

Matot: Geulas Yisrael #61

The Ghosts of Menashe

Moshe Taragin

Things weren't evolving according to the original plan. After weathering thirty-eight long years in the desert, we finally arrived at the doorstep of the land of milk and honey. Expecting to be warmly greeted and courteously escorted into our homeland, we were in for a shock. One nation after another denied us passage home, forcing us to circumvent the east flank of Israel in search of a point of entry. Several armies confronted the Jews on the battlefield, further dispiriting the tired voyagers.

Shockingly history repeated itself. The revolting egl scenes reappeared at Pe'or, as a pagan carnival of sexual orgies raged throughout the Jewish camp. Twenty-four thousand lives were lost during this pointless disaster. The egl party had afflicted a young and frightened nation, but this debauchery was infecting a more mature people from whom greater loyalty was expected. To make matters worse, this nightmare was unfolding right on the threshold of Hashem's land, and not in some barren and nameless desert. Things were, clearly, not going according to plan.

Amidst all this mess, two and half tribes approach Moshe, snubbing the promised land. The recently captured East bank of the Jordan river was too fertile and the pasture lands were too verdant. After forty years of nomadic wandering, they just wanted to quietly settle down and raise their livestock. The land of Israel and the struggle of Jewish history was too demanding for them.

Still recalling the trauma of the meraglim thirty eight years earlier, Moshe is irate. The meraglim disgrace had sabotaged Jewish history and Moshe imagined that this current "unholy request" would be just as subversive.

Ultimately, Moshe had no choice but to accede to this inauspicious request. He carefully structures an agreement by which these outliers will first battle for the land alongside the rest of the nation, and only afterwards, return to their homesteads on the East Bank. At least the moral crisis was averted: the specter that some will fight, and others will luxuriate on the sidelines, is a moral outrage.

Beyond solving a moral atrocity, Moshe is left wondering how this appeal will affect the rest of the nation. Will they *ever* be excited to enter this land? Who or what will summon the necessary passion and sacrifice for a divine land which can only be secured through superhuman effort?

Stunningly, the solution comes from very same faction which caused the crisis to begin with. Five daughters of Menashe approach Moshe, demanding their deceased father's share in Israel. As their father Tzelaphchad bore no sons, these five daughters feared being denied their family's inheritance in Israel. The prospect of being deprived of land in Israel is unthinkable.

These five daughters are classic outsiders. Decades earlier, their criminal father had passed ignominiously. According to some he was the "mekoshesh" who publicly violated Shabbat and was executed. According to others, he was a member of the ma'apilim, who charged into Israel against divine instructions and were summarily annihilated. It must not have been pleasant for these women to acknowledge their father's past, but their desire for the land of Israel was too powerful. Additionally, in that period of history, women were not, typically, involved in legal negotiations. It must have been awkward for them to approach Moshe and Sanhedrin and lodge their petition, but their passion for Israel blazed too deeply.

This was all uncharted territory. There was absolutely no precedent for women receiving parcels of land in Israel. It would have been more convenient and far less complicated for these five women to join their fellow Menashe citizens, and disappear into the East bank of the Jordan. Land there was more plentiful and not as tightly regulated as it was in Israel proper. Yet, against all odds, but with unquenchable passion they crusaded for their portion in the land of Hashem.

Five lone courageous women altered the course of Jewish history, by rebooting public excitement for the land of Israel. Witnessing their devotion to Israel, we were ready, once again to return home. The same tribe which had caused the crisis, solved the crisis.

Assimilationists and Zionists

3000 years later, as we were once again perched on the doorstep of Israel, history would repeat itself. The 19th century offered appealing new options for European

Jewry. The Enlightenment removed the discriminatory policies and legal restrictions, which had prevented Jews from joining European society. Responding to these new opportunities, many European Jews asserted a doctrine of *assimilation*: we were no longer a *separate nation*, divided from our surrounding hosts by distinct national identity, customs and culture. Jews should integrate into the host nation just like any other religious minority, but not as a separate nation. Much of this secular agenda was directed against traditional Jews, whose "backward and fossilized habits" bred hostility to Jews in general. These assimilationists found the cultural pasturelands of Europe too attractive, campaigning for integration into Europe, at the expense of our historic dream of returning to our Israel. Who would defend Jewish national identity against this assimilationists program and who would propel European Jewry back home?

Not surprisingly, the solution, once again came from the very same group which threatened our return home. Herzyl and secular Zionism announced that we *are a separate* nation with a distinct culture and a historic homeland far away from the boulevards and promenades of Europe. Needless to say, the assimilationists weren't enthused by these claim,s which they viewed as "sheer folly, a dangerous craze,". As an assimilationist scolded Herzyl: "Hungarian Jews neither wanted to be, nor could be anything but Hungarians." Or as a Hungarian assimilationist declared: "Every endeavor of Hungarian Jewry is diametrically opposed to the trends of Zionism. It [Hungarian Jewry] does not dream of a Jewish kingdom but wants to merge with Magyardom [Hungary] while maintaining intact its ancestral religion." Undeterred by the integrationists, Herzyl sparked our imagination and steered us back home.

Once again, factions of Jews refused the divine offer of return. Once again, we were shrinking at the prospect of inhabiting the land of God. Admittedly, the concept of living before G-d is overwhelming and causes us to flinch. Once again, though the energy for our national return emerged from within the very community which was. From within Secular Zionists arose to defend our national spirit and champion our return. The daughters of Menashe reappeared in the 19th century Europe to defend our land and our spirit.

Whenever Jews flinch in the face of a divine invitation, the daughters of Menashe are there to defend the great love between people and land.

The ghosts of these brave women always walk us home.