



Parshas Matos-Masei

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## A Taste of Torah

### The Other Side of the Story

by Rabbi Mordechai Fleisher

Following the conquest of the mighty kings Sichon and Og, the Jewish People found themselves the proud owners of a large swath of land on the eastern side of the Jordan River. This open area was perfect for raising animals, and the tribes of Reuven and Gad owned lots of animals. They approached Moshe and requested that they be allowed to settle in what becomes known as *Ever Hayarden* (the Other Side of the Jordan). After discussion, clarification, and negotiation, Moshe and these two tribes came to an agreement: They would settle this land, but the soldiers of Reuven and Gad would accompany the Jewish People into the Land of Canaan during the years of war and subsequent settling of *Eretz Yisrael*.

While the Torah tells us that these tribes' motivation for taking *Ever Hayarden* was to provide pasture for their large flocks, Moshe, in his blessings to the Tribes before his death at the end of the Torah, gives another reason for Gad's interest. Moshe states (Devarim 33:21), "He chose the first portion for himself, for that is where the lawgiver's plot is hidden..." Rashi explains that the "first portion" refers to Gad's decision to take a portion in the lands of Sichon and Og, the first conquest of the Jewish People. "The lawgiver's plot," says Rashi, refers to the hidden burial place of Moshe, the lawgiver who brought the Torah down from Heaven.

This reason indicates that the Tribe of Gad had a special connection with Moshe. This notion is further strengthened by the opening words of this section of the Torah (Matos 32:1), "*Umikneh rav*." Literally, these words mean "And an abundance of cattle," and the verse thus reads "And an abundance of cattle to the Children of Reuven and Gad - very great," providing the reasoning behind their request for the lands of Sichon and Og. However, a chassid by the name of Reb Peretz of Peshischa once told his rebbe, the Yid Hakadosh (Rabbi Yaakov Yitzchak Rabinowitz of Peshischa; 1766-1813), that these words can also be understood as saying "and an acquisition of the teacher" (The word *mikneh* can mean "cattle" or "an acquisition," while the word "*rav*" can mean "abundance" or "a teacher"), indicating that

it wasn't the abundance of animals but the special connection these two Tribes had with Moshe that led them to desire a portion near his eventual burial place. Rabbeinu Bachya notes that in fact, it was the Tribe of Gad that was primarily interested in this arrangement, while the Tribe of Reuven came on board with the Tribe of Gad; this would dovetail well with the Tribe of Gad being singled out by Moshe as having this special relationship.

What is the connection between the simple and homiletic interpretation of this verse, and what is the special connection of the Tribe of Gad with Moshe?

Rabbi Fishel Mael in his *Sefer Shivtei Yisrael* notes that in the aforementioned blessings that Moshe bestowed upon the Tribe of Gad, Moshe also noted that the soldiers of Gad were so mighty that when they struck an enemy soldier, they removed the head and arm in one blow. This is a rather gory description and one could be forgiven for wondering why Moshe saw fit to discuss this; clearly, there is a deeper message present.

Our Sages tell us (Sotah 44a) that when the Torah teaches that a Jewish soldier who feared that his sins could be a liability when in need of merits during battle (see Devarim 20:8 and Rashi *ibid. s.v. hayarei*), it refers to a sin as subtle as speaking between the donning of the arm tefillin and head tefillin. Why is this shortcoming singled out? The Vilna Gaon draws a connection between this teaching and the blessing bestowed upon Gad, who took the arm and head with one blow during battle. *Sefer Shivtei Yisrael* explains the arm tefillin represent one's actions, while the head tefillin represent one's thoughts. There should be no interruption between one's thoughts and deeds; rather, once one has decided upon the proper course of action, he must act decisively and without hesitation. In war, clarity is vital to success, while hesitation and uncertainty are a fatal flaw. One who speaks between the arm and head tefillin manifests a lack of decisiveness in his personal spiritual growth, and is thus unqualified to be part of a Jewish army whose fuel is spiritual fitness. The members of Gad, however, had such clarity of purpose that there was no concern of

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## Stories for the Soul

### Return Policy

A soldier in the IDF was home on break from duty. During his stay at home, there was a dispute in the household, and the soldier shot and killed his own father. For various reasons, the soldier was sentenced to only five years of prison. While he was sitting in jail, he suffered from feelings of regret and began to take on observance of mitzvos, eventually becoming a full *ba'al teshuva*. Some time later, he was transferred to the prison for religious prisoners. In shul one morning, the prisoner expressed his wish to say *kaddish* for his father, but the other prisoners, aware of why the man was in jail, ran from the shul and refused to participate in the man's *kaddish*. "Should we answer *amein* to the *kaddish* of a son who killed his father?" they complained to the rabbi of the prison.

The rabbi consulted with Rabbi Yosef Shalom Eliashiv (1910-2012), who ruled that the prisoners had not acted properly. The gates of *teshuvah* are never locked, he said, and therefore even someone who has committed such a terrible crime but had sincerely repented is accepted in Heaven, and others must respond to his *kaddish*.

When the man was eventually released from prison, he applied to a yeshiva for *ba'alei teshuvah*, but the heads of the yeshiva refused to accept him, saying that they didn't want to accept a murderer. Rabbi Eliashiv again ruled that their behavior was inappropriate, reiterating his previous position that the man had sincerely repented and should therefore be allowed into the yeshiva.

In this week's parsha, the Torah lays out the idea that one who unintentionally murdered another must go to an *ir miklat*, a city of refuge. One reason for this is that exile serves as an atonement for the act of murder. Murder, be it intentional or unintentional, is one of the gravest sins a person can commit. However, in the absence of a properly ordained Jewish court to judge and convict one who murders, other avenues of atonement are still available, and one can rehabilitate despite the grievous nature of his act.