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What to Do When You're Not Being Valued: Reuven and Gad's Questionable Decision

It was our first year in Israel, and we had not yet decided if we would be staying in Israel to make Aliya or returning to America. When our first son, Yoshiyahu Reuven, was born in Haddasah Ein Kerem, can you guess the number one question we were asked? Not whether I had an epidural, or if he was now a sabra, or if he was sleeping through the night yet. The number one question we were asked was, "Does this mean he'll need to serve in the army?"

I was astounded.

Despite every parents' fear of their child serving in the army, Moshe's response to Reuven and Gad's request in this week's parsha echoed through my ears: "Will your brothers go out to war, while you stay here?" ... Do you not remember the reason we needed to travel 40 years in the first place? Why should your brothers risk their lives while you watch from afar?

Reuven and Gad clarified: Of course we will come fight. This is our nation

and our people. Only once everything is conquered will we return to this land. To this, Moshe agreed.

The Questions:

Despite their explanation, Moshe's challenge still rings true: How could Reuven and Gad so blatantly go against everything for which they've been striving, and the messages that Moshe and God have been conveying, for 40 years? What prompted them to make such a brazen request?

To answer these issues, we need to delve into the personalities of the tribes of Reuven and Gad, in order to understand the complex emotions of their inner world and how their role within their family affects who they are. As Tamar Weissman proposes in her book, Tribal Lands, the limited stories in Sefer Breishit about the twelve tribes are the keys we need to understand regarding their tribal development throughout tanach.

The Duo's Unique Connection:

Taking us back to Sefer Breishit, Reuven and Gad may seem like a random duo. But what is the connection between them? What lies beneath their partnership? Quite simply, they are both Leah's eldest sons. Reuven is born to Leah herself, and Gad is the first born to Leah's maidservant, Zilpa. Gad is both

named by and considered Leah's son, her other first born. These boys are born with all the pressure of biblical first borns; tasked to be leaders and to take responsibility for their younger brothers, the Bnei Yisrael.

And yet, Reuven notoriously makes mistakes throughout his younger years in trying to live up to his position as the first born. In Yaakov's blessing he says Reuven is 'unstable as water'. He impulsively makes poor decisions. Despite his best efforts, he does not receive his brother or father's respect. Gad, too, doesn't seem to take a leadership role at all. Like all people, Reuven and Gad have a basic human need to feel valued - especially by their family. The feelings Leah has of being unloved is passed down to her eldest children.

Poor Decisions: But From a Good Place

What makes Reuven unique is that the Torah shows us his mistakes are always coming from a place of good intention, frantically trying to establish his mother's status or his own within the family dynamic. His trademark symbol on his tribal flag is the duda'im, the fertility plant which he finds in order to help his mother feel more loved. His stone on the breastplate is ruby red, which Rabbeinu Bechaye teaches, is

thought to deliver fertility. Whether he sleeps with Bilha or switches the beds, the midrash makes it clear, Reuven's actions are not intended for a romantic relationship but in order to defend his mother's honor and dignity.

While Reuven and Gad both want to be 'The Firstborns', their respect is never gained. Reuven attempts to save Yosef but ultimately fails and regrets his failure his whole life (37:21-22,29). When Egypt demands Binyamin, Reuven is first to offer Yaakov a "solution" for his own sons to be killed if they don't bring him back; a suggestion so ridiculous, Yaakov doesn't even respond (42:37-38).

The Yosef story also shows Reuven's attempt to do what's best as the first born. The precedent in the family was that Yitzchak was chosen and Yishmael was not. Yaakov was chosen and Eisav was not. Assuming only one son would be chosen, who should be the most threatened by the favoritism towards Yosef, Rachel's first born? Reuven. Like mother, like son, and as clearly seen in the story of the sale of Yosef, these feelings of never fully being chosen are passed on to Leah's children too. This was a struggle he held with him always. Gad, too, as a first born son, yet the

son of a maidservant, never fully feels part of the family in the first place.

We fast forward, as we continue throughout Chumash and we have leaders from the tribe of Levi like Moshe, Aharon, Miriam, from the tribe of Yehuda, like Kalev, Chur and Betzalel and from the tribes of Yosef, like Yehoshua. But Reuven and Gad can't find their place amongst the leadership.

They want to play their role as first borns but, like their mother, continuously feel they are not good enough. Reuven and Gad loved their brothers, yet they were able to see that despite their efforts, their leadership is not heeded.

Their Solution:

And so, when these tribes see an opening and a space for themselves on the other side of the Jordan, they jump on it. They realize this is their moment. They may not be able to rise as leaders amongst their brothers but they can be big fish in a small pond somewhere else. Without the other tribes surrounding them, they no longer need to feel overshadowed or look over their shoulders. One could view this decision as tragic and desperate. But I'd like to believe it's healthy and honest. The brothers

know their worth, have a healthy acceptance of who they are, and make decisions that are right for them and their families.

Reuven himself did not turn into Korach, one who challenges authority around him so much that his ego leads to his death. His descendants, Datan and Aviram, among others, unfortunately did fall into that trap. But as a whole, Reuven and Gad recognize that their skills are simply not needed and accept their role as part of the Jewish people with grace. Rather than pushing others down, they humbly seek ways to make a difference where they can. Whether it's Hoshea from Reuven, Eliyahu from Gad (Bereishit Raba 71:8), helping David fight or throughout Tanach when leaders are needed, the tribes want to help and step up when they feel they are needed. But they refuse to put their families in positions of feeling like they don't have their place.

Reuven and Gad decide to stay in Ever HaYarden and make an impact there. In the smaller, less central part of Israel, they hope to finally find their voice and an inner peace.

The Message:

It's a struggle for many to be able to internalize their role and value:

whether in the workplace, in a social group, at home within their family, their extended family or amongst their community. Many spend their lives trying to prove themselves to others or desperately analyzing why they are not appreciated. There are times we try to make a difference and it simply is not working. Despite our best efforts; our contributions are not appreciated.

First of all, the Reuven and Gad's struggle is a reminder to let those around us whom we love and value know how much they mean to us.

Reuven and Gad teach us when to leave that space that continues to undervalue our contributions. They teach us to stop trying to prove ourselves to those who don't respect us and to find our own place where we can make a difference and reach our potential.

They remind us of the importance of never viewing our own brothers as our enemies but to embrace our presumed competitors and understand they are our family, also trying to do their best.

Reuven and Gad do not create tension, make excuses or accuse others. They do not put others down in order to build themselves up or cry for attention. These two tribes make

a difficult decision to work to become the best versions of themselves without looking over their shoulders. They signal to their brothers they will always be right over the river and there for them whenever needed.

I believe this message is a crucial one - sometimes finding a new environment can help us make changes to our lives for the positive.

And yet, one cannot ignore the tragic note that we're left with. Reuven and Gad finally found their place, but was that really the best ending for them? Down the line, for the grandchildren and great grandchildren, was this decision in their best interests?

How do you know when it's time to change environments and when you would have done better staying where you were and being part of something greater?

It's hard to know of course, and so Reuven and Gad's internal struggle is just as meaningful as it ever was.