

“Shared Israeliteness”

Parashat Mattot-Masei 5781

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It might seem strange that a country of about 8,500 square miles, a country that takes up a microscopic .014% of the available land on this planet should have not one but two national leaders. Surprising that is, until you consider that this tiny little sliver of land is the country called Israel. On Thursday of this week, our beloved little homeland swore in its 11th President, Isaac Herzog, or as he is affectionately known, Bougie Herzog. The Israeli presidency is a single term of seven years, and the president is elected not by popular vote, but by the Knesset. Presidents are elected to be heads of state, in distinction to Prime Ministers, who govern day-to-day. Israel’s presidency was established as a symbol of unity for Israel’s diverse population, a statesman who is supposed to reflect Israel’s highest values. The outgoing President is Reuven Rivlin, and I, along with many others, wondered how he could possibly fill the shoes of his predecessor, the legendary statesman and Nobel Peace Prize winner Shimon Peres. But President Rivlin proved to be a remarkable unifier, a healer, even a visionary. After his first year on the job President Rivlin gave one of his more memorable speeches which came to be known around Israel as “*Ne’um Ha’shvatim*,” or the Speech of the Tribes. Of course the word *shvatim* comes straight from the Torah, and is the biblical term used to describe the original 12 Tribes of Israel. In his speech of the Tribes, Rivlin identified 4 new tribes among the nation of Israel: *Chilonim*, secular Jews, *datim le’umim*, religious Zionists, *haredim*, the ultra-Orthodox, and *Aravim*, Israeli Arabs. In a courageous, prophetic speech he urged these four modern tribes of Israel to view each other not with suspicion or mistrust, but to acknowledge that each one is integral to Israeli society. He used the phrase: “*Yisraeliyut meshutefet*,” a shared Israeliness that must unite all these tribes in order to make progress and to seek a better future for the nation. When the new president addressed the Knesset on Thursday, he thanked Reuven Rivlin for his leadership and said: “you painfully identify the fragmented pieces of Israeli society; you put a mirror in front of us, even if what we saw did not always please us.”

I love the pageantry of inaugurations, American inaugurations, Israeli inaugurations...and I watched the footage of Israel’s presidential inauguration last week on YouTube. As I heard thee tributes and reflections, I thought about the parasha this week, and the mirror it is putting in front of us. Moses is approached by the leaders of two of the 12 tribes, Re’uven and Gad. These tribes had acquitted huge numbers of cattle. I did a little bovine research, and there is actually formula that cattle ranchers use to determine how much land they need to raise their cows. On average, each animal requires around 4-5 acres...that’s per animal, to have enough space to eat and graze. Now the Torah says that the animals possessed by Re’uven and Gad were *atzum me’od*...What does that mean? Vast in number, a huge quantity, a tremendous amount. Consider that they 36,000 cattle, 337,500 sheep and 30,5000 donkeys in the recent campaign against the Midianites. That’s in addition to the herds they already had. You need wide open grassland to raise cattle, and the Re’uven and Gad found just that sort of landscape, east of the

Jordan River. East of the Jordan means not in the Promised Land, not in *Eretz Yisrael*. They tell Moses, Eretz Mikneh Hi, this is cattle country, let us stay here and raise our herds, rather than crossing the Jordan where it's less suitable. To put it lightly, Moses flies off the handle. How could you possibly not want to go to Eretz Yisrael? How could you abandon your people when they are about to go to war to take possession of the land? He is furious, fuming. But why? God already promised that all the wars to conquer the land would be won... That God would literally fight the battles of the Jewish people. Moses didn't "need Re'uven and Gad," for the army. Moses didn't need their manpower or forces of these tribes. The battle was a fait accompli. The land would become the inheritance of the Jewish people. So what is Moses so disturbed about?

Rabbi Shalom Rosner, who teaches at Yeshivat Kerem B'Yavneh, near Ashdod, writes that "Moses feared that that if these two tribes did not participate with the rest of the nation in the war, they would miss participating in a defining national event. They would likely feel distant and disconnected from the rest of B'nai Yisrael."¹ This reminds me of President Rivlin's phrase *Yisraeliyut Meshutefet*, an identity of shared Israeliness, or in terms of the Bible shared *Israeliteness*. To Moses's delight and reassurance, the tribes of Re'uven and Gad promised that they would fight alongside their brothers and sisters for the land of Israel, even if they were going to settle beyond its borders. This is what shared Israeliteness demanded of them.

I wish more Jews today would ask what it means to share in the identity, no the destiny of b'nai Yisrael. What is our *Yisraeliyut meshutefet*, our shared responsibility for our fellow Jews, both those who live in the land of Israel, and those of us, the modern day Reuvenites and Gadites who live outside the land. In the face of rising antisemitism and anti-Zionism, what is demanded of us at this moment? Tomorrow I will be downtown at one o'clock, on the west side of the U.S. Capitol, hopefully with many other Jews and allies from around the country, to demonstrate that antisemitism has no place in this great nation. I hope many of you will join me there. But it takes a lot more than a rally, as important as rallies are. A true partnership among the Jewish people, a sense of shared responsibility cannot be episodic or occasional. It can't only be called upon when there is a war or a crisis. There's a fascinating little detail toward the end of the parasha. The original request to settle east of the Jordan, as I mentioned, was from the tribes of Re'uven and Gad. But when Moses actually designates the land, the Torah says:

*Vayitein lahem Moseh livnei Gd, v'livnei Reuven, v'lechatzi shevet Menashe ben Yosef.*² There's a new detail here! Moses gave that land east of the Jordan not only to the tribes of Gad and Reuven, but also to half of the tribe of Menashe. Why is that? And why is it that the tribe of Menashe is described as shevet Menashe ben Yosef? The tribe of Menashe son of Joseph? Invoking the name of Joseph reminds us of a Hebrew, a Jew who maintained his Jewish identity even while he lived in and served Egypt. Invoking Joseph reminds us of a Jew who made his

¹ Rabbi Shalom Rosner, "Shalom Rav, Insights on the Weekly Parasha, v.2," p. 310

² Numbers 32:33

brothers promise him that he would be buried not in Egypt but in Eretz Yisrael. And invoking Menashe just one week after we read in Parashat Pinchas about the daughters of Tzelophehad, who were from that very tribe, and argued to Moses that the fact that they are women should invalidate their ability to inherit their father's land, because they were so committed to that land. Moses seems to dispatch half of Menashe to live among the Gadites and the Reubenites to remind them of their connection to the entirety of the Jewish people! To prevent the Jordan River from becoming a wedge that divided our people, our nation, our shutfut, our sacred partnership with all of *b'nai Yisrael*.³ We all need a *chatzi menashe* in our lives, a regular, consistent reminder that we are all responsible for each other...religious and secular, right wingers and left wingers, Diaspora Jews and Israeli Jews...When we remember that, when we live that, when we act on that, we will be so much stronger as a result.

Adonai oz le'amo yitein, Adonai yivareich et amo va'shalom... May God give strength to the Jewish people, and may God bless the Jewish people with peace.

³ Rabbi Shalom Rosner, "Shalom Rav, Insights on the Weekly Parasha, v.2," p. 310