

THE REUVEN/GAD SYNDROME

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The fourth book of the Torah - Bamidbar - concludes in this week's public Torah reading. The new generation of Jews, no longer the slave generation that left Egypt hastily and constantly longed to return there when faced with problems and difficulties, stands poised to enter the Land of Israel and fulfill God's covenant with Avraham. However here again, narrow personal interests becloud the general picture and weaken the necessary national resolve.

It is no longer the so-called fleshpots of Egypt that beckon and entice. It is rather the pasture lands east of the Jordan River that force the cattle raising tribes of Reuven and Gad to plead with Moshe that they not be compelled to cross the Jordan and enter the Land of Israel.

Moshe's initial reaction to their request is one of shock and bitter disappointment. He reminds them that their parents' generation was destroyed in the desert for disparaging the Land of Israel and refusing to struggle on its behalf. And he warns them that they have apparently learned little from that bitter event in Jewish history.

Here they stand making the same error in judgment and vision that the previous generation did. Moshe's greatest frustration is that the Jewish people can't see past their cattle, their personal gain, an imagined short term benefit and their refusal to acknowledge the grandeur of the Lord's long term vision for themselves and their land. It is this blindness of spirit and unwillingness to appreciate the uniqueness of Israel, the people and the land that Moshe bemoans.

But all of this temporary gain comes with cost and a price. Separated from their brethren west of the Jordan, the tribes of Gad and Reuven have a difficult time defending themselves and are the first tribes to be exiled. They produce no major leaders or heroes for the Jewish people and their dreams of prosperity and material success are only fleetingly realized.

Criticized bitterly and eternally by the prophetess Devorah for standing aside in an hour of national Jewish peril, they become the model of individual Jewish indifference to the general cause of Jewish survival and success. In our current world they unfortunately have many heirs and disciples. Mordecai warned Esther not to stand away and be passive in the face of Haman and his decrees. He warned her that when the Jews would somehow escape from the troubles she and her family would be doomed to extinction in the Jewish story if she allowed her narrow self-interest to rule over her national duty for the preservation of Israel.

Today, also, narrow self-interests govern many Jews - even leaders who seemingly should know

better - in their attitudes, policies and behavior regarding the existential problems that face the Jewish people and the Jewish state. The Talmud teaches us that Jerusalem always needs advocates for its cause. That certainly is the case in the generation and times in which we find ourselves currently. Jewish apathy and alienation are our enemies. The allure of current political correctness in policy and mindset is misleading and dangerous. We too stand at the cusp of great adventures and opportunities. We should avoid the Reuven/Gad syndrome.

Shabat shalom

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Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com