



5 ways

to explore the text further

The view expressed overleaf is that the Reubenites and Gadites wish to stay put rather than move ahead. They are prepared to settle for what 'is,' rather than reach for what could be. They want comfort in the 'now' rather than undertake the responsibilities and sacrifices required in striving for a future promised by God. Do you agree? What tell-tale signs of this attitude can be found in the detail of the text?

1. Note the repetition of 'cattle' (four times in the first five verses) indicating the intense focus of the Reubenites and Gadites: material possessions, tribal wealth.
2. Rashi notes that the negotiating tribes placed their concern for their cattle before their concern for their little ones (32:16) while Moses subtly corrects them by referring to their little ones before their cattle (32:24).
3. Only after being corrected by Moses do the tribes make their little ones the priority (32:26).
4. Throughout the negotiation, Moses repeatedly speaks of Israel as a people going "before the Lord," emphasizing the involvement of the divine in the conquest of the land of Canaan.
5. The Reubenites and Gadites agree to cross the Jordan with Israel into the long-awaited promised land "as my lord orders" (32:25,27). Is this obedience to divine designs, or political compromise? Are they fighting through coercion rather than free choice?
You can continue to follow this story in the Book of Joshua (see 1:12-18; 4:12; 13:8-13).



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www.lightoftorah.net

Text: Teresa Pirola
Design: Sarann Ryan
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 30:2—32:42

Matot: 'tribes'

Why reflect on Torah?

By reading Scripture with the help of Jewish interpreters, *Light of Torah* helps us to be aware of the spiritual kinship between Christians and Jews. We remember that the 'bible' of Jesus, himself a faithful Jew, was the Hebrew Scriptures—sacred writings which became incorporated into what we Christians refer to as the 'Old Testament.' The term 'old' here denotes not 'obsolete' but rather the 'more ancient' or 'first' part of our Christian Scriptures, the foundation of the Gospels and other biblical texts that follow. In the words of Pope John Paul II:

"To deprive Christ of his relationship with the Old Testament is therefore to detach him from his roots and to empty his mystery of all meaning. Indeed, to be meaningful, the Incarnation has to be rooted in centuries of preparation. Christ would otherwise have been like a meteor that falls by chance to the earth and is devoid of any connection with human history. From her origins, the Church has well understood that the Incarnation is rooted in history and, consequently, she has fully accepted Christ's insertion into the history of the People of Israel." (April 1997 speech, PBC)



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Numbers 30:2—32:42

Having just been victorious in battle, the Israelites are now encamped on the plains of Moab ready to cross the Jordan river into the promised land. After every obstacle they have encountered in their epic wilderness trek, can there be anything stopping them now? Apparently there is, according to Numbers 32. 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.

Tasting Torah

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 conquest of the promised land, to instead stay put and settle with their families in the rich grazing country east of the Jordan.

Read chapter 32 with your *havrutah* partner and discuss their approach to Moses, Moses' response, and the outcome of the negotiations.

Touching Torah

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: "Let this land be given to [us] your servants for a possession; do not make us cross the Jordan"* (32:5)

Depthing Torah

To this Moses lets loose 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, he will again abandon the people in the wilderness; and you will destroy all this people" (see 32:15).

Despite Moses' fury he negotiates with the Reubenites and Gadites. They will go to war with 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.

Yet 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? (See overleaf)

Doing Torah

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?



Love of God & homeland, or love of money?

The Midrash 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"
(Numbers Rabbah 22:7).

Bibliography: Freedman and Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers* Vol. 2 (London/NY: Soncino Press, 1983); Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (NY: Lambda). Scripture: NRSV.