

## The First Jewish Diaspora

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The parsha describes the request of the tribes of Reuven and Gad to forgo an inheritance in the Land of Israel in exchange for the lands of Ya'azer Gilad that Bnei Yisrael had already conquered. Moshe Rabbenu is very hesitant to allow this. He agrees only after the tribes promise to send their men as soldiers to lead the conquest of Israel and allow the other Jews to settle.

There are various explanations for Moshe's uneasiness. In her studies on Bamidbar, Nechama Leibovitz takes the position that Moshe opposed the tribes' prioritization of possessions over ideology. They chose an easy life in a fertile land that could support their livestock. This is instead of a less lucrative and more dangerous life conquering and settling the land of Israel. Ramban emphasizes Moshe's fear that the tribes' decision not to enter the land would demoralize the rest of the nation the way the spies had 40 years earlier.

The tribes of Reuven and Gad keep their promise. They fight throughout the conquest. Once Bnei Yisrael have divided up the land, the tribes' soldiers head back to their territory on the other side of the Jordan river. Sefer Yehoshua (chapter 22) describes the events. They provide another perspective on Moshe's hesitance in our parsha.

One of the very first acts of the tribes after taking leave of their fellow Jews is to set up a massive altar on the bank of the Jordan. The sight of this enrages the Jews who stayed in Israel. They suspect that the altar is for idolatrous sacrifices. The Israelite Jews prepared for war and send a group of messengers to investigate. They ask the Giladean Jews why they are rebelling against God, something that would bring God's wrath on the whole Jewish people. If it is the impure land they are living in that's influencing them to do this, then let them come and live in the land of God (Israel). The Giladean Jews reply that this was the furthest thing from their intention. They were afraid that future generations of Israelite Jews would deny the Giladean's claim to be part of the Jewish people. The altar wasn't for use. It was a testimony to the Giladean Jews' eternal commitment to God and claim to Jewish nationhood. This explanation satisfies the Israelite Jews, and resolves the tension between the two groups.

The Israelite and Giladean Jews have widely divergent points of view in this story. From a mindset perspective the Giladean Jews became the first Jewish diaspora. The Israelites regarded them as living in an impure land, and at some distance from God. The Giladean Jews viewed themselves as full members of the Jewish people. They were concerned about being excluded and emphasized their place in the nation and as servants of God. This divergence of perspective began as soon the Giladean Jews crossed the Jordan. Perhaps this was Moshe's concern in our parsha.

Moshe's condition to the tribes indicates how to bridge the two divided perspectives. The years that the Giladean Jews spent fighting for their brethren cemented a sense of national unity. This is clear on both sides of the dialogue in Sefer Yehoshua. The sense of a shared identity and historical fate, coupled with earnest and open dialogue, allowed the sides to

understand each other's perspectives and prevented a tragedy.  
Shabbat Shalom

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