

The tribes of Reuben and Gad rank 9th and 10th respectively relative to the rest of the tribes of Israel in terms of population. But evidently, they had large herds of livestock:

וּמִקְנֵה רֹב הָיָה לְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וּלְבְנֵי גָד עֲצוּם מְאֹד. (במ' לב:א)

Now **many** livestock belonged to the Sons of Reuben and to the Sons of Gad belonged an exceedingly **mighty** amount. (Num. 32:1)

As we know, every word in the Torah is chosen carefully. But the presence of this particular word-pair here - **רב-עצום** - raises our curiosity. **רב-rav** means **many**. **רב-עצום-atzum** means **mighty**. Usually **רב-עצום** refers to a massive throng of **people**. Here though, it refers to a massive throng of **animals**. **רב-many** elicits **alarm**; **רב-עצום-mighty** elicits **fear** of being conquered. Thus, when Pharaoh says to his people:

הִנֵּה עַם בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל רַב וְעֲצוּם מְמֹנֵי (שמות א:ט)

Here, (this) people of the Children of Israel is **numerous** and **mightier** than we! (Exod. 1:9)

he is expressing his **alarm** at the rapid increase in Israel's population in Egypt as well as his **fear** that, once mobilized as a force, that large population of foreigners would:

וְנוֹסַף גַּם הוּא עַל שְׂנְאֵינוּ וְנִלְחֵם בָּנוּ (שמות א:י)

be added to our enemies and make war upon us (Exod. 1:10)

Two weeks ago, in Parashat Balak, we read a similar observation of Israel's vast population prompting this response from Moab:

וַיָּגֵר מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי הָעָם מְאֹד כִּי רַב הוּא וַיִּקְצֹץ מוֹאָב מִפְּנֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל. וְעַתָּה לָכֵה נָא אֶרֶץ לִי אֵת הָעָם הַזֶּה כִּי עֲצוּם הוּא מְמֹנִי... (במ' כב:ג, ו)

and Moab was exceedingly **alarmed** by the people, since they were so **many**; they felt **dread** before the Children of Israel...So-now, pray go, curse this people for me, for it is too **mighty** for me! (Num. 22:3-6)

To reiterate, everywhere else, **רב-עצום** refers to large numbers of **people**. But this is the only instance where the word-pair **רב-עצום** refers to **animals**! What's up with that? **As the 9th and 10th largest tribes, Reuben and Gad did not have substantial populations. On the other hand, because the Torah uses רב-עצום to describe their herds it is telling us that they are serious economic entities to be reckoned with. As herders they punched way above their weight.** Other than raising livestock, and maybe some light household crafts - clothing, pottery, wood-gathering etc.- Israel in the desert had no economy to speak of. **But the fact that the Torah singles out Reuben and Gad for their herds means that at some point they made that a tribal strategy to build herds so that they could be taken seriously. In the absence of any other distinguishing asset, possessing**

large herds would have been a very significant way to differentiate themselves from the other tribes.¹ Bottom line: all the other tribes probably had their own average-sized herds. But the fact that Reuben and Gad were able to build large herds despite their relatively small populations, was due to a concerted objective and strategy. This is not as farfetched as it sounds. After all, we already have a good biblical example of someone who became a shepherding super-power. When Jacob worked with Laban, he made a deal with him to take as his back-wages all **the speckled, spotted and dark animals** (Gen. 30:32-34). Through careful breeding, Jacob was able to create a very large and uniquely identifiable herd. He utilized all of his skill and ingenuity and tended to the animals closely to protect them from predators, diseases, and theft. Because of a clear objective and a concerted strategy, he managed to build a substantial herd. Likewise, Reuben and Gad also produced large herds because it was their strategic goal. But if Jacob's objective was to achieve a measure of comeuppance on Laban, what would have been Reuben and Gad's objective in building a large herd? **It was to claim the territory east of the Jordan River as their own tribal territory.** Once the area had been conquered, they decided that they wanted to create a distinct and separate enclave parallel to the rest of Israel on the **west** side of the Jordan. They figured that the **East-Bank** was up for grabs and that they would be the first ones to lay a claim on that territory. The building of large herds was part of a strategy to create their own province or statelet that would exist in tandem with the other tribes. Their strategy is revealed in their elaborate, yet very direct petition to what we could call the **National Executive Council of Ancient Israel**: Moses, Elazar, the (new) High Priest, and the tribal chieftains. Their bottom line is this: **the land east of the Jordan is good pastureland, and we have herds.** Here is the text:

וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי גָד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אֱלֶעָזֶר הַכֹּהֵן וְאֶל נְשִׂאֵי הַעֵדָה לֵאמֹר. עֲשֻׂרוֹת וְדִיבּוֹן וַיֵּעָזֶר וְנִמְרָה וְחֶשְׁבוֹן וְאַלְעָלָה וּשְׁבָם וְנֶבֹ וְבֶעֶן. הָאֶרֶץ אֲשֶׁר הָפָה ה' לִפְנֵי עַדְתִּי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶרֶץ מִקְנֵה הוּא וְלַעֲבָדֶיךָ מִקְנֵה. וַיֹּאמְרוּ אִם מִצְאֵנוּ חֵן בְּעֵינֶיךָ יִתֵּן אֵת הָאֶרֶץ הַזֹּאת לַעֲבָדֶיךָ לְאֶחָזָה אֵל תַּעֲבֹרֵנוּ אֶת הַיַּרְדֵּן. (במ' לב:ב-ה).

The Gadites and the Reubenites came to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains of the community, and said: Ataroth, Dibon, Jazer, Nimrah, Heshbon, Elealeh, Sebam, Nebo, and Beon— **the land that the LORD has conquered for the community of Israel is land for herding. and your servants have herds. If we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a holding; do not make us cross the Jordan!** (Num. 32:2-5).

¹ One can think of an analogous situation where a small country tries to punch above its weight in the world economy. For example, Israel, which has a relatively small population, and lacks large deposits of natural resources has developed, during the last four decades, itself as a world technological power, optimizing its

human resources to effect substantial innovations in a multitude of areas. This is the result of a deliberate national strategy. For example, in water resource management Israel is a world power because of innovations in recycling, conservation, desalination, drip irrigation and other advanced technologies.

Reuben and Gad wanted autonomy from the rest of the tribes. They eyed the land that had been conquered, the territory east of the Jordan, and staked their claim on it, despite the fact that it was not part of the original inheritance, the Land of Canaan, only adjacent to it. They wanted quasi-independence from the rest of Israel. Why? Here are some plausible reasons. **1. Politics.** Already by this point in the Bible, we know where the centers of power are in Israel. **Leader Moses: a Levite. High Priest Aaron: another Levite,** married to a **Judahite** (Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav, sister to Nachshon, the first tribal prince of Judah, Exod. 6:23). **Leader-designate Joshua: an Ephraimite.** Recall that Reuben was the firstborn of Leah, and Gad was the firstborn of Leah's handmaid, Zilpah. **But despite both of their firstborn statuses, they had no political influence! Nada!** Recall that when Jacob blessed his sons on his deathbed he said to Reuben: *Unstable as water, you shall excel no longer; For when you mounted your father's bed, You brought disgrace...!* (Gen. 49:4) Such a blessing! Gad did not fare much better: *Gad shall be raided by raiders, but he shall raid at their heels* (49:19). It has been a few hundred years since Jacob said that, but we can imagine that the tribes of Reuben and Gad bore a long-lasting collective shame from that "blessing". Reubenites and Gadites would have always felt "typecast" and would have wanted to do anything to break away from that awful legacy. Thus, Reuben and Gad had a very plausible incentive to differentiate themselves from the other tribes and create a kind of **sovereignty-association**² with the rest of Israel. That meant territory. And the most effective way to lay claim to territory was to produce large herds that would need to pasture on it.

2. Pastoral Pride. Crossing over the Jordan necessitated a broad series of transformations for the Israelites. Of course, many Israelites would have welcomed the opportunity to build permanent homes and dwell in fortified towns. But quite likely, there would have been those Israelites (like, say the Amish) who would have wanted to preserve their authentic pastoral existence. The pastoral nomad is characterized by fierce independence and self-preservation. Though many towns are listed in their territory, Reuben and Gad's objective in taking that territory **is an attempt to preserve the ancient cultural heritage of Israel as herders.** They wanted to be authentically



linked to their Patriarchal and tribal ancestors. That required a territory where they could

engage in **transhumant** living, moving seasonally between different grazing areas. Recall that when the sons of Jacob came down to Egypt to dwell there, Joseph told them not to tell Pharaoh that they were shepherds because shepherding was repugnant to the Egyptians. They did so anyway in defiance, proud of their ancestral heritage. (Gen. 46:32-47:3) **Reuben and Gad's desire to live as pastoral nomads east of the Jordan is likewise, an assertion of pride in their ancestral heritage.**

3. Economic Opportunism. Reuben and Gad were willing to forego geographic continuity with the other tribes in order to achieve their own economic gain. For that, the tradition judges them harshly and suggests that their preference for wealth over solidarity resulted in their being sent into exile first when the land was conquered.

וְכֵן אָמַר מֹשֶׁה בְּבִנְיָ גָד וּבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן עֲשִׂירִים וְהִנֵּה לָהֶם מִקְנֵה גָדוֹל, וְחִבְבוּ אֶת מְמוֹנָם וַיָּשְׁבוּ לָהֶם חוּץ מֵאֶרֶץ יִשְׂרָאֵל, לִפְקֹד גָּלוּ תַחֲלָה מִכָּל הַשְּׂבָטִים (במדבר רבה כב:ז, תנחומא מטות ה)

You find similarly with the children of Gad and the children of Reuben, who were wealthy, and they had considerable livestock. But they loved their money and settled themselves outside of the Land of Israel. That is why they were exiled first among all the tribes... (Bemidbar Rabbah 22:7) (Tanhuma Matot 5).

Moses recoils at their petition and is scathing in his response:

הֲאֵחִיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּשְׁבוּ פֹה. (במי' לב:ו)
Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? (Num. 32:6)

Moses understands that the shared burden of sacrifice is essential to tribal solidarity. He worries that as a consequence of settling the **East-Bank**, Reuben and Gad will claim exemptions for the coming war of conquest against the Canaanites saying to the others: **It's your war, people, not ours.** By settling outside the land, they are going to undermine the national ethos and worse, incur God's wrath:

וְהִנֵּה קָמְתָם תַּחַת אֲבֹתֵיכֶם תְּרַבּוּת אֲנָשִׁים חֲטָאִים לִסְפוֹת עוֹד עַל תְּרוֹן אֶרֶץ ה' אֵל יִשְׂרָאֵל. (במי' לב:יד)
Now here, you have arisen in place of your fathers, a brood of sinning men, to add further to the flaming anger of God against Israel (32:14).

Moses establishes that their shared responsibility to fight is a precondition for their right to settle in the conquered lands east of the Jordan. To their credit, Reuben and Gad agree to this and pledge to send their sons into battle. Nevertheless, Moses' rejoinder continues to this very day, as the issue of shared national service is front and center in the national conversation of Israel in a time of war. **Shabbat Shalom!**

Day 659. We pray for an end to the war and the return of the hostages. May God comfort the bereaved, protect the IDF, and heal the wounded.
With thanks to cookbook author and culinary personality Adeena Sussman for letting me write part of this in her home!



² Some Canadian trivia: **sovereignty-association** derives from the Quebec separatist movement of the late 60's through the mid-90's. When separatist governments in Quebec wanted to leave Canada they proposed to form a separate sovereign entity, with its own

laws, language and culture, while maintaining strong economic ties with the rest of Canada, **sovereignty-association**. Reuben and Gad would be sovereign in their own territory, while maintaining strong familial, religious and cultural ties to the rest of Israel.