

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

After describing (at length) the division of the spoils from the war against Midyan (Bamidbar 31:25-54), the Torah tells us of the request made by the Tribes of Gad and R'uvein, asking to receive the territory on the eastern side of the Jordan River as their "inheritance." With no apparent reason to assume otherwise, the order and placement of these two narratives is likely based on when they actually occurred. However, the land of Sichon and Og (which they were requesting) had been conquered well before the war of retribution against Midyan; the involvement with Midyan only came about because Moav was upset/concerned that the Nation of Israel was camped at its border (22:4), which only occurred after the land of Sichon and Og had been conquered (22:2). Why did Gad and R'uvein wait until after the war with Midyan to ask Moshe if they could receive their portion from lands conquered earlier?

My beloved chavrusa, R' Yitzchok Steinfeld, gave me an answer that was suggested by his rebbe, Rav Yisroel Belsky, which is based on these two Tribes wanting to inherit the land in which Moshe would be buried (see Rashi on D'varim 33:21; see also <http://www.aishdas.org/ta/5766/sukkos.pdf>). Since G-d had commanded Moshe to "exact revenge against Midyan and then be gathered unto your people" (31:2), it was only after Moshe had fulfilled the commandment and his death was imminent that requesting this land became a pressing matter.

Other possibilities are based upon the reason given for Gad and R'uvein making their request -- having much cattle (32:1). The spoils from the war against Midyan included a lot of cattle (31:32-34), meaning that as much as each Tribe had before the war, they had that much more after this war. However, since this increase should have applied equally to all the Tribes, the question (if we are to attribute the request made by Gad and R'uvein to their getting more cattle from the spoils of the war against Midyan) becomes why an increase in the amount of cattle for all the Tribe caused these two to make their request.

Daas Sofrim suggests that even though each Tribe received an equal amount of the spoils (including the animals), the other Tribes were not as skilled at shepherding as the Tribes of Gad and R'uvein.

Therefore, all of the animals obtained from the spoils (or at least a good portion of them) were sold to Gad and R'uvein, with the net result being that these two Tribes ended up with the overwhelming majority of the nation's cattle. Consequently, after the war with Midyan they asked Moshe if they could settle on the eastern side of the Jordan. Maharzo (Bamidbar Rabbah 22:8) says that the Midyanites had exceptional success at animal-rearing because G-d had assigned the administering angel that oversees these matters to Midyan. When G-d wanted Gad and R'uvein to experience this success instead, He had the Nation of Israel defeat the Midyanites and reassigned this administering angel to help the Tribes of Gad and R'uvein instead. According to this, it was not the cattle taken as spoils that gave Gad and R'uvein so much more than the other Tribes. Rather, after the war (as a direct consequence) they had much more success with their cattle than the other Tribes did, which led to their request. [Even if there doesn't seem to be enough time between the war against Midyan and Moshe's death for these Tribes to have had enough success to need the grazing land on the eastern side of the Jordan, they may have seen what was starting to happen and realized they eventually would. It should be noted, though, that the wording of the verse is that they "had" much cattle, not they "would have" a lot of cattle in the future.]

A simple, straightforward possibility is that Gad and R'uvein had more cattle to start with, with the increased amount each Tribe obtained after the war just putting these two Tribes over the top. However, if anything the increased cattle received by each Tribe lowered the percentage gap between them and the other Tribes; a request to receive land on the eastern side of the Jordan should have applied more before the war than it did afterwards. Nevertheless, there might be a very good reason why each and every Tribe receiving a large amount of cattle from the spoils of the war with Midyan led to the Tribes of Gad and R'uvein asking that they be given the land conquered from Sichon and Og.

Previously

(<http://rabbidmk.wordpress.com/2010/07/21/parashas-va-eschanan-5770>), I suggested that even if Gad and R'uvein hadn't asked for this land, they would have received it as their portion. They knew it would be theirs, and were asking that it become theirs now rather than having to cross the Jordan with their families and belongings just to cross back over after everything was conquered and distributed. This is why when the lottery

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that determined which portion of land went to each Tribe was drawn, all 12 Tribes were represented (see Rashi on Bamidbar 26:54), not just the 10 whose lands had not yet been specified. It is also why Moshe gave half of Menashe their land now even though they didn't ask for it; since both Moshe and Menashe knew it would eventually be theirs, how could Moshe make them schlep everything back and forth if Gad and R'uvein didn't have to?

Knowing that their portion would be on the eastern side of the Jordan River may have been enough incentive to ask for it now, but after every Tribe received a large amount of cattle from the spoils of the war with Midyan they became concerned about whether they would ever really get it. After all, until now it had been clear to all, based on the large amount of cattle they had, that they needed the exceptional grazing land on the eastern side of the Jordan; there was no reason to think any other Tribe would want to be outside Canaan. However, now that every Tribe needed grazing land, maybe they would ask for part of the territory conquered from Sichon and Og too (see Netziv on 32:5). Moshe wouldn't be around to insist on giving Gad and R'uvein their rightful portion; would the "new regime," led by Y'hoshua, give each of the 12 Tribes a portion on the western side of the Jordan as well as grazing land on the eastern side (similar to the way Yaakov used Sh'chem for grazing while living in Chevron)? Fearful that now every Tribe might want a piece of "their" territory, Gad and R'uvein approached Moshe and asked that it be designated for them, and only them, right then and there.

This could also explain why, seemingly smack in the middle of the conversation (32:4-5), the paragraph ends a new one begins. It is possible that the first paragraph occurred before the war with Midyan, with Gad and R'uvein asking for the territory conquered from Sichon and Og because they wanted to avoid schlepping everything back and forth from the eastern side of the Jordan to the western side and then back again to the eastern side. Moshe didn't say yes, and the conversation ended. Then, after the war, when the other Tribes getting cattle caused Gad and R'uvein to be concerned about losing their rightful territory, they approached Moshe a second time. Although the Torah put both conversations together in order to keep the narrative contiguous (just as the Torah may have

included Yisro's leaving in the same narrative with his arrival even if it happened much later, see Ramban on Sh'mos 18:1), the first paragraph may have occurred before the war with Midyan while the second paragraph occurred after the Tribes divided up the spoils, a development that Gad and R'uvein were afraid could impact which land they would receive. © 2013 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“Shall your brethren go to war, while you settle here?" (Numbers 32:6) The tribes of Gad and Reuven are so taken with the grazing potential of the land east of the Jordan River that they request permission to remain right there and establish their settlement. Moses rebukes them, insisting that they must first join the other tribes in battle, and only once the entire land is conquered, "may you return, so that you come out pure in the eyes of G-d and of Israel." (Numbers 32: 22)

Rabbi Shaul Robinson (who is my successor as rabbi of Lincoln Square Synagogue, and a very beloved student) was once surprised on entering a Satmar bakery in Williamsburg, Brooklyn to see a large Hebrew sign which read, "Shall your brethren go to war while you settle here?" He immediately asked the owners, "Can this be true? Are you encouraging young haredi men to join the I.D.F? Have you really joined the ranks of the Religious Zionists?" The owner of the bakery pointed out that this verse was actually being cited by the Satmar Hassidim to encourage participation in demonstrations in favor of Sabbath observance. Unfortunately, the Hassidim did not understand the irony in the verse whose meaning they were distorting for their purposes.

The Israeli haredi world is currently going through a cataclysmic shakeup. Until now, virtually all of their young men lived a life of exclusive Torah study. This is a result of Ben Gurion's agreement with the Hazon Ish to fill the ranks of Torah scholarship, which had been so decimated by the Shoah.

There is now a strong likelihood that a great many, if not all, haredi young men will be called up for several years of national service. Interestingly enough, even before the present political constellation enabled the possibility of a haredi draft, many haredi young men were showing interest in joining the IDF, sharing the burden of military service and integrating themselves into the workforce.

There was never a halakhic justification for military exemptions for those studying Torah. Our sages declared that if Israel is under threat of attack, "Even a groom must leave his bridal chamber and even a bride must leave her nuptial canopy in order to protect our land and its citizenry." (Maimonides' Laws of Kings 7:4)

The great Hassidic authority, Rabbi Isaac of Karlin, writes in his Talmudic commentary *Keren Orah* that, "In an obligatory war everyone goes to battle, and so even Torah scholars must be freed from their studies" (Commentary to Sotah).

The ultra-Orthodox decisors base their insistence upon exemption on two major sources. They cite the *Sifrei* (Numbers, Parshat Matot, 157), which comments on the biblical text enjoining universal military conscription: "With the exclusion of the Tribe of Levi" - implying that the tribe of Levi was exempted from serving in the army!

However, there is an alternative manuscript of this midrash which reads, "with the inclusion of the tribe of Levi". This reading is preferred by Rashi, who insists that the tribe of Levi went out to battle against Midian - even though that battle was not an obligatory war in the classical sense (Numbers 31:4).

The second text they cite is the Talmudic ruling that the righteous deeds of Torah scholars guard them against attack, and thereby exempt them from sharing in the cost of defensive city walls. (Bava Batra 7b). But the *Tosafot* (ad loc.) and the *Hazon Ish* (on Bava Batra 5:18) limit this exemption to defenses against robberies - monetary protection. If the wall is to be erected for the protection of human lives, even Torah scholars would be expected to contribute! After all, we dare not rely upon miracles when life is at stake.

Even within our Talmudic passage (Bava Batra 7b), there is a fascinating difference of opinion between Rabbi Yohanan and Resh Lakish as to whether it is the Torah study or the righteous deeds which bring this protection. This question was seemingly resolved in an earlier generation in favor of righteous deeds. The discussion took place between two rabbis imprisoned during the Hadrianic persecutions. Rabbi Hananya ben Tradion noted that while he stood accused of only one crime, he would receive the death penalty while his colleague Rabbi Elazar ben Parta would survive despite having five accusations against him. Rabbi Hananyah ben Tradion attributed his colleague's special good fortune to his performance of good deeds, "Because you occupied yourself with the study of Torah as well as the performance of good deeds, whereas I occupied myself exclusively with the study of Torah. And it has been taught: He who only studies Torah is compared to someone who has no G-d" (Avoda Zara 17b).

In the present Israeli climate, when businessmen - if they work alone - must simply close their shops and somehow absorb the loss of clientele for 30-90 days per year of reserve duty and young husbands must leave wives and fledgling families for the same period, what greater "good deed" could there be than lessening this pressure and sharing in this national obligation? What better way can there be to remove the resentment against the Ultra-Orthodox and pave the way towards a united Jewish nation than by a united sharing of the burden as well as the merit of

protecting our future? © 2013 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The fourth book of the Torah - Bamidbar - concludes in this week's public Torah reading. The new generation of Jews, no longer the slave generation that left Egypt hastily and constantly longed to return there when faced with problems and difficulties, stands poised to enter the Land of Israel and fulfill G-d's covenant with Avraham. However here again, narrow personal interests becloud the general picture and weaken the necessary national resolve.

It is no longer the so-called fleshpots of Egypt that beckon and entice. It is rather the pasture lands east of the Jordan River that force the cattle raising tribes of Reuven and Gad to plead with Moshe that they not be compelled to cross the Jordan and enter the Land of Israel.

Moshe's initial reaction to their request is one of shock and bitter disappointment. He reminds them that their parents' generation was destroyed in the desert for disparaging the Land of Israel and refusing to struggle on its behalf. And he warns them that they have apparently learned little from that bitter event in Jewish history.

Here they stand making the same error in judgment and vision that the previous generation did. Moshe's greatest frustration is that the Jewish people can't see past their cattle, their personal gain, an imagined short term benefit and their refusal to acknowledge the grandeur of the Lord's long term vision for themselves and their land. It is this blindness of spirit and unwillingness to appreciate the uniqueness of Israel, the people and the land that Moshe bemoans.

But all of this temporary gain comes with cost and a price. Separated from their brethren west of the Jordan, the tribes of Gad and Reuven have a difficult time defending themselves and are the first tribes to be exiled. They produce no major leaders or heroes for the Jewish people and their dreams of prosperity and material success are only fleetingly realized.

Criticized bitterly and eternally by the prophetess Devorah for standing aside in an hour of national Jewish peril, they become the model of individual Jewish indifference to the general cause of Jewish survival and success. In our current world they unfortunately have many heirs and disciples. Mordecai warned Esther not to stand away and be passive in the face of Haman and his decrees. He warned her that when the Jews would somehow escape from the troubles she and her family would be doomed to extinction in the Jewish story if she allowed her narrow self-interest to rule over her national duty for the preservation of Israel.

Today, also, narrow self-interests govern many Jews - even leaders who seemingly should know better - in their attitudes, policies and behavior regarding the existential problems that face the Jewish people and the Jewish state. The Talmud teaches us that Jerusalem always needs advocates for its cause. That certainly is the case in the generation and times in which we find ourselves currently. Jewish apathy and alienation are our enemies. The allure of current political correctness in policy and mindset is misleading and dangerous. We too stand at the cusp of great adventures and opportunities. We should avoid the Reuven/Gad syndrome. ©2013 Rabbi Berel Wein - Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

It is a fascinating story and from it comes one of the great principles of Judaism. Two of the tribes, Reuben and Gad, see that the land east of the Jordan is ideally suited as pasture for their large herds and flocks of livestock. They approach Moses and ask to have permission to settle there rather than cross the Jordan. Moses is initially furious at their request. It is, he says, bound to demoralise the rest of the people: "Shall your fellow countrymen go to war while you sit here?" Had they learned nothing from the sin of the spies who, by de-motivating others through their behaviour, condemned an entire generation to forty years of wandering in the desert?

The Reubenites and Gadites take the point. They explain that they have no wish to exempt themselves from the struggles of their fellow Israelites. They are fully prepared to accompany them into the promised land and fight alongside them. "We will not return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance." Moses makes them take a public pledge to this effect and grants their request on condition that they fulfil their word. "When the land is then conquered before G-d you may then return, free of any obligation before G-d and Israel and this land will be yours as your permanent property before G-d."

The italicised phrase -- literally you will be innocent before G-d and Israel -- became in the course of time an ethical axiom of Judaism. It is not enough to do what is right in the eyes of G-d. One must also act in such a way as to be seen to have done the right in the eyes of one's fellow man. One must be above suspicion. That is the rule of *veheyitem neki'im*, "You shall be innocent in the eyes of G-d and Israel."

How did this translate itself into Jewish law and life? The Mishnah in Shekalim speaks of the three periods in the year when appropriations were made from the collective donations stored in the Temple treasury. The Mishnah states that "The person who

made the appropriation did not enter the chamber wearing a bordered cloak or shoes or tefillin or an amulet, so that if he subsequently became poor, people would not say that he became poor because he committed an offence in the chamber, and so that if he became rich people would not say that he did so by misappropriating contributions in the chamber -- for we must be free of blame in the eyes of people just as we must be free of blame before G-d, as it is said, 'You shall be innocent in the eyes of G-d and Israel.'"

Similarly the Tosefta states: "When one went in to take up the offering of the chamber, they would search him when he went in and when he came out, and they continue chatting with him from the time he goes in until the time he comes out." Not only must there be no wrongdoing when coins are taken from the Temple treasury; there must be no suspicion of wrongdoing. Hence the person who gathered the money should not wear any item of clothing in which coins could be hidden. He was to be searched before and afterwards, and even engaged in conversation so that he would not be tempted to secrete some of the money in his mouth.

Two rabbinic teachings from the Second Temple period speak of families famous for their role in Temple life and the lengths they went to place themselves beyond suspicion. The Garmu family were expert in preparing the showbread. It was said of them that "their memory was held in high esteem because fine bread was never found in their children's homes, in case people might say, they feed from the preparation of the showbread." Likewise the Avtinas family were skilled in making the incense used in the temple. They too were held in high regard because "Never did a bride of their family go forth perfumed, and when they married a woman from elsewhere, they stipulated that she was not to go out perfumed, in case people should say, They perfume themselves from the preparation of the Temple incense."

The general principle is stated in the Talmud Yerushalmi: "R. Samuel bar Nachman said in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: In the Mosaic books, the Prophets and the Writings, we find that a person must discharge his obligations before men just as he must discharge them before G-d. Where in the Mosaic books? In the verse, 'You shall be innocent in the eyes of G-d and Israel.' Where in the prophets? In 'G-d, the Lord G-d, He knows and Israel too shall know.' Where in the Writings? In the verse, 'You shall find grace and good favour in the eyes of G-d and men.' Gamliel Zoga asked R. Yose bar Avun, Which verse says it most clearly? He replied, 'You shall be innocent in the eyes of G-d and Israel.'"

This concern became the basis of two halakhic principles. The first is known as *chashad*, "suspicion", namely that certain acts, permitted in themselves, are forbidden on the grounds that performing them may lead others to suspect one of doing something

forbidden. Thus, for example, R. Shimon bar Yochai held that one of the reasons why the Torah prescribes that peah [the corner of the field left unharvested for the poor] should be left at the end of harvesting was because of suspicion. If the owner of the field had set aside an unharvested corner at the beginning or middle, the poor would come and take what is theirs before the end of harvesting, and a passer-by might think that no corner had been set aside at all. Likewise the rabbis ordained that if a house has two doors on different sides, Hanukah candles should be lit at both so that a passer-by, seeing one door but not the other, should not think that the owner of the house had failed to fulfil the command.

A closely related halakhic principle is the idea known as *marit ha-ayin*, "appearances". Thus for example, before milk substitutes became common, it was forbidden to drink milk-like liquids (made, for example, from almonds) together with meat on the grounds that people might think it was milk itself. Similarly it is forbidden on Shabbat to hang out garments that had become wet (for example, by falling into water) to dry, in case people think that one has washed them on Shabbat. In general one is not allowed to perform actions which, permitted in themselves, lend themselves to misinterpretation.

The connection or contrast between these two principles is a matter of some debate in the rabbinic literature. There are those who see *chashad* and *marit ha-ayin* as very similar, perhaps even two names for the same thing. Others however see them as different, even opposites. *Chashad* represents the possibility that people might think you have done something forbidden and thus think badly of you. *Marit ha-ayin* concerns cases where people, knowing that you are not the sort of person to do something forbidden, draw the mistaken conclusion that because you are doing X, Y is permitted, because X is easily mistaken for Y. Thus, to take one of the cases mentioned above, people seeing you hanging out clothes to dry on Shabbat might conclude that clothe-washing is permitted, which it is not.

This concern for appearances is, on the face of it, strange. Surely what matters is what G-d thinks of us, not what people think of us. The Talmud tells us of a moving encounter between the dying Rabban Yochanan ben Zakkai and his disciples: "They said to him: Master, bless us. He said to them: May it be G-d's will that the fear of heaven should be as important to you as the fear of [the opinions of] human beings. They said: Is that all? He said: Would that you were able to attain this [level of spirituality]. You can see [how difficult it is] because when someone wants to commit a sin, he says, I hope no one will see me [thus placing his fear of human beings above the fear of G-d who sees all]."

What is more, it is forbidden to suspect people of wrongdoing. The rabbis said, 'One who suspects the innocent is [punished by being] bodily afflicted' and 'One

should always judge a person in the scale of merits.' Why then, if the onus is on the observer not to judge harshly, should we -- the observed -- be charged with the duty of acting above suspicion?

The answer is that we are not allowed to rely on the fact that others will judge us charitably, even though they should. Rashi makes a sobering comment on the life of Moses: "If he left his tent early, people would say that he had had a row with his wife. If he left late, they would say, He is devising evil plots against us."

Even Moses, who devoted his life with total selflessness to the people of Israel, was not able to avoid their suspicion. R. Moses Sofer goes so far as to say that he was troubled throughout his lifetime by the challenge of the command, 'You shall be innocent in the eyes of G-d and Israel,' adding that it was far easier to fulfil the first half of the command ('in the eyes of G-d') than the second ('in the eyes of Israel'). Indeed he wondered if it was possible for anyone to fulfil it in its entirety. Perhaps, he said, this is what Ecclesiastes meant when he said, "There is not a righteous man on earth who only does what is right and never sins."

Yet there is a profound idea embedded in the concept of *veheyitem neki'im*, 'You shall be innocent.' The Talmudic sage Rava was scathing of those who stood in the presence of a Torah scroll but not in the presence of a Torah sage. To be a Jew is to be summoned to become a living *sefer Torah*. People learn how to behave not only from the books they study but also -- perhaps more so -- from the people they meet. Jewish educators speak of 'text-people' as well as 'text-books,' meaning that we need living role models as well as formal instruction. For that reason, Rabbi Akiva used to follow Rabbi Yehoshua to see how he conducted himself in private, saying 'This too is part of Torah, and I need to learn.' The twin principles of *chashad* and *marit ha-ayin* mean that we should act in such a way as to be held as a role-model (by being above suspicion -- the rule of *chashad*) and that, just as a book of instructions should be unambiguous, so should our conduct (by not laying itself open to misinterpretation -- the idea of *marit ha-ayin*). People should be able to observe the way we behave and learn from us how a Jew should live.

The fact that these rules apply to every Jew, not just to great sages, is eloquent testimony to the spiritual egalitarianism of the halakhah. Each of us is bidden to become a role-model. The fact, too, that these rules exist despite the fact that we are commanded not to suspect others of wrongdoing, tells us something else about Judaism, namely that it is a system of duties, not just of rights. We are not allowed to say, when we have acted in a way conducive to suspicion, 'I have done nothing wrong; to the contrary, the other person, by harbouring doubts about me, is in the wrong.' To be sure, he is. But that does not relieve us of the responsibility to conduct our lives in a way that is above

suspicion. Each of us must play our part in constructing a society of mutual respect.

This brings us back to where we began with the request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad to settle the land east of the Jordan. Moses, we recall, granted their request on condition that they first joined the other tribes in their battles. They did so. Years later, Joshua summoned them and told them that they had fulfilled their promise and were now entitled to return to the place where they had built their homes (Joshua 22).

However, by a profound historical irony, suspicion was aroused again, this time for a quite different reason, namely that they had built an altar in their territory. The other tribes suspected that they were breaking faith with the G-d of Israel by constructing their own place of worship. Israel was on the brink of civil war. The suspicion was unfounded. The Reubenites and Gadites explained that the altar they had built was not intended to be a place of worship, but rather a sign that they too were part of the Israelite nation -- a safeguard against the possibility that one day, generations later, the tribes living in Israel proper (west of the Jordan) would declare the Reubenites and Gadites to be foreigners since they lived on the other side of the river: "That is why we said, 'Let us get ready and build an altar -- but not for burnt offerings or sacrifices.' On the contrary, it is to be a witness between us and you and the generations that follow, that we will worship the Lord at sanctuary with our burnt offerings, sacrifices and fellowship offerings. Then in the future your descendants will not be able to say to ours, 'You have no share in the Lord.' And we said, 'If they ever say this to us or to our descendants, we will answer: Look at the replica of the Lord's altar which our fathers built, not for burnt offerings and sacrifices, but as a witness between us and you.'"

Civil war was averted, but only just.

Suspicion is a pervasive feature of social life and it is intensely destructive. Judaism -- a central project of which is the construction of a gracious society built on justice, compassion, mutual responsibility and trust -- confronts the problem from both directions. One the one hand it commands us not to harbour suspicions but to judge people generously, giving them the benefit of the doubt. On the other, it bids each of us to act in a way that is above suspicion, keeping [as the rabbis put it] "far from unseemly conduct, from whatever resembles it, and from what may merely appear to resemble it."

Being innocent before G-d is one thing; being innocent before one's fellow human beings is another, and far more difficult. Yet that is the challenge -- not because we seek their approval (that is what is known as pandering) but because we are summoned to be role models, exemplars, living embodiments of Torah, and because we are called on to be a unifying, not a divisive, presence in Jewish life. As the Chatam Sofer said, we will not always succeed. Despite our best

endeavours, others may still accuse us (as they accused Moses) of things of which we are utterly innocent. Yet we must do our best by being charitable in our judgement of others and scrupulous in the way we conduct ourselves. ©2013 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion of Masei includes the sentence that speaks to the commandment of living in Israel. The key phrase is "and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein." (Numbers 33:53)

Rashi is of the opinion that this sentence does not constitute a command to live in Israel. It is rather good advice. Take possession of the land from its inhabitants, otherwise you will not be able to safely live there.

Ramban (Nahmanides) disagrees. In his addendum to Rambam's (Maimonides) Book of Commandments, Ramban notes that Rambam failed to mention living in Israel as a distinct mitzvah. Ramban writes: "We have been commanded in the Torah to take possession of the land which G-d gave to the patriarchs and not leave it in the hands of others or allow it to remain desolate, as it says 'and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein.'" (Addendum, Mitzvat Aseh 4)

Some commentators argue that implicit in Rambam is the commandment to live in Israel. So basic is the mitzvah, writes the late former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, that it need not be mentioned, as it is the basis for all of Torah.

But whether or not one maintains that Rambam believes it is a mitzvah to live in Israel, doesn't this commandment, as certainly understood by Ramban, fly in the face of our mission to be an or la'goyim? How can we be a light to the nations of the world if we don't live amongst Gentiles and are ensconced in our own homeland?

One could argue however, that the mandate to live in the chosen land of Israel is crucial to the chosen people idea. Being the chosen people doesn't mean that our souls are superior. Rather it suggests that our mission to spread a system of ethical monotheism, of G-d ethics to the world, is of a higher purpose. And that can only be accomplished in the land of Israel.

From this perspective, the significance of the modern state of Israel is not only as the place of guaranteed political refuge for Jews; or as the place where more mitzvot can be performed or where our continuity as a Jewish nation is assured. Rather it is the only place where we have the potential to carry out the chosen people mandate.

In exile, we can develop communities that can be a "light" to others. But the destiny of the Jewish people lies in the State of Israel. Israel is the only place

where we as a nation can become an or la'goyim. In the Diaspora, we are not in control of our destiny; we cannot create the society envisioned by the Torah. Only in a Jewish state do we have the political sovereignty and judicial autonomy to potentially establish the society from which other nations can learn the basic ethical ideals of Torah.

As we near Tisha B'av, the fast commemorating our exile from the land, this position reminds us of our obligation to think about Israel, to visit Israel, and, most important, to constantly yearn to join the millions who have already returned home. Only there do we have the potential to be the true am hanivhar (chosen people). © 2012 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI AVI HELLER

Weekly Dose of Torah

You know, there is a moment in every perfect feast when you reach the ideal stage of fullness and satiety. Not overfull, where you say “ohhh, I ate too much” and not still hungry, even tongue-hungry, where you want to keep dipping in for a small fifth or sixth serving. But perfectly, amazingly, totally satisfied and full. As beautiful a feeling as this is (and so elusive) it also represents a significant halachic moment as well. As it says in the Torah – quite optimistically, I might add – “and you shall eat and you shall be satisfied” (Devarim 8:10). The next word is “and you shall bless”¹, which is the Biblical commandment (one of those 613 from Torah Avenue) to say the Grace After Meals, in Hebrew, birkat ha-Mazon, in Yiddish, benching.

The benching consists of four blessings. The first one, the blessing of sustenance (birkat ha-Zan) is required by the Torah when a meal includes bread and the eater feels full. Our tradition is that it was written by Moses himself and, though (or, maybe, because) we sing it to a children’s ditty, it is one of the most well-known prayers to any Jew who went to Jewish camp or Hebrew school. The second blessing (which begins “nodeh lecha”), is the Blessing of the Land and is a thanksgiving to G-d, who gave us the land of Israel. The land is important, for without it, we could not grow the food which we have just eaten and which has made us full. The principle of the second blessing is that we do not only thank G-d for what is in front of us, but also for underlying causes, for antecedents. We thank G-d for creating the conditions in which we have things to be thankful for. The second blessing concludes “blessed

¹ “And you shall bless Hashem your G-d for the good land that He has given you” Cf. Devarim 8:13, where the next phrase is “and you shall build beautiful houses....and you shall forget Hashem, your G-d. In other words, you have two choices, bless G-d and remember Him or forget and move on to your next project, choosing alienation from Hashem.

are you, Hashem, for the land and for the food”, incorporating both the first and second blessings together. It was written by Joshua, Yehoshua.

The third blessing (which begins “rachem na”) is the blessing of Jerusalem and was originally written by David. It not only thanks G-d for that which He has given us, but asks Him not to let us be too dependent on other human beings and it concludes with a prayer to build Jerusalem (“uvnei yerushalayim”). Finally, the fourth blessing, which is called “ha-Tov v’ha-Meitiv” was composed after the destruction of the Second Temple. In the year 135 CE, a great revolt against Rome was crushed and, as punishment to the Jews, the slain of the rebel city of Betar were left to rot on the battlefield, unattended and unburied. Eventually, G-d caused the Romans to relent and allow the Jews to bury their dead. The Men of the Great Assembly composed this blessing at that time.² This blessing, its explanation and its place here right after we have eaten (thinking about unburied bodies), has always bothered me. But I think that if we look at the benching as a whole, we can come to a greater understanding of why it is here.

The Rosh (Rabbenu Asher, Germany/N Africa, 14 c) asks an interesting question on a verse in our Torah portion that says “When you will come to the land of Canaan, this is the land that will be to you as an inheritance.” (34:2) The Rosh asks: how did they say the benching when they were still in the desert? They had not yet come to the land or built the Temple or Jerusalem. Could they say the Grace after meals? He answers: yes, but only the first paragraph, i.e. the one that Moshe wrote. Moshe’s prayer was originally written for the manna that fell from Heaven. Though the Jewish people did not have to work for it (only to go out and collect it each morning) it was important that they be appropriately grateful for the amazing gift and blessing that G-d had bestowed upon them.

However, once they had conquered the land of Israel under Yehoshua and settled the land,³ they then had to say the second blessing on the land.⁴ In other words, the blessing grew. There was a time when they only said the blessing of the food, because they had food but no promised land in which to grow it. Ironically, once they had become farmers and worked hard to plant and harvest, that was when they began to thank G-d with two blessings rather than one. Their gratefulness increased when they became partners with Hashem and could take pride in their own handiwork.

² The blessing actually gives thanks that their bodies miraculously did not decompose during the time they were left unattended, until they could be properly buried.

³ Actually, it’s unclear when they would have begun saying the second blessing, right when they entered or at some point during the next 14 years of conquest and settlement.

⁴ The second blessing is also sometimes called the blessing of “b’rit v’torah”, covenant and Torah – entering the land is a sign of the fulfillment of the covenant of Hashem with the people, but it is more than JUST the land.

Not to mention that they had the special privilege of getting to work the land of Israel. (This summer, after we arrive in Israel and pray the morning service, the first thing the MJE Fellows will do is to harvest from the soil of Israel, at a farm called Leket, and then distributed to the poor.)

I think this is true in our own lives as well. As we go through the journey of our lifetime, we add in new experiences. Hopefully, we fulfill the promises of our youth in building a career, a community, a family, in gaining wisdom and experience. Even if we are "wandering in the desert" and have taken some wrong turns, we still thank G-d for that which we have. But when we put down our roots and reach a stage of completion, we need to remember to add a blessing, one that incorporates both the past and the present. Awareness of how we have been blessed helps stave off an overly critical eye to what is wrong -- or not yet right -- in our lives.

There is also an additional stage. The Rosh notes that both the third (Jerusalem) and fourth (dead of Betar) blessings are related to sad events, such as the destruction of the Temple and the abolishment of the independent Jewish nation that existed 2000 years ago. We can only pray for the re-building of Jerusalem once Jerusalem was destroyed and we can only give thanks for the burial of the dead of Betar after they were all killed. Why do we incorporate these blessings in the Grace after Meals?

I think that it is related to a famous Jewish principle that "Just as we bless for the good, we bless for the bad." (Mishna, Berachot 9:5) Even the bad things that have happened to our people are an occasion for blessing. I think this is for 2 reasons. One: we learn from our mistakes and from our suffering how to be better. Two: We know that this is only one stage in the journey and not the final one. The Jewish people are not going to be in exile forever. Jerusalem WILL be rebuilt and the Messiah WILL come; it's just a question of when. When we eat a meal and are satisfied, we thank G-d even though we know that we will be hungry again in six hours. We will need to eat again and, hopefully, we will be able to have the food to be satisfied again, to eat food that sustains our bodies to do the work of G-d and does not destroy the planet He bequeathed to us. This meal is not the last meal we will ever have. But we bless for what we have – whether good or bad – and live another day.

As we come into the nine days of Av in which so many terrible things –including the destruction of both Temples – occurred, we can think about this message. Like the first two blessings of the benching, we can be grateful for all the things we have, both personally and as members of the Jewish people. We are allowed to practice our religion with freedom, to take off of work for Shabbat, to have a synagogue and a rabbi to turn to. There are Jewish books in any language you'd care to read, Judaica stores, kosher

restaurants, mikvahs, websites and a million other Jewish opportunities within arm's reach. And the Jewish people are vibrant. As beleaguered as it is, we have a beautiful Jewish state that we can visit and even live in. There is Torah scholarship, vibrant debate, Jewish leaders who care deeply about the future of our people. There is so much to be thankful for. And yet, like the last 2 blessings of the benching, we are also aware of what we don't have. Sometime soon, perhaps and with the help of G-d, we can rebuild Jerusalem the way she was meant to be rebuilt and have a Jewish state that basks in the light of G-d and not just the UN. We are satisfied, and so we bless. But we still have much to do. Shabbat shalom! © 2011 Rabbi A. Heller and Manhattan Jewish Experience

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

One of this week's Parshiot, Parshat Maasei, lists the many places where the Jews in the desert traveled through and camped. Since the Torah doesn't waste any words or letters, it would seem strange to list places that the Jews visited, if it meant nothing for us today. As commentaries help explain, when you love someone, you want to remember everything you did together, and G-d's love for us is no different. This love that G-d has for us is the reason why the Torah spends so many Pessukim (verses) listing the places the Jews visited. As Rabbi Twerski asks, though, at each point the Torah says (33:1-12) that they "traveled from A and camped at B. They traveled from B and camped at C", when it could have saved words and simply said that they camped at A, B, and C?

Commentaries help us understand this by explaining that the forty years that the Jews spent in the desert was filled with spiritual growth (as often discussed in the Daily Aliya blog), and the "travels" represented that growth. The Torah attests to the fact that not only did the Jews travel to point A, but they camped/grew there. The lesson for us is simple and true: If you want to "travel" through Torah growth, make sure you not only travel along a solid path, but make sure you "camp" at every stage, and make sure you're comfortable with it, before you move onto another level. For example, you can't jump to Kaballah (mysticism) before you know Halacha (law) and Talmud. There's a process that requires "camping" at every step of the way. So before we venture off to see the wonderful sites the Torah has to offer, make sure you take a road map (Torah), a guide (Rabbi), and patience. Only then will you truly enjoy the ride. © 2013 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

