

Parshat Maatot-Maasei Where Did Menashe Come From?

Simon Wolf

In this week's parsha, Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven approach Moshe Rabbeinu with a request to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan River.¹ The Torah relates that the impetus for this petition was that Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven were blessed with an abundance of livestock and the rich grazing lands conquered from Sichon and Og were of great appeal and value to them. Disconcerted by their request, Moshe states incredulously, "shall your brethren go to battle while you remain here?" After wandering in the desert for forty years and the loss of an entire generation, Bnei Yisrael had finally been released from the sin of the Meraglim and were on the verge of entering the Promised Land. Moshe accuses Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven of repeating the sin of their forefathers by fomenting seeds of dissension amongst Bnei Yisrael to enter the Land of Israel. Their "refusal" to join the remainder of Bnei Yisrael in the conquest of Eretz Canaan would dishearten and demoralize the rest of the people. It would be interpreted as a lack of faith in God's ability to empower Bnei Yisrael's conquest of Eretz Yisrael and cast aspersions on the desirability of the Land of Israel. In order to mitigate the negativity that might be construed by their remaining on the eastern side of the Jordan River, Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven present a novel solution to Moshe Rabbeinu. They propose building fortified cities in the lands conquered from Sichon and Og to house their livestock and families. Once their families and possessions were securely settled, Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven would join and lead the remainder of Bnei Yisrael in the conquest of the Land of Israel. They commit not return home until the remainder of Bnei Yisrael are settled on the western side of the Jordan River. This would enhance the morale of the people and dispel any possible misinterpretation of their motives for requesting to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moshe accepts their proposal. In a national ceremony before Elazar HaKohen and Yehoshua Bin Nun, the leadership of the next generation, Moshe has Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven publicly commit to lead the armed conquest of Eretz Canaan as a necessary precondition to their taking possession of the lands of Sichon and Og.

Assuming that they will hold up their end of the bargain, Moshe Rabbeinu then distributes and divides the lands of Sichon, king of the Emori, and Og, king of the Bashan, to the tribes of Reuven and Gad and half of the tribe of Menashe. From heretofore, this subdivision of Bnei Yisrael is taken for granted. For instance, in the description of the borders of Eretz Canaan in Parshat Maasei, Moshe instructs the people that there are nine and half tribes who will take their possession within these stated borders since the remaining two and half tribes have already taken their inheritance on the eastern side of the Jordan River.² In addition, the six cities of refuge mentioned in Parshat Maasei are equally apportioned between the two sides of the Jordan River.³ The three allocated to the eastern side of the Jordan River are in Parshat Etchanan distributed amongst the two and half tribes who inherited those lands.⁴ A summary of this whole story, along with the allotment of the lands, is reiterated at the end of Parshat Devarim when Moshe in his farewell address reviews the conquest of the lands of Sichon and Og.⁵

The question that jumps out from the narrative is the sudden appearance of half of the tribe of Menashe. Until now in the Torah (במדבר לב,א-לב), the entire discussion, as well as the bilateral agreement, had been between Moshe Rabbeinu and the Bnei Gad and the Bnei Reuven. There is absolutely no mention of the tribe of Menashe. Suddenly, when it comes to the apportionment of the land, Moshe includes half of the tribe of Menashe along with the Bnei Gad and Reuven (שם, לג-מב). How does half of the tribe of Menashe get dragged into this story? Where were they until now?

The simplest answer would be to suggest that they were ancillary to the two larger tribes and therefore subsumed in the mention of the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. If that were true, it would suffice to mention the half tribe of Menashe once in the distribution of the portions of the land, but, as noted above, the Torah continues to refer to the land on the eastern side of the Jordan River as belonging to the two and half tribes. This seems to ascribe importance and significance to the half tribe of Menashe independent of the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven. Therefore, it must be that there was something more remarkable

¹ במדבר פרק לב

² ...זאת הארץ אשר נתת לנו אלהינו בגויל אשר צונו יקח לתת לתשעת המטות וחצי המטה... שני המטות וחצי המטה לקחו ונחלתם מעבר לירדן ירחו קדמה מזרחה (במדבר לד, יג-טו)

³ ...אתו שלש הערים תתנו מעבר לירדן ואת שלש הערים תתנו בארץ כנען ערי מקלט תהיינה (במדבר לה, יג-יד)

⁴ את בצר במדבר בארץ המישר לראובני ואת ראמת בגלעד לגדי ואת גולן בבשן למנשי (דברים ד, מג)

⁵ ואת הארץ הזאת ירשנו בעת ההוא מערער אשר על גולן ארץ חצי הר הגלעד וערי נחתי לראובני ולגדי ויתר הגלעד וכל הבשן ממלכת עוג נתתי לחצי שבט המנשה... (דברים ג, יד-כב)

precipitating this change between the beginning and the end of the deliberations between Moshe and the Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven.

The Ramban suggests that the half tribe of Menashe was opportunistic.⁶ When Moshe began to divide the land between the tribes of Gad and Reuven, he realized that the expanse was too large for just the two tribes alone and he therefore sought volunteers to fill the void. There were individuals within the tribe of Menashe who saw this as a window of opportunity to take a bigger portion in the land than they would have otherwise received on the western side of the Jordan River. That is because only two of the eight families (מכיר וגלעד) within the tribe of Menashe volunteered to settle in the Gilad and the Bashan. They chose to do this either because similar to the tribes of Gad and Reuven they had bountiful livestock and would benefit from the large tracts of grazing land or because they were the smallest families within the tribe of Menashe. Had they joined the remainder of their tribe in Eretz Canaan, they would have received limited allocations of land. In order to gain a disproportionate inheritance, they chose to join Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven in the wide open lands of pasture found on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

The Chizkuni suggests that the division of the tribe was imposed upon them because of the sin of their father Menashe who was the messenger sent by Yosef to incriminate the brothers with stealing his goblet.⁷ Menashe's participation in the entrapment of the brothers which caused them to rend their garments was punished quid pro quo with his tribe being divided in two.⁸

In Sefer Breishit, those that have large numbers of livestock and choose to move eastward are parties who have been rejected from or have opted out of being God's chosen people. We find this by the story of Lot with Avraham⁹ and in the struggle of Eisav with Yaakov.¹⁰ Reuven and Gad might have chosen the eastern side of the Jordan River for a similar reason. While they were not completely disenfranchised, they were demoted from a position that was rightfully theirs based on the birthright. Similar to Eisav, Reuven was stripped of his status as the first-born¹¹ and relegated in the encampment to head a group

consisting of Shimon¹² and Gad. Gad was one of four children born to the maidservants. The other three were Dan, Asher and Naftali. Those three were a single encampment headed by Dan. Gad, who was the firstborn of Zilpa, Leah's maidservant might have seen himself as deserving that position over Dan.¹³ In addition, being paired with Reuven and Shimon, who both had lost their birthright positions, might have influenced Gad to feel similarly rejected. Therefore, Reuven and Gad, like those rejected in Sefer Breishit, see their appropriate place on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Seeing the choices made by the tribes of Reuven and Gad, the tribe of Menashe might have felt a sense of camaraderie with their plight since they too had been supplanted by their younger brother Ephrayim. That common sense of destiny might have compelled the tribe of Menashe to join the tribes of Reuven and Gad on the eastern side of the Jordan River.

The deficit with these latter two explanations is that it seems like only twenty-five percent of the families (2 out of 8) of the tribe of Menashe chose to reside in the Gilad and the Bashan. According to the Chizkuni, it should have been fifty percent and according to the suggestion that it was their rejection that landed them as partners of destiny with Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuven, it should have been the entire tribe of Menashe. There might be a more fundamental reason provided by Divrei Hayamim that further enhances the explanation given above as to why the tribe of Menashe split along these lines. The Torah enumerates eight heads of households that comprise the tribe of Menashe, but it may be that they were not all of equal standing. The Ramban mentioned that possibly Machir and Gilad were smaller families compared to the others, but Divrei Hayamim offers a different insight as to why these two families might have been unique.¹⁴ In addition to his regular wives, Menashe took a non-Jewish (הארמיה) concubine (פילגש) as a wife. She gave birth to Machir, who was the father of Gilad. While it is difficult to completely square the information found in Divrei Hayamim with that found in the Torah,¹⁵ it clearly associates Machir and Gilad with the non-Jewish concubine of Menashe. This would explain why these two families in particular from the tribe of Menashe chose to join the other "rejected" parties on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Not only had their tribe been

⁶ רמב"ן עה"ת לב, לג

⁷ חזקוני במדבר לב, לג

⁸ עיין מלכים א יא, כט-לב שקריעת בגדים מסמלת פילוג

⁹ בראשית יג, א-יג

¹⁰ שם לו, ח-י

¹¹ דברי הימים א ה, א-ב

¹² שמעון גם נדחה ולא קבל נחלה והיה נספח לשבט יהודה וגם עיין דברי הימים א ד, לח-מג שחלק מהם עברו לעבר הירדן

¹³ גד היה בן זלפה שהיא היתה מבוגרת מבלהה, וגם השפחה של לאה, האחוז

המבוגרת וגם אם הבכור

¹⁴ דברי הימים א ז, יד-יט

¹⁵ עיין בראשית ק"ק שם

subordinated to that of Ephrayim, but they themselves had been born of questionable lineage that would have caused them to feel like outsiders and more comfortable breaking out alone in the Gilad and the Bashan.¹⁶

Until now all the suggestions have cast a negative light on the choice of the half tribe of Menashe to take their portion on the eastern side of the Jordan. Is it possible that it was not their decision at all, but rather imposed upon them by Moshe Rabbeinu? The first mention of the half tribe of Menashe is in the context of a Pasuk that begins, "and Moshe gave to them... (ויתן להם משה...)"¹⁷ This would imply that it was actually Moshe's initiative to allocate these lands to half of the tribe of Menashe. There is a hint to this in the Yerushalmi¹⁸ where the Gemara brings a dispute as to what is the source for the fact that Bikurim (the first fruits) are not brought from Ever HaYarden (the eastern side of the Jordan River). One suggestion is that it is because it is not a "land flowing with milk and honey (ארץ זבת חלב ודבש)". Another proposed source is that the Bikurim have to come from land "that You gave to me (אשר נתת לי)". The Gemara notes that the distinction between the two reasons is the half tribe of Menashe. According to the suggestion that only fruits from the Land of Milk and Honey can be brought up to the Temple in Jerusalem, then the entire eastern side of the Jordan River is disqualified. On the other hand, according to the reason that it has to be land granted to you and not taken by you, then only the land of the tribes of Reuven and Gad would be precluded, but not the lands of the half tribe of Menashe. This intimates that there is a qualitative difference between the inheritance of Reuven and Gad and that of the half tribe of Menashe. It could simply be that the lands of Reuven and Gad were conquered by the entire Bnei Yisrael and then requested by Reuven and Gad as their inheritance whereas the areas solicited by the half tribe of Menashe were conquered by those petitioning to settle in those lands rather than the whole Bnei Yisrael.¹⁹ Though, the more straightforward way to understand the Gemara is that Reuven and Gad requested to remain in their chosen lands whereas the half tribe of Menashe was allocated their land by Moshe Rabbeinu. The

question that needs to be answered now is why would Moshe split the tribe of Menashe and allocate a portion of their land on the eastern side of the Jordan River?

One possible explanation could be that which is described in Divrei Hayamim about the battles waged by Reuven, Gad and half the tribe of Menashe in their conquest to expand the lands of their inheritance.²⁰ They are described there as a large fighting force of fierce warriors. The eastern front, especially the northeastern front, was the area from which most of Bnei Yisrael's enemies attacked.²¹ They were border areas that were vulnerable and needed securing in order to protect the Land of Israel from foreign intrusion. Maybe, Moshe chose to add the half tribe of Menashe to the tribes of Reuven and Gad to reinforce the border, especially the northeast, with mighty warriors. This might also explain why it was so important to Moshe that these soldiers participate in the conquest of the Land of Israel and why their absence would have been so demoralizing.

On the other hand, Moshe Rabbeinu might have had a longer term strategic vision in mind when he compelled half of the tribe of Menashe to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moshe was possibly addressing the fear which is expressed by the two and a half tribes in Sefer Yehoshua.²² There they note that the natural geographical border could be used to disenfranchise those living on the eastern side of the Jordan River from being a part of the nation of God. In addition, Moshe might have also worried about the possibility of those on the eastern side of the Jordan River drifting away from God due to their physical distance and the topographical divide from the remainder of Bnei Yisrael and the centers of worship (Mishkan and Mikdash). The Pesukim in Divrei HaYamim note that this fear actually comes to fruition when those in Ever HaYarden reject God and worship the god's of the nations that God had cleared out from before them and that leads to the two and half tribes being exiled by Ashur before those on the western side of the Jordan River.²³ In order to mitigate this problem, Moshe Rabbeinu splits the tribe of Menashe in half in order to create a familial bond

¹⁶ עיין שופטים יא, א וברד"ק שם שגרשו יפתח מן בית אביו כי הוא היה בן פילגש (וגם היה מן הגלעד)

¹⁷ במדבר לב, לג וגם עיין יהושע יז, א

¹⁸ ירושלמי ביכורים א, ח

¹⁹ עיין במדבר לב, לט-מב וגם במשך חכמה במדבר לב, לג

²⁰ בני ראובן וגדי וחצי שבט מנשה מן בני חיל אנשים נשאי מגן וחרב ודרכי קשת ולמודי מלחמה ארבעים וארבעה אלף ושבע מאות וששים יצאי צבא... ובני חצי שבט מנשה ישבו בארץ מבשר עד בעל חרמון ושניר ונהר חרמון המה רבו... אנשים גבורי חיל אנשי שמות ראשים לבית אבותם (דברי הימים א ה, יח-כד)

²¹ אדום, מואב, עמון, ארם, אשור ובבל (חוץ מהפלישתים והמצרים)

²² ...ואם לא מדאגה מדבר עשינו את זאת לאמר מחר יאמרו בניכם לבנינו לאמר מה לכם וליקוק אלהי ישראל: וגבול נתן יקוק ביננו וביניכם בני ראובן ובני גד את הירדן אין לכם חלק ביקוק והשביתו בניכם את בנינו לבלתי ירא את יקוק... (יהושע כב, כא-כט)

²³ וימעלו באלהי אבותיהם ויזנו אחרי אלהי עמי הארץ אשר השמיד אלהים מפניהם: ויער אלהי ישראל את רוח פול מלך אשור ואת רוח תלגת פלנצר מלך אשור ויגלם לראובני ולגדי ולחצי שבט מנשה ויביאם לחלח וחרבור והרא ונהר גוזן עד היום הזה (דברי הימים א ה, כה-כז ובמלבים שם ומלכים ב טו, יז-כ, ובאיכה רבתי פתיחתא ה)

between those in the East and those in the West. He wisely created a natural familial connection to offset and overcome the geographical divide. It is possible that he chose the tribe of Menashe because of the contiguity of their border within Eretz Canaan to the two and half tribes on the eastern side, as well as the fact the northern Kingdom of Israel would be centered in the areas of Menashe.

There might also be two other reasons why Moshe chose the tribe of Menashe to be the bridge between those on the eastern and western side of the Jordan River. The first of which is another familial bond that would ensure a connection between those in the tribe of Menashe with Yehudah, the tribe of leadership. In Divrei Hayamim, it tells of a man from Yehudah, Calev, the son of Chetzron, who is recognized as the great grandfather of Betzalel, the architect of the Mishkan and who is identified by Chazal as being synonymous with the prince of the tribe of Yehudah, Calev ben Yefuneh.²⁴ The Pesukim say that he married the daughter of **Machir** Ben Menashe (the sister of **Gilad**) and that union produced Sguy who was the father of **Yair**.²⁵ Interestingly, the families that are specifically mentioned as receiving their portion amongst the half tribe of Menashe on the eastern side of the Jordan River are **Gilad, Machir and Yair**. That would mean that Yair was actually from the tribe of Judah, yet he was amongst those from the tribe of Menashe that had their inheritance in Eretz Yisrael. This would reinforce the idea that Moshe was trying to create a familial bridge that would tie those furthest away on the eastern side of the Jordan River to those in the political and spiritual center of Yehudah.

The last reason Moshe might have chosen the tribe of Menashe is because of something we learn from the story of the daughters of Tzafchad. When the Torah first tells of the petition of the daughters of Tzafchad to Moshe Rabbeinu that

they should not be disenfranchised from the Land of Israel just because their father had no sons, it describes their lineage all the way back to Yosef.²⁶ Rashi asks why does the verse have to tell us that Menashe is the son of Yosef, is that not obvious? He quotes from the Midrash that just like Yosef loved the Land of Israel so too his descendants loved the Land of Israel.²⁷ Yosef, in his last will and testament, because of his love for Eretz Yisrael, makes those gathered promise that when God redeems Bnei Yisrael from Egypt that they will ensure that his bones are transported along with them to the Land of Israel.²⁸ Similarly, his offspring showed that same love for the Land of Israel. While the men were saying let us appoint someone to return to Egypt, the women of Menashe were demanding a portion in Eretz Yisrael. It is this love of the Land of Israel found in the descendants of Yosef and manifest in the women of Menashe that Moshe seeks to capture when he splits the tribe of Menashe and awards a portion of their inheritance together with the tribes of Gad and Reuven. The magnetic draw of the Holy Land, their natural affinity for the Land, would keep those of Menashe tethered to the Land of Israel and help ensure a strong bond between those on the eastern and western sides of the Jordan River. The verse that tells us that Moshe awarded the lands of Sichon and Og to half the tribe of Menashe mentions that Menashe is the son of Yosef.²⁹ Similar to the case by Bnei Tzafchad, the linkage to Yosef is to conjure up the imagery of that indestructible bond between the Land of Israel and the descendants of Yosef.

Moshe's choice to place a portion of the tribe of Menashe on the eastern side of the Jordan River is a paradigm for future generations. No matter where we live and how far away we feel, this week's Parsha reminds us of that unbreakable natural bond between the People of Israel and the Land of Israel.

Shabbat Shalom

²⁴ דברי הימים א ב, יח-כג וברד"ק שם ועיין בבלי סוטה יא: ותמורה טז.
²⁵ לפי רש"י שם שחצרון רק לקח את בת מכיר כפילגש, זה גם יתאים למה שהסברנו למעלה שבני הפילגשים לקחו חלקם בעבר הירדן

²⁶ וַתִּקְרְבֵנָה בְּנוֹת צִלְפַּחַד בִּן חִפְרֵן בִּן גִּלְעָד בִּן מְכִיר בִּן מְנַשֶּׁה לְמִשְׁפַּחַת מְנַשֶּׁה בֶּן יוֹסֵף וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֹתָיו מִחֵלָה נָעָה וְחִגְלָה וְחִמְלָה וְתַרְצָה: (במדבר כז, א)

²⁷ למשפחות מנשה בן יוסף, כשם שחיבב יוסף את ארץ ישראל כך יוצאי חלציו חיבבו את ארץ ישראל (ספרי במדבר פסיקתא קלג)

²⁸ בראשית נ, כד-כה

²⁹ וַיִּתֵּן לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה לְבָנֵי גָד וְלְבָנֵי רְאוּבֵן וְלַחֲצִי שֵׁבֶט מְנַשֶּׁה בֶּן יוֹסֵף אֶת מַמְלַכַת סִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֲמֹרִי וְאֶת מַמְלַכַת עֹג מֶלֶךְ הַבְּשָׁן הָאֲרֶץ לְעָרֶיהָ בְּגִבְלַת עַרְי הָאֲרֶץ סְבִיבֵי: (במדבר לב, ג)