

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

NASO

BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

CHUKKAT

BALAK

PINCHAS

MATOT

MASSEI

MATOT

RUNNING AWAY FROM

42

WHO WE'RE NOT

We are almost at the finish line. We can see it. We can feel it. Just a tiny bit further. But we are tired. Maybe we should just stop right here and get comfortable instead.

The Jewish people endured 210 years of slavery followed by 40 years of wandering through the desert - all for the greater purpose of finally getting to the Land of Israel which was promised to Abraham. We are now standing with the finish line in sight, about to receive our final instructions for this climactic moment of conquering the land. Out of the blue, the tribes of Reuben and Gad approach Moses. Strangely and unexpectedly, instead of sharing in the palpable excitement of the moment, they declare that they would like to settle down in the land just *outside* of Israel.

They explain that on a practical level the land outside of Israel is better suited for pasture which

would benefit their business as shepherds. While this explanation seems logical and teaches us the importance of priorities, how is it possible that on an emotional and ideological level, the tribes of Gad and Reuben are not swept up at the nation's excitement at the imminent entry into their homeland after so many years of wandering? This is the land promised to them, and their ancestors, by God, as a land flowing with milk and honey¹ - and they're choosing to not take part? Surely there must be more to this choice than simple economics?

Reuben and Gad both happen to be firstborns. Firstborns were expected to be leaders of their families, and as such, have a privileged status. However, for both Reuben and Gad, adopting the responsibilities of leadership does not come naturally. Gad is the firstborn of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid) but he is not actually given firstborn status since he is

not born to one of the Matriarchs. Reuben, in contrast, is given firstborn status but eventually loses it.

Reuben's leadership strategy is not one of teamwork. He tends to take complete control of certain situations without leaving opportunity for others to join him in the task. The most obvious example of this is his plan to save Joseph from the brothers' plot to kill him.² Instead of trying to convince his brothers not to kill Joseph, Reuben suggests that they throw him in a pit to die, planning to return alone later in order to take him out. Perhaps if he had encouraged the brothers not to commit fratricide, he may have succeeded and Joseph would not have been sold into slavery from that pit.

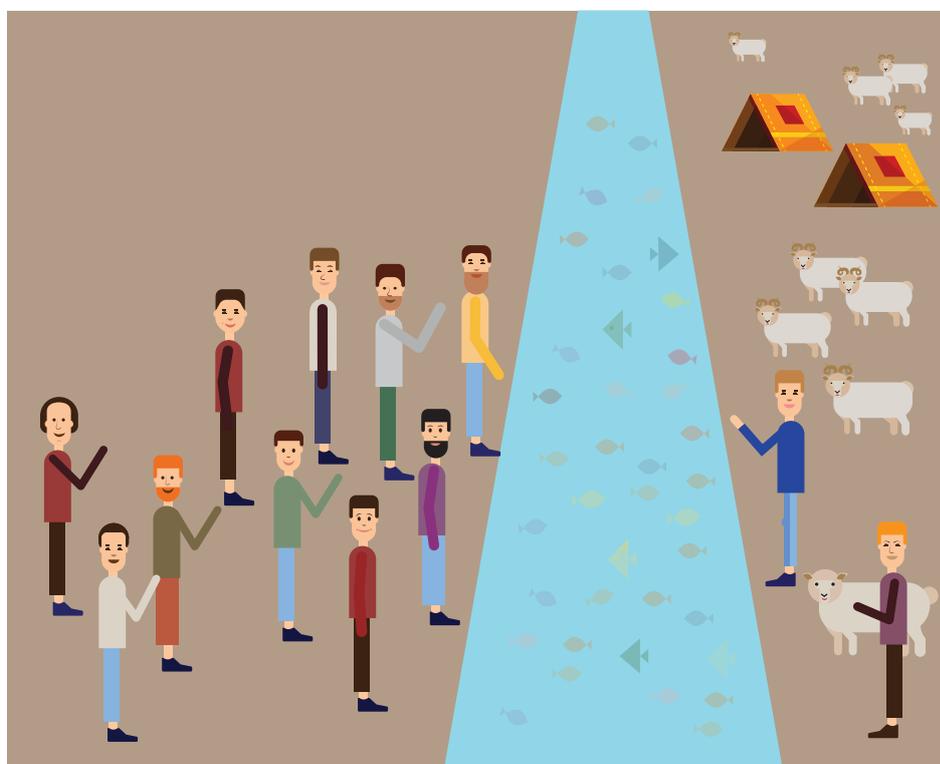
Reuben is a classic example of a leader without followers and without a strategy.

We each have ideas of what we are supposed to do with our lives and who we are supposed to be. Sometimes our vision is shaped by external forces, pressure to enter the profession that our family expects, for example, or to perform like our siblings. And sometimes our ideas are formed by our own internal beliefs and dreams.

What happens, though, when we try to be something that we actually are not?

Reuben happens to be a firstborn, and as such his leadership status is somewhat imposed on him. He does not choose to become a leader, and the skill does not come naturally to him. He therefore continues to inadvertently make bad leadership choices. When he finally realises that his approach to leadership is not working, he doesn't try to improve his technique, or to look for his own unique style. Rather, he runs away and invites his fellow rejected firstborn, Gad, to join him in a separate geographical location, where together they can be leaders without followers. Such a decision, however, means that they must separate themselves from everyone else. Reuben simply cannot face the public humiliation of failing to fulfill what he sees as the role of the firstborn.

Eventually, the firstborn rights are transferred to the tribe of Levi. The Torah describes how the tribe of Levi does not receive rights to a specific segment of land but rather is dispersed among all of Israel.³ This reflects the nature of **a true leader - someone who leads from within, from among the people;**



someone who inspires others and grows with them. Levites may not be the literal firstborn children, but they naturally embrace the leadership role.

Parashat Matot reminds us that at times we may have misconceptions about who we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to do. Some traits do not come naturally to us. Some are even opposite to our basic natural inclinations. In those instances, **we must attempt to focus on our more natural strengths and talents, rather than to artificially hold onto traits that will hold us back** from reaching our true destiny.

Notes

¹ Exodus 3:8. ² Genesis 37:18-22.

³ Genesis 49:7.

Parasha Fact:

Though the tribes of Reuben and Gad wish to remain on the east side of the Jordan, they commit to fighting alongside their kin to conquer all of Israel. Even though they already had the land that they wanted, they recognized the need to aid their brethren.

Next week in Massei:

On the brink of entry into the Promised Land, the Torah diverts the focus for just a moment and enters into an unusual level of detail about the journeys of the Jewish people through the desert. Why do we need to know all the details? What is the significance of each of the different locations and stages of the journey? Perhaps within this unlikely list of travel coordinates lies the ultimate code to achieving true peace of mind.

שבת שלום