View PDF



Rabbi Hayyim Angel

Mattot:

A Misunderstanding or a Leadership Triumph?

In his work, *Iyyunim BeParashot HaShavua* (series 1, 2002), Rabbi Elhanan Samet presents a meaningful analysis of a debate between Rabbi Yitzhak Arama (Spain, 1420-1494) and Rabbi Yitzhak Abarbanel (Spain, Italy 1437-1508). The following essay is based on Rabbi Samet's study.

The request of the tribes of Reuben and Gad in Numbers chapter 32 appears straightforward. Having seen the fertile grazing lands east of the Jordan, they ask Moses for permission to settle there rather than receive territory west of the river. Moses responds with surprising severity. He accuses them of abandoning their brethren and compares them to the spies whose discouraging report had doomed an entire generation to die in the wilderness.

Why does Moses react so strongly? Were the tribes guilty of selfishness, or did Moses misread a generation that was fundamentally different from the one that had left Egypt? The medieval commentators offer two sharply different perspectives, and each illuminates an important dimension of leadership and communal responsibility.

The first perspective, advanced by Abarbanel and associated with Ramban, sees Moses's rebuke as based upon a misunderstanding. The tribes never intended to

avoid military service. Their request focused on where their families and livestock would reside, not on whether they would participate in the conquest of Canaan. The key phrase appears at the end of their initial request: “Do not bring us across the Jordan.” According to this reading, they refer to their inheritance and permanent residence, not to their personal participation in the campaign.

From this perspective, the episode reveals a growing gap between Moses and the generation preparing to enter the Land of Israel. Unlike the generation of the spies, these Israelites have already demonstrated courage in battle against Sihon and Og. They are not fearful of conquest. They are eager and prepared to fight. Just as Abarbanel sees tensions between Moses and the younger generation in the episodes of Mei Merivah (Numbers 20) and Baal Peor (Numbers 25), so too here he detects a leader whose assumptions are shaped by the failures of an earlier generation.

The second perspective, developed by Rabbi Yitzhak Arama in his *Akedat Yitzhak*, views Moses’s response very differently. Moses correctly perceived a grave danger lurking beneath the tribes’ request. Even if Reuben and Gad did not intend to evade military service, their proposal threatened to create the same practical result as the sin of the spies. Once a large and fertile territory had already been conquered, why continue crossing the Jordan?

Moses therefore confronts not a crisis of faith but a crisis of national destiny. Unlike the spies, Reuben and Gad do not doubt God’s promises or fear the Canaanites. Nevertheless, their request could weaken the nation’s resolve to complete its mission. The danger lies not in their motives but in the consequences their proposal might produce.

Several details in the text support Rabbi Arama’s reading. After Moses’s rebuke, the Torah records a break in the narrative and then states, “They approached him and said…” Why did they need to approach him again? The Akedah suggests that the closed *parashah* break indicates a pause during which the tribal leaders consulted among themselves and reformulated their proposal. They did not merely clarify a misunderstanding; they strengthened their commitment.

Indeed, their revised proposal goes well beyond what would have been necessary to correct Moses's impression. They promise not only to fight alongside their brethren but to march "before" them. They pledge to remain engaged until all the tribes are securely settled in their inheritances. This expanded commitment later finds fulfillment when the eastern tribes participate in the conquest under Joshua before returning home.

Yet even if Rabbi Arama is correct, the story ultimately highlights the greatness of the new generation. Moses identifies a potentially dangerous challenge, but the tribes respond not with resentment or defiance. Instead, they rise to the occasion. They place themselves at the forefront of the national effort and transform a questionable request into an extraordinary demonstration of solidarity.

The debate between Abarbanel and the Akedah therefore centers on a larger question: Is the Torah criticizing Moses or praising him? Abarbanel emphasizes Moses's inability fully to appreciate the character of the generation about to inherit the land. Rabbi Arama emphasizes Moses's courage in confronting a threat before it matured into disaster. For Abarbanel, the episode exposes the limitations of an aging leader; for the *Akedah*, it demonstrates the enduring necessity of vigilant leadership.

Perhaps the enduring lesson is that both insights contain truth. The generation entering the land was indeed different from the generation that left Egypt. It possessed confidence, initiative, and a willingness to fight for the nation's future. At the same time, Moses's leadership ensured that this strength would be directed toward collective responsibility rather than tribal self-interest. History did not have to repeat itself. Through courageous leadership and a willing response from the people, a moment that could have echoed the tragedy of the spies instead became a model of national unity and shared destiny.