

DRASH FOR FRIDAY JULY 16, 2004

By Barry Wendell
Beth Chayim Chadashim

This week we read two selections from the Torah, Matot and Masei. These are the last two sections in the Book of Numbers - Bamidbar. Next week we will begin Deuteronomy, another indication, as summer wanes, that the High Holy Days are near. Quite a lot happens in these two parshot. Go read the text this weekend, or come to the Traditional Egalitarian Minyan tomorrow, where we will discuss the section in detail.

In Matot, the tribal warriors have just come back from conquering the Midianites. They are ready to cross the Jordan and conquer the Promised Land. In chapter 32, the Reubenites and the Gaddites come to Moses and Eleazar, who is now the High Priest. They want the land just conquered, east of the Jordan; it is good land for cattle. Moses is furious. "The LORD was incensed at Israel, and for forty years He made them wander in the wilderness, until the whole generation that had provoked the LORD's displeasure was gone. And now you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to LORD's wrath against Israel", Plautt translates.

The leaders of the two tribes agree to be "shock-troops" in the Promised Land. They will help with the conquest, but they would prefer to live outside the land that God promised. Moses calms down, and assigns them the former kingdoms of Sihon, king of the Amorites, and Og, king of Bashan.

There's a Midrash that Reuben and Gad were the first tribes to be exiled in the Babylonian conquest, and that this was their punishment for not settling in the Promised Land. Maybe. I prefer to think that they were just watching out for themselves. They are criticized in the Talmud for putting their material interests above the interest of the community.

I'm not sure it was only material interests - or that you can separate material from other, possibly spiritual interests. Maybe knowing only the desert, they needed to stop at the first good land they found. Maybe they saw how the community was run and decided to leave. Moses and Eleazar, and Eleazar's son Pinchas, could be authoritarian and difficult. The other tribes weren't exactly pleasant to be around.

When I was 24 and my sister 21, our parents bought a new, larger house in Baltimore County between Pikesville and Randallstown. My sister was just finishing college, and I had moved back in with them after dropping out of grad school in New Orleans, and more importantly, escaping from my first real boyfriend. Within a few months, my sister was teaching school in Prince George's County, the poorer Maryland suburb of Washington, D.C., and I had secured a state government job, and had moved to a semi-Bohemian, partly gay neighborhood near downtown Baltimore. My parents wondered why we couldn't be like the young married Jewish couples with babies who had bought most of the houses in their neighborhood. We were raised in a ghettoized

Jewish community, like the refugees from Egypt, only materially well off. Our parents had been traumatized by anti-Semitism and the Holocaust. They expected us to stay in the community and live by its rules. We felt stifled there and fled for our lives. I imagine the people of Gad and Reuben felt the same way.

I eventually defined my own Judaism, and found , in Los Angeles, a place where it was possible to be socially Jewish without a traditional marriage and kids in Hebrew school. And at least at BCC, a place where diversity could be celebrated, not treated as a threat.

My sister still lives in Prince George's County with her husband who is not Jewish, and their son Evan, who is. Evan is in a gifted magnet in a public school. There are no other Jewish children in his class, although he has a few friends from the small temple in their neighborhood. Some of the kids endure a long bus ride to attend a Jewish day school in Montgomery County, the preferred Maryland suburb. Evan's school friends are Korean, Indian, African, African-American and European-American. His Bar Mitzvah is next weekend at their tiny shul. Evan at first was reluctant to endure this ritual. It 's not something everyone does, as it was for me. I hope that it has become more meaningful for him because it is a rare thing in his community, and not something done out of habit.

I would like to think that the tribes of Reuben and Gad, and the half tribe of Manasseh, settled there east of the Jordan, found a way to be Jewish in a way that worked for them, just as my sister and I found our way back to Judaism once we had fled Pikesville. And maybe when I see pictures or hear or read about people in Jordan and Iraq, perhaps instead of thinking of them as potential enemies, I'll recognize the descendents of Gad and Asher.

Shabbat Shalom