



A Startling Request

At first glance, the request of Reuven, Gad and part of the tribe of Menashe seemed quite reasonable. They had many flocks of sheep and cattle, and the Transjordan territory had great areas of pasture, so it was a logical choice for their inheritance. Yet how could they justify this petition if it meant not entering the Promised land? Let us explore their mindset, where they erred, and why Moshe Rabbeinu was disappointed by their appeal.

Rav Dessler in *Michtav MeEliyahu* explains that these tribes understood that every element, feature and living thing is put in this world to serve Hashem. Through raising their flocks of sheep, they would elevate the sparks of the Divine in the world and draw down holiness. In no way did these tribes

disparage the land, they simply felt they could achieve their purpose in a different region. Indeed, Moshe Rabbeinu, who was aware of their mission, was not upset by their request, rather he was concerned that the other tribes would become disheartened and lose their momentum in moving forward to Eretz Yisrael. Chazal note that Hashem intended to give these tribes this land. Their misstep was asking for it impetuously. They were therefore punished and sent into exile many years before the rest of the ten tribes.

Rav Nebenzal in his *Sichot* on the *parashah* draws a powerful lesson from the tribes' attitude. They appreciated their holy mission vis a vis their sheep, however, they gave less consideration to the 'owners of the sheep.' They failed to reflect on what would be best for their own children, to ensure they would be raised in the best conditions for their spiritual well-being. This is a challenge we often face; what to prioritize when we have two important responsibilities. For example, when one comes late to a wedding, does one spend time eating the leftover food from the smorgasbord, arguing that it is part of the *seudat mitzvah* or does one go directly to the *chuppah* to greet the *Shechniah* hovering over the new young couple? Sometimes people invest a lot of money in beautifying a shul building yet neglect to gather the necessary funds to



support the teachers who will give shiurim and spread Torah in that very building. These tribes had exalted spiritual values; nonetheless they overlooked their main spiritual focus.

The importance of spiritual priorities is further seen at the end of the *parashah*. Rav Nebenzal notices that the Torah makes a point to tell us the new names the tribes gave to the places that they captured. In changing the names, the people were infusing these places with holiness. We ought to realize how many times we call a city by its name and what that simple act achieves. In referring to a place by its Jewish name, its spiritual essence comes to the fore and eradicates the previous idolatrous influence. Truly a powerful increase of *kevod shamayim*. ■

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