

Primary and Secondary

This week, we complete the book of *B'midbar*, Numbers, reading the final two portions, *Matot-Masei*. This week is also the start of the nine days of mourning, which culminate on *Tisha b'Av*, the 9th of Av Fast for the destruction of the holy Temples in Jerusalem and our exile from Israel. Every year, in fact, we complete Numbers during this time period. There may be a thematic link between these two events – the Torah reading cycle and the Nine days.

One of the more startling events in the whole Torah occurs in *Matot*. The people have been wandering for 40 years in the desert and they've arrived at the gates of Israel. After this prolonged wait to enter the land, caused by the sin of the spies who raised doubts about the conquerability of the land, two tribes – later joined by another half-tribe – request to settle the land on the East of the Jordan, rather than settling the land of Israel itself. "It would be a favor to us if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan." (Numbers 32:5)

Moshe is, naturally, stunned by the request. Have the Forty years taught the people nothing?! Had the skepticism toward the viability of life in Israel become a generational fact? "Now, you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add further to God's wrath against Israel." (ibid, 14)

But the tribes reassure Moshe: "we will build here sheep holds for our flock and cities for our children. And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home." (ibid, 15–16) The tribes' commitment to protect the rest of the people is a welcome reassurance. Moshe's upset at the proposal is tempered when the tribes proclaim their support for Jewish peoplehood: "If you do this...and the land is conquered...then you shall be clear from God and Israel." (ibid 20–22)

But Moshe adds one final message: "Build cities for your children and sheep holds for your flock." (ibid 24) The distinct message is subtle, but the critique is profound. Moshe echoes the words of the tribes. But Moshe adds a twist. When initially making their proposal, the tribes desire to build sheep holds and cities for children. Moshe reverses the order and instructs them to first build cities then sheep holds. Rashi highlights the point saying that the tribes made that which ought to be primary, secondary; and that which ought to be secondary, primary. (See Rashi, comments to ibid, 15)

Rashi's reading of Moshe's critique of the two and a half tribes might be a critique for the Jewish sovereignty over 2000 years ago. The Talmud attributes the fall of the Temple and exile to the story of Kamza and Bar Kamza. There, a man, Kamza, is mistaken as a friend when he was, in truth, an enemy. In the embarrassing drama that ensues, Kamza vows revenge by turning the Roman authorities against Israel, claiming the Jews were fomenting revolt and sedition against Rome. He demonstrates the anti-Rome attitude by sending a blemished animal as a sacrifice to the Temple. A blemished animal is unfit for use, but in the case of geopolitical danger and the threat of annihilation – survival trumps ceremony.

The high priest of the day, Zecharia ben Avkulus, however, persuaded the people not to allow the sacrifice. He reasoned, people may think blemished animals can be brought on the altar. To his opposition, the people suggested killing Kamza, thereby, preventing the slander of Israel to Rome, but the high priest countered: then, people will think that bringing a blemished animal to the Temple warrants death. So, as the Talmud concludes, because of the piety of Zecharia the Temple was destroyed and the Jews were exiled. (See TB Gittin 55b)

This damning critique can be summed up using Rashi's words: they made secondary what ought to be primary and make primary what ought to be secondary. Perhaps, by contrast, the rebuilding of the Temple and the return to a sovereign and secure Jewish home depends on bringing balance back to our priorities; when what ought to be primary is primary, the Jewish people will reverse its fortunes.

May it be so, very soon; Shabbat Shalom Umevorach,
Rabbi Menashe East