

Edah Staff:

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Esther Berman, Administrative Assistant

Edah
1501 Broadway,
Suite 501
New York, NY
10036

212-244-7501

www.edah.org

Upcoming EVENTS:

Torah for Elul at the JCC in NYC

Tuesdays
Sept. 5th-19th,

7pm
Chaviva Levin—
“Teshuva and Apostasy in Medieval Ashkenaz”

8:30 pm Rabbi Saul Berman -
“Teshuva: Repairing Relationship”

On Responsibility and Resolve By Bat Sheva Marcus

You have been wandering in the desert for forty years. No one remembers your lives back in Egypt because that generation has died out and there really isn't anyone to remember. You are tired, displaced and ready to settle down into your new life in Israel. Except... except... here, on this side of the Jordan the land is beautiful. The land is plentiful for your cattle with which you have been blessed, the grass is green and luscious. Perhaps this is where you should make your home, settle and raise your children and, most importantly, grow your cattle herds. You approach Moshe, asking if that would be a possibility. His response? Moshe is furious. More furious than you could have anticipated.

“What?” he demands האחיכם יבאו למלחמה ואתם תשבו פה:

“Should your brothers enter a war [with the inhabitants of the land] and you will sit here?!” Moshe continues with a tirade, suggesting that by staying where they are, these tribes will weaken the resolve of their brothers and incite fear. He spends the next nine pesukim recapping, quite graphically, the sin of the spies and how their deed cost Bnei Yisrael the initial opportunity to enter the land of Israel. This, he says, will be their fate once again, if these tribes continue with their plans. This will lead directly to the destruction of the Jewish people.

Reuven and Gad obviously did something wrong when they made this request of Moshe, something which triggered deep anger from Moshe. What was their sin and why was it so serious an offense as to warrant such a reply?

The pshat seems to be exactly what one would surmise by looking at Moshe's words. He is angry that these two tribes are abandoning the others. Moshe is concerned that their behavior will be interpreted as fear and will incite fear in the other tribes. He is afraid of an “instant replay” of the sin of the spies. Ramban supports this position and suggests that, worse yet, Moshe is concerned that these tribes did not trust sufficiently in G-d to have confidence that they would win the war. It is this demonstration of a lack of faith which makes Moshe so angry.

Nechama Leibowitz, however, takes a different tack. She suggests that Reuven and Gad angered Moshe because their request showed a skewed perception of the worth of

material possessions vis-à-vis their relationship to G-d. She points out that when the tribes initially approach Moshe they put all the emphasis on their cattle, ignoring the needs of their families and their community, concerned only with their livelihood and material possession. In fact Rashi supports this by pointing out that even when they bring a second proposal which includes fighting alongside their brothers, they describe the construction of pens for their cattle prior to mentioning a place for their children to safely reside.

Further, Nechama Leibowitz points out that this concern only for material possessions is *taking the place* of any spiritual life they have. She describes the verse that sums up the spiritual outlook of these tribes as “beginning and ending with cattle.” Even when they return with a second proposal, which involves fighting along with bnei Yisrael prior to entering the land, their proposal includes only a plan to handle their personal possessions and their active involvement in the battle. It does not include any mention of G-d or his involvement in the land. In sharp contrast, Moshe, upon acceptance of their second proposal, responds with reference after reference to G-d's involvement in the imminent victory.

So here we have two very different readings on this passage. The pshat, supported by Ramban, suggests that Moshe is angered by the fact that in avoiding battle they are shirking their responsibility and will be directly responsible for weakening the resolve of community. Rashi and Nechama Leibowitz's reading suggests that Moshe's wrath is a response to displaced values and a lack of acknowledgement of G-d's place in their lives.

So which is it? Is it the lack of responsibility to the community or the expressed lack of values which so angered Moshe? Perhaps these two are not so very far apart. Perhaps it is precisely through standing up for our responsibilities and concerning ourselves with the fate of our community that we develop appropriate values and an appreciation of G-d in our lives. And perhaps it is precisely through the acknowledgement of G-d in our lives that we begin to develop a stronger appreciation for doing our part in the world, and making a difference in our community. Ultimately though, it is clear that only with everyone doing their part, the community will be a strong and may have the privilege to fulfill its destiny.

Bat Sheva Marcus is the Chief Operating Officer of M.A.Z.E. Fertility Laboratories and the Clinical Director of the Medical Center For Female Sexuality. She is a founding board member of the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance.