



On the Other Side of the Jordan

R. Tali Adler – adler@hadar.org

Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei 5785

Moshe's real concern, when Reuven and Gad ask to remain on their side of the Jordan, is the way that distance can split families apart.

It's a single word that betrays his concern, one that reminds us of a much older story:

במדבר לב:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְבְנֵי גָד וְלְבְנֵי רְאוּבֵן הָאֲחִיכֶם יָבֹאוּ לְמִלְחָמָה וְאַתֶּם תֵּנֻשְׁבוּ פֹּה:

Bemidbar 32:6

Moshe replied to the Gadites and the Reuvenites, “Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here?”

“Brothers.” Moshe's word choice refers to the rest of the Jewish people, the Reuvenites and Gadites ultra-extended family. But read in context of the rest of the story—massive wealth that leads to a request to separate—the word “brothers” reminds us of a similar story, a story about family and the way physical distance can cause it to unravel:



בראשית יג:ה-ו

וְגַם לְלוֹט הָהֵלֶךְ אֶת אַבְרָם הָיָה צָאן וּבָקָר וְאֵהָלִים: ⁶וְלֹא נָשָׂא אֹתָם הָאָרֶץ לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו כִּי הָיָה רְכוּשָׁם רָב
וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשִׁבְתָּ יַחְדָּו:

Bereishit 13:5-6

⁵Lot, who went with Avram, also had flocks and herds and tents, ⁶so that the land could not support them staying together; for their possessions were so great that they could not remain together.

Like Avraham's separation from Lot, the two tribes, request to stay on this side of the Jordan is precipitated by cattle in need of grazing land. Here, the painful nature of the divide is made clear from the outset: the text states twice that the two could no longer dwell "together," emphasizing Avraham and Lot's previous state of togetherness. Lot, Avraham's nephew, has been his constant companion since he left his home to follow God's command. Avraham, who does not have children, likely sees Lot as his presumptive heir—until now.

⁸וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶל לוֹט אֵל נָא תְהִי מְרִיבָה בֵּינִי וּבֵינְךָ וּבֵין רָעִי וּבֵין רָעִיךָ כִּי אֲנָשִׁים אֲחִים אָנַחְנוּ: ⁹הֲלֹא כָל
הָאָרֶץ לִפְנֶיךָ הִפְרָד נָא מַעְלִי אִם הַשְׂמָאל וְאִימָנָה וְאִם הַיָּמִין וְאֲשַׁמְאִילָהּ: ¹⁰וַיֵּשָׂא לוֹט אֶת עֵינָיו וַיֵּרָא אֶת כָּל
כְּכַר הַיַּרְדֵּן כִּי כָלָה מִשְׁקָהָ לִפְנֵי שְׁחַת ה' אֶת סֹדֶם וְאֶת עֲמֹרָה כָגֵן ה' כְּאָרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בְּאֶכָה צֶעַר: ¹¹וַיִּבְחַר לוֹ
לוֹט אֶת כָּל כְּכַר הַיַּרְדֵּן וַיֵּסֶע לוֹט מִקְדָּם וַיִּפְרְדּוּ אִישׁ מֵעַל אָחִיו:

⁸Avram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herders and yours, for we are brothers. ⁹The whole land is before you. Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; and if you go south, I will go north." ¹⁰Lot looked about him and saw how well watered was the whole plain of the Jordan, all of it—this was before God had destroyed Sdom and Amorah—all the way to Zoar, like the garden of God, like the land of Egypt. ¹¹So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward, and brother parted from brother.



Avraham's suggestion to Lot that they separate further emphasizes the relationship between the two. Using the word "brothers"—the same word Moshe uses for the relationship between the two tribes and the rest of the Jewish people—Avraham proposes that Lot choose whatever part of the land he wants for himself. Whichever way Lot goes, Avraham will go in the opposite direction.

Like the two tribes, Lot chooses land adjacent to the Jordan (on the near side) because it is well irrigated and good for cattle. Once again, the text emphasizes the brotherhood between Lot and Avraham, this time, as they part ways.

Despite their separation, Avraham still considers Lot his brother, and when Lot is endangered, Avraham mobilizes to save him:

בראשית יד:יד

וַיִּשְׁמַע אַבְרָם כִּי נִשְׁבָּה אָחִיו וַיֵּרָק אֶת חֲנִיכָיו וְלִידֵי בֵיתוֹ שְׂמֹנֶה עָשָׂר וּשְׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת וַיֵּרֶדְף עַד דָּן:

Bereishit 14:14

When Avram heard that his brother had been taken captive, he mustered his retainers, born into his household, numbering 318, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

Although the text does not say so explicitly, an additional motive might lurk behind Avraham's campaign: the hope that, when he sees that Avraham was willing to fight for him, Lot might choose to return home. But when the king of Sdom offers Avraham a deal, those hopes are dashed. Take everything you want, he tells Avraham: all the possessions. The people, though are mine:



¹⁶וַיָּשֶׁב אֶת כָּל הָרָכָשׁ וְגַם אֶת לוֹט אָחִיו וְרָכָשׁוֹ הִשְׁיֵב וְגַם אֶת הַנָּשִׁים וְאֶת הָעָם: ...²¹וַיֹּאמֶר מֶלֶךְ סְדֹם אֶל
אַבְרָם בְּנֵי הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהָרָכָשׁ קַח לָךְ:

¹⁶He brought back all the possessions; he also brought back his brother Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people.... ²¹Then the king of Sdom said to Avram, “Give me the people, and take the possessions for yourself.”

The implication is clear. Avraham went to war for one reason: to save Lot. Now, however, without even a conversation with his nephew, Avraham is dismissed, told to take his loot and go. That failure, those fleeting and defeated hopes of reconciliation, are the impetus for God’s sudden appearance to Avraham in the verses immediately following his conversation with the king of Sdom, an appearance, we are told, which took place “following these events.”

בראשית טו:א-ד

¹אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה הָיָה דְּבַר ה' אֶל אַבְרָם בְּמַחְזָה לֵאמֹר אֵל תִּירָא אַבְרָם אֲנִכִּי מִגֵּן לָךְ שְׂכָרְךָ הִרְבֵּה
מְאֹד: ²וַיֹּאמֶר אַבְרָם אֶדְנִי ה' מַה תִּתֵּן לִי וְאֲנִכִּי הוֹלֵךְ עִרְרִי וּבֶן מִשְׁקָךְ בֵּיתִי הוּא דָּמָשֶׁק אֶלְיָעֶזֶר: ³וַיֹּאמֶר
אַבְרָם הֵן לִי לֹא נָתַתָּה זָרַע וְהִנֵּה בֶן בֵּיתִי יוֹרֵשׁ אֹתִי: ⁴וְהִנֵּה דְּבַר ה' אֵלָיו לֵאמֹר לֹא יִירָשְׁךָ זֶה כִּי אִם אֲשֶׁר
יֵצֵא מִמֶּעֶיךָ הוּא יִירָשְׁךָ:

Bereishit 15:1-4

¹Following these events, the word of God came to Avram in a vision: “Fear not, Avram, I am a shield to you; Your reward shall be very great.” ²But Avram said, “O lord God, what can You give me, seeing that I shall die childless, and the one in charge of my household is Dammesek Eliezer!” ³Avram said further, “Since You have granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir.” ⁴The word of God came to him in reply, “That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own offspring shall be your heir.”



The Avraham we encounter in this conversation with God is different than we've seen him before. He has lost hope. What can you possibly give me, Avraham asks God, when if I am to be inherited by my household manager, Eliezer?

In the context of Lot's failure to return, Avraham's despair is tragic. Avraham hoped, after all this time, that he and Lot might finally find a way to live together again. When he returns without his nephew, Avraham understands that he has lost his presumptive heir, the man who has been like a brother to him, forever. Lot has abandoned Avraham and the covenant with God as well.

Hundreds of years later, when Reuven and Gad ask Moshe to remain on the other side of the Jordan—so close to the fertile lands of Sdom that Lot once chose—Moshe sees the tragedy playing out once again. In his question “will your brothers go to war while you remain here?” Moshe highlights the danger the Jewish people face if Reuven and Gad remain behind.

It is not simple to remain a family when you choose to live in different places. If Reuven and Gad remain behind they, like Lot, may decide to abandon not just their brethren, but the entire covenant.

But when Moshe hears Reuven and Gad's offer, he realizes that this time the story might have a different ending:

במדבר לב:יז-יח

¹⁷וְאֶנְחֵנוּ נִחְלֵץ חַשִּׁים לְפָנֶיךָ בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל עַד אֲשֶׁר אִם הִבִּיאֲנֶם אֶל מְקוֹמָם וַיָּשֶׁב טַפְנוּ בְּעָרֵי הַמְּדָצָר מִפָּנֶיךָ
יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ: ¹⁸לֹא נָשׁוּב אֶל בְּתִינוּ עַד הַתְּנַחֵל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אִישׁ נַחֲלָתוֹ:



Bemidbar 32:17-18

¹⁷And we will go ahead as shock-troops in the van of the Benei Yisrael until we have established them in their home, while our children stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. ¹⁸We will not return to our homes until Benei Yisrael—every one of them—are in possession of their portion.

In promising not to return to their own homes until their brethren are settled in theirs, Reuven and Gad make it clear that they are not playing Lot's part in this story, but Avraham's. Like Avraham who went to war for Lot even after their separation, Reuven and Gad will not allow distance to erode their responsibility to their family. Just as Avraham fought for Lot, so too they will fight for their brothers. In taking Avraham's part, the two tribes are living his words to Lot: "We are brothers" (*anashim ahim anahnu*). Despite distance and geography, we will not forget that we are kin. Despite the Jordan between them, they understand that their destinies are bound up together. They will not forget their brothers, nor the covenant that binds them to each other and to God.

It is not easy to maintain relationships across distance. Relationships can fade when they are not maintained in the day-to-day, and the world and its complications look very different from different places. Mutual misunderstanding grows all too easily in relationships that do not have the bedrock of regular contact to strengthen them. Whether separated by a river or by an ocean, it can become all too easy to look at someone who used to feel like a sibling and see a stranger.

But the story of Reuven and Gad offers a pathway forward. These relationships are not easy, but they are possible if we are willing to remember Avraham's words—"We are brothers"—and enact the commitment that comes from them.



They are possible if we remember that whatever side of the river—or ocean—we find ourselves on, being family means that we share a covenant, and a destiny.