?**

They apparently realized that the best thing to do was to devise a formula that would take into account both their needs as well as Moses' objections. As we mentioned, Moses had objected to the idea on two grounds: 1. Remaining behind while the others are forced to fight reflects a selfish disregard for the

unity of the People 2. Remaining behind will have a devastating effect on the others who will similarly seek to remain behind and thus avoid the dangers and hardships of the Land. The leaders of the two tribes therefore suggested that they be allowed to set their families and cattle up in the lands to the east of the Jordan while they serve as “shock-troops” to lead the charge into the Land. Indeed, unencumbered by their families, they will have greater mobility and be able to undertake commando assignments that are essential to the success of the conquest. Only after they have completed their assignment and “every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion” in the Land should they be allowed to return to their homes to the east of the Jordan.

How does this counter-proposal answer Moses’ objections?

In putting their lives at the greatest risk by accepting upon themselves the role of “shock-troops” for the rest of the nation they cannot be accused of disregarding their responsibility toward their brethren nor can they be seen as deterring the others from entering the Land. To the contrary; since *they* will serve as the shock-troops, the *others* will be freed of some of the perils of warfare and *their* lives will be spared. Furthermore, their willingness to lead the People will serve as an example of courage and inspire others to follow suit (*changed*).

The question is **would Moses accept this counter-proposal?**

Text 4 – Numbers 32:20-27 – Moses’ conditional acceptance

At first glance it appears as though Moses accepted their proposal unconditionally. A careful reading of the text, however, reveals that this is not the case. What they proposed was to serve as shock-troops “in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home” in return for which they would be allotted the region that they desired; a quid pro quo between themselves and the people. However, in his reply, Moses restructures their proposal and states everything in terms of *lifnei Hashem* - “at the instance of the Lord”. **What does this mean?**

1. Moses wanted to put their proposal into proper perspective. In stating that they will serve as shock-troops “until we have established them in their home” they implied that the success of their mission was assured by virtue of their will alone. Moses wanted to teach them that successes of this nature should not be seen merely as the result of human efforts but of the divine hand at work behind the scenes.

Moses wanted to teach that the conquest and settlement of the Land were not merely a material matter that can be exchanged based on personal preference or expediency. Rather they are part of God’s design and therefore have enormous significance. If the two tribes are

going to be given the right to settle elsewhere it is because their contribution to the conquest isn't merely a business deal; it is a solemn commitment to God and God will hold those who fail to live up to their commitments accountable (*changed*).

How did the two tribes respond to Moses' condition?

The two tribes apparently understood the significance of Moses' condition and accepted it. They replied "Our children... will stay behind... while your servants, all those recruited for war, cross over, *at the instance of the Lord*, to engage in battle" and during the actual conquest we are told: "The Reubenites, the Gadites, and the half-tribe of Manasseh (the role of this group – mentioned also in our text from verses 33 onwards – alongside the tribes of Reuben and Gad is the subject of much scholarly discussion. See our questions for further study) went across armed in the van of the Israelites, as Moses had charged them. About forty thousand shock troops went across, *at the instance of the Lord* (Joshua 4:12-13)".

Thus, for the first time but certainly not for the last, an attempt was made to define the *mitzvot hateluyot bechutz la'aretz* - the responsibilities devolving upon Jews living in the Diaspora. Moses was begrudgingly willing to allow the two tribes to remain abroad as long as they assumed a critical role in securing the future of the rest of the People in the Land.

But does this really make sense? If the People of Israel were assigned a land in which they were to fulfill an important divine mission, as we have argued throughout this course, why would two tribes be absolved from this responsibility and be allowed to decide their future outside the land? Aren't they an integral part of the nation? Why then was it sufficient for them to assist the others in the conquest and the settlement while they ultimately settle elsewhere?

The following are a few possible answers:

1. Granting their request was a necessary concession given the circumstances – against the background of the story of the scouts in which virtually the entire nation refused to enter the land Moses must have been relieved that on this occasion only *two* tribes voiced an objection. If he had insisted that they proceed into the Land against their will he might run the risk of inflaming tensions that could trigger another large scale revolt.

The settlement on the east of the Jordan had already begun – according to Numbers 21:24-31 the People not only took possession of the Amorite lands but they also settled in all their cities (Bible scholars generally assume that this section was inserted after the conquest of the Land and it therefore cannot be said to reflect an earlier reality.) Although the text does not indicate which tribes were involved, the two tribes seem to allude to their own settlement in Amorite

territory when they say in 32:19 “But we will not have a share with them in the territory beyond the Jordan, for *we have received our share on the east side of the Jordan.*” (See also the commentary of Rashi). After they had already staked their claim to that territory and had begun to settle there it would have been infinitely more difficult for Moses to insist that they uproot themselves and join the other tribes who had yet to reach their destination.

3. God may not have approved the arrangement – a careful reading of this story reveals that although Moses invokes God’s name repeatedly Moses does not *consult* Him even once. This is uncharacteristic of a man whose career was marked by an ongoing dialogue with God and who served as His intermediary to the People. This problem is compounded by the fact that when he had been confronted just recently by the daughters of Zelophehad regarding the rights of inheritance in the Land and he was not certain as to the appropriate ruling he chose to bring “their case before the Lord (Numbers 27:5)”. Thus, the fact that he does not do so on this occasion and that God does not intervene to offer His advice suggests that Moses acted on his own accord and that God may not have approved of his actions.

Perhaps his failure to consult God can be understood not only against the background of the sin of the scouts but against his own personal background. Moses had already been told that he will not be given the opportunity to fulfill his dream of leading the People into the Land because of his role in the Waters of Meribah (see Numbers 20:1-13). Now, in the twilight of his career and of his life, there was still one thing that was keeping him going and one thing that was still his driving force – his concern that, after he passes from the scene, Joshua will successfully bring the People into the Land. The last thing he needed was to die wondering whether this would ever happen; that because of his own intransigence the entire future of the nation was once again in question. If all he needed to do in order to die in peace was to allow two of the twelve tribes to settle just over the border, especially when they were prepared to lead the people in the conquest of the Land, so be it. It may not have been exactly what God had in mind - and perhaps that is why Moses never consulted Him in the first place - but for Moses there was simply no other way.

Suggested Lesson Plan

Step 1

It is recommended to begin the lesson with a discussion regarding the relationship today of Diaspora Jews with the State of Israel and the Jews living there. What are the various expressions of support for the State of Israel and the Jews living there that are found among Diaspora Jews? Are there some types of support that are more essential than others? How important is visiting Israel? Why are many Jews

today reluctant to visit Israel? How do you feel about this reluctance? How important is living in Israel? Is Israel the place for all the Jews? Alternatively, it might be helpful to ask students to rank Israel on their list of Jewish values, then compare and discuss the various lists.

Step 2

Study and analyze text 1 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. After studying the text it may be helpful to ask: What role do material concerns play in deciding where to live? What are some other considerations in deciding where to live? To what extent should we be expected to compromise on our material well-being and comfort for community, religion or other values?

Step 3

Study and analyze text 2 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. It may be helpful to then ask: Do you think Moses overreacted? How much should we have to sacrifice for our family, community, religion, the Jewish people and the State of Israel?

Step 4

Study and analyze text 3 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. It may be helpful to then ask: What do you think of their compromise formula? Would you have been inclined to accept it?

Step 5

Study and analyze text 4 guided by the questions that appear in bold print. Then ask, if Moses were alive today what *mitzvot*, or responsibilities, do you think he would assign to Diaspora Jews in relation to the State of Israel and the Jews living there? To what extent are Diaspora Jews living up to these responsibilities?

Step 6

Summarize the central ideas in the lesson and then pose some of the following questions: Do you think the existence of a strong Jewish community in the Diaspora is good for Judaism? Is it good for the Jewish People? Is it good for Israel?

V. Questions for Further Study

1. Read Deuteronomy 3:16-20. What are the differences between the account of the story of the tribes of Reuben and Gad as it is told in Numbers and in Deuteronomy? Try to explain these differences
2. Read Numbers 32:33-42. What is the problem with this section in relation to the previous section? See how this problem is addressed by both traditional and modern commentaries.

VI. Literature for Further Reading

Leibowitz, N. (1980). *Studies in Bamidbar*, Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, pp. 379-387

Levine, B. (2000). *Anchor Bible: Numbers 21-36*, New York: Doubleday, pp. 475-507

Milgrom, J. (1990). *The JPS Torah Commentary: Numbers*, Philadelphia: JPS, pp. 266-277, 494-496