

COMMENTS PRIOR TO READING OF PARASHAT MATTOT, 7/19/14

This parasha puts into sharp relief the erstwhile core question tugging at the souls of the most passionate American Jewish Zionists. We believe that the State of Israel is the dawn of our redemption as a people, the chief laboratory for our tradition going forward, the locus for Jews to be unabashed and public as Jews, the place to secure our Jewish future. So why aren't we there?

For some, times of crisis in Israel relieve this core tension, if only temporarily. For others, the tension is exacerbated. Marshalling funds, responding to misleading media reports, explaining Israel's challenges to those who don't understand them -- in some sense, we participate in the war effort. We come closer to Israel at these moments. But do we really?

A number of B'nai Israel teens and college students -- Jeremy Rosenberg, Madeline Kaufman, Maxwell Singer, Hanna Berlin, amongst others -- now have a much better sense of what it means to participate in the Israeli endeavor. The benefits and glories are quite real to them -- the beauties of the land and its history -- and its commitment to protecting life, as Hanna is experiencing as a volunteer for Magen David Adom. But just as real to them now are the persistent dangers and worries -- which time in shelters, and the distressing news about fallen Israeli soldiers, certainly drive home.

So what keeps us here? Real life. The desires and demands of our tribes, units and families -- which walk tremulously beside the demands of our whole nation, Am Yisrael.

For the Reubenites and Gadites, it's all well and good that B'nai Yisrael will conquer Eretz Yisrael. But what will be in it for us parochially? Where will our plentiful cattle thrive? Where will we be able to raise more cattle? What will we do to feed our tribesmen when the manna stops raining down from the heavens?

These two tribes assert, in contemporary terms, their states' rights. Moshe panics and doubts their commitment to the federal charge – conquering the land of Israel – and the source of that charge, God. Agreement come through intense negotiations, though there remains a gap in worldview between Moses and these tribes, particularly when it comes to the sacred, Godly, nature of the responsibility of conquering the land. The Reubenites and Gadites will inherit land east of the Jordan, but must fulfill their obligation to participate in the conquest of the land.

And, so it is for us, to a point. We are committed to Am Yisrael, but we are also committed to our parts of the Am, our “tribes,” and their particular values. Our families in the United States and Canada. Our egalitarian religious values. Jewish religious pluralism. Our right and duty to make a living, and to feel self-esteem in that endeavor. Legitimate factors keep us on the east side of the Jordan.

Continuing the parallelism, the question, however, is -- how do we participate in the continuing “conquest” and defense of the land? They are charges for all of Amy Yisrael, not just Israeli citizens, and they will always be so – realities that we are duty-bound to pursue just as much as we pursue the ideal of peace. We need to be there for Am Yisrael, fulfilling these sacred charges, in crisis and in moments

of relative quiet, while also tending to our affairs on the east side of Jordan, like the tribes of Reuben and Gad.

Crisis, for most, helps us cut through existential tensions. As we come close to Israel during its time of war and crisis, let us stay present when the current crisis ends, and when the relative quiet alluringly provokes our unacceptable distance.