
A Final Hurdle

Having just been victorious in battle, in Numbers 32 we find the Israelites encamped on the plains of Moab ready to cross the Jordan river into the promised land. After all the obstacles they have encountered in their epic wilderness trek, can there be anything stopping them now? Apparently there is. This time the obstacle is not physical hardship, hostile foreigners or the discouraging reports of the spies. It is the desire to settle down and be comfortable, rather than forge ahead into the land promised by God.

Now the Reubenites and the Gadites owned a very great number of cattle. When they saw that the land of Jazer and the land of Gilead was a good place for cattle, the Gadites and the Reubenites came and spoke to Moses, to Eleazar the priest, and to the leaders of the congregation, saying... (Numbers 32:1-2).

The Reubenites and Gadites seek permission to be excused from the Israelites' approaching battle as they enter the promised land, to instead stay put and settle with their families in the rich grazing country east of the Jordan. Chapter 32 tells of their approach to Moses, Moses' response, and the outcome of the negotiations.

Note that the Reubenites and Gadites present their petition in two parts. First, they politely present the facts. The land on which they stand *"is a land for cattle; and [we] your servants have cattle"* (32:4).

Then the text says: *"They continued..."* It is as if there had been a pause. Were they dropping a hint and waiting to see how Moses responded? Were they hoping that Moses might be impressed by the 'cattle' link and suggest they stay behind and settle the land? If so, their hopes were dashed. Moses apparently was silent, and so they continued: *"If we have found favour in your sight, let this land be given to [us] your servants for a possession; do not make us cross the Jordan"* (32:5).

To this Moses releases a torrent of fury.

"Shall your brothers go to war while you sit here? Why will you discourage the hearts of the Israelites

from going over into the land that the Lord has given them?" (32:6-7).

Moses has no time for their cosy little plans when all their resources as a nation are being mustered to accomplish the divine plan! In their proposal he sees the disaster of the spies all over again:

"If you turn away from following the Lord, the Lord will again abandon the people in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people" (see 32:15).

The Midrash too expresses disapproval:

"In the case of the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, you find that they were rich, possessing large numbers of cattle, but they loved their money and settled outside the Land of Israel" (Num. R. 22:7).

Yet, despite his fury, Moses negotiates with the Reubenites and Gadites. They will enter the battle along with the people of Israel and secure a victory. Then they, along with the half tribe of Manasseh (32:33), will settle in their land of choice, outside the land of Israel.

Still, the gulf between negotiating parties remains. In Moses' mind, Israel's mission as God's people is paramount. The Reubenites and Gadites on the other hand seem to view it as a business deal balancing their interests against the rest of Israel. Unlike Moses who is centred on God and the whole people, they are focused on their own material wealth and needs. Subtle details in the text reveal this critical difference in vision; can you pick them?

Further reflection:

If the motivation of the tribes in question was so sinful (v.14) and contrary to the divine will, why did Moses negotiate with them? And why did it not attract the same cataclysmic display of divine wrath as in the case of the story of the spies? Food for thought as we engage, ponder and wrestle with the word of God

Sources: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol. 2 (London/New York: Soncino Press, 1983); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York, n.p.d.). Scripture: NRSV.

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