

Parshat Mattot-Masei
A Guide to Nation Building
Nomi Kaltmann - Class of 2023

“The children of Reuben and the children of Gad possessed much cattle, and they saw the land of Ya'zer and the land of Gilead, and behold, it was a land for pasture.... And they said [to Moshe]: ‘If we have found favor in your eyes, may this land be given to your servants for a possession—do not take us across the Jordan.... We will build sheepfolds here for our cattle, and cities for our children.’” (Bamidbar 32:1, 5, 16)

“They spoke first of their cattle, and only then of their children. Said Moses to them: Not so! Make the primary thing primary, and the secondary thing secondary.” (Rashi on verse 16)

The double Parsha of Mattot - Masei provides a fascinating insight into the Jewish understanding of community building and mutual responsibility. It further provides insight into how leaders must communicate with a nation in order to address difficult problems relating to nation-building issues and community cohesiveness.

When a person contemplates the vision of an ideal nation and society, it most often reflects their own ideologies and core values. Nation-building is generally only successful when personal values are central to subsequent actions which determine a nation's fundamental goals and aspirations for their own unique brand of a utopian society. The priorities that a nation determines as their ultimate goal represent the ideologies they wish to invest their time and energy in, and a message they communicate to the outside world.

Thus, when the request by the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half the tribe of Menashe that they be allowed to settle alongside the Eastern Bank of the Jordan River was voiced, this caused a small crisis that Moshe and the rest of Bnei Yisrael hadn't contemplated. Rather than these tribes vying to enter into the Land of Israel as the rest of the nation had been yearning for during their 40-year journey through the desert, this seemingly innocuous request represented the antithesis of the cohesive nation-building that had been the predominant ideology amongst the Israelites. Rather, this request represented the individual pursuits for personal gain for the specific group needs of the tribes of Reuben, Gad and half of Menashe.

Initially, Moshe is forceful in his response as he interprets their request as an attempt to shirk their duties in the forthcoming battles of conquering the Land of Israel, thus forsaking the other tribes in favour of seeking out already-won territory suited to their farming needs.

While the Torah does not elaborate on the reasoning behind why these tribes owned more livestock and sheep than other tribes, it is clear that the fertile Eastern Jordan river banks were a desirable tract of land for anyone to settle on due to the high-quality farmland which was suitable for tending and feeding livestock.

The Or HaChaim suggests that Gad and Reuben were particularly skilled militarily, which meant that during battles leading up to entering the Land of Israel they had been particularly skilled at capturing animals. In contrast, the Midrash HaGadol notes that these tribes may not have in fact owned more livestock than the other tribes, but that they placed a higher value on livestock above all other things, and therefore this was one of their primary motivations in wanting to live in fertile lands.

Nechama Leibowitz, in her book *Studies in Bamidbar*, summarizes the views of several Jewish leaders and scholars who have looked at the request of these two and a half tribes to settle on the Eastern side of the Jordan as a “dilemma between the choice of a career — personal advancement — or the fulfillment of a mission.” In other words, their request represents a conflict between choosing communal priorities over professional ambition and advancement.

Moshe also highlighted the similarities between this request and the disastrous spying mission 40 years earlier which resulted in the people of Israel rejecting the Land of Israel and subsequently being banished into the wilderness for 40 years. Perhaps the similarities were not clear to the tribes of Reuben, Gad and Menashe as the passage of time may have meant they were young children or unborn at the time of the spies, and they may not have understood the serious consequences that arose from the rejection of the Land of Israel. Moshe's response was an attempt to help the two and a half tribes gain an understanding of what was at stake should the nation fail to build a communal identity that was built on a foundation focused on supporting each other over individual pursuits.

While the two and a half tribes clarified their request and confirmed that they would be happy to engage in the conquest for the land of Israel, their response revealed shortcomings in their priorities. They responded that they would be happy to build pens for their animals and cities for their children, thus implying that their cattle and livestock were their primary priority. Moshe corrects them when he reverses the order, stating that they should build for their children first and livestock second (Bamidbar 32:24). This once again helped to guide the intrinsic values that were required to successfully build a nation, one where family and people took precedence over possessions and material wealth.

Upon providing a commitment to help their brethren fight and agree to being on the frontlines, Nachmanides sees the two and a half tribes in a more favourable light and sees this as demonstrating their commitment to God and their community.

This Parsha provides a lesson in understanding how the success of both the people and their nation are fundamentally linked to the values they adopt. Values influence how people behave and the outcomes of these actions will often determine the happiness and success of the group. Our priorities should reflect what kind of people we want to be.

Today, these values are ever more important as the world endures a global pandemic with millions across the world feeling isolated and alone. The challenge we face is to find the strength and courage to support each other so that when the world returns to normal we feel confident that we were the best versions of ourselves possible and offered support to those who needed it. This way we can be sure that our actions reflect our values and together we build a stronger and more cohesive global community.



Nomi Kaltmann is from Melbourne, Australia. Nomi comes to Maharat after earning her Bachelor of Laws and Bachelor of Liberal Arts in Politics and Jewish Civilizations from Monash University. She also holds a Masters degree in Legal Practice from the Australian National University. Previously Nomi has worked for the Shadow Attorney General of Australia and as an advisor to the former Minister for Small Business in the Victorian Legislative Assembly. Nomi also coordinated and accompanied a Parliamentary delegation to Israel and the Palestinian Territories. Specialising in charities and not-for-profit law, Nomi has worked for the Australian Charities Commission. Nomi was one of the founding members of the Women's Orthodox Tefillah Group in Victoria. She has previously studied at Midreshet HaRova and completed a Masters research unit that looked at the current state of Australian family law and issues relating to Agunot and Gett. Nomi is married to Daniel Guttman and they have two beautiful children.