Dvar Torah: The Other Half of Manasseh
Rabbi Dan Moskovitz
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This week's parasha, *Matot*, tells the story of two and a half tribes—Reuven, Gad, and half of Menashe—who ask to remain on the east side of the Jordan River, outside the boundaries of the Promised Land.

It begins with a request: Reuven and Gad, blessed with large herds, see the rich grazing lands of Gilead and say, *"This land is very good for cattle—and we have cattle."* They propose to Moses: *"Let us stay here."*

Moses is not pleased. He accuses them of opting out of the national mission, of abandoning their brothers just as the people are poised to enter the Land. The echoes of the spies' sin from *Parashat Shelach* linger in his voice—that moment when the Israelites lost faith and were condemned to wander the desert for forty years. Moses fears that Reuven and Gad's request signals another retreat from responsibility.

But Reuven and Gad push back. That's not their intent. They pledge to fight alongside their brothers. In fact, they offer to lead the charge. They simply want to settle their families and livestock east of the Jordan, then fulfill their duty on the battlefield.

Eventually, Moses relents. He grants them the land. And then, almost as an afterthought, the Torah tells us: *"Moses gave the land to the children of Gad, the children of Reuven, and to half the tribe of Menashe."*

Half the tribe of Menashe.

They didn't ask for it. They weren't part of the negotiations. Yet suddenly, they're in the picture—settling on the east bank with Reuven and Gad.

What's going on?

Some commentators, like Ramban, explain that this was Moses' initiative. The land was too vast for just two tribes, so he sought another partner—one that could help bridge two worlds.

Ibn Ezra suggests that Manasseh had been involved from the beginning, but their role was minimized because they weren't a full tribe—only a half.

But perhaps the deeper meaning lies not in the map, but in the mission.

Reuven and Gad, our sages suggest, felt slighted. Both tribes had ancestral claims to prestige—Reuven as Jacob's firstborn son, and Gad as the firstborn of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. Yet both had seen their status eroded. Reuven lost his birthright due to a past transgression, and the double portion was transferred to Joseph's sons. Gad, descended from a handmaid, never held equal standing with the children of Jacob's primary wives.

Perhaps, as Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z"l suggests, their request wasn't simply about land—it was a quiet protest, born of pain. A familiar human impulse: when people feel unheard, unrecognized, unvalued—they withdraw. They disengage. As Rabbi Sacks wrote:
"If their voices weren't heard, they were ready to opt out—with disastrous consequences."

But with Manasseh, we see something else.

The tribe of Manasseh was descended from Joseph—the one who, even in Egypt, never stopped dreaming of the Promised Land. Within Manasseh were the daughters of Tzelofchad—who, in last week's parasha, stood with courage and demanded a share in the land of their ancestors. Manasseh represents connection. Rooted in exile, but reaching for redemption.

And so, perhaps, that is why Moses chose them.

Because if Reuven and Gad were pulling toward the periphery, Moses needed a tribe that could stand at the threshold and hold everyone together. A tribe that could live on the edge and still keep its heart in the center.

Manasseh became that bridge. Half the tribe settled in the Land of Israel proper. The other half remained on the east bank. One people—divided geographically, but united in purpose.

With family on both sides of the river, the Jewish people would not—could not—abandon either group. The presence of Manasseh tethered the eastern settlers to the national story, and tethered the western tribes to the eastern frontier. In a time when some were pulling away from the center, Moses inserted a tribal thread to sew the people back together.

It was brilliant leadership. And it was necessary.

Because the consequences of disconnection were real. The Book of Chronicles later tells us that Reuven, Gad, and the eastern half of Manasseh were the first to be exiled by Assyria. Separated from the spiritual core of the people, they were the first to fall.

But it didn't have to end that way.

Moses' choice to place half of Manasseh with them was a profound act of inclusion. He didn't shame Reuven and Gad. He didn't force them into conformity. He gave them space—but refused to let them drift away entirely. He ensured they remained linked—literally, through family—to the rest of the people.

The tribe of Manasseh was the perfect choice. Descended from Joseph, loyal to memory and mission, and home to those who claimed their inheritance with faith and determination, Manasseh had always held fast to connection. They became the glue. Half lived with Reuven and Gad in the east; half remained in the heart of Israel. One people—split across a river, but bound by destiny.

That's the lesson for us today.

In our own time, we know what it is to feel the edges of community. Whether it's Jews in the Diaspora, or deep disagreements over Israel, identity, or ideology—it can be tempting to pull back. To say: *If I'm not centered, I'm out.*

The story of Manasseh reminds us: **a community can stretch without breaking—if it remains bound by shared purpose and mutual responsibility.**

It challenges us—leaders, congregants, all of us—to listen deeply to the pain beneath protest, and to respond with inclusion, not dismissal. As Rabbi Sacks taught, the answer to division is not exclusion. It is **"finding a role for everyone in the grand enterprise."**

Sometimes, the tribe that looks divided is the one holding the people together.

The story of Manasseh reminds us that wholeness can come through halfness. That unity does not require uniformity—but it does require loyalty. To each other, and to the sacred project we share.

Ultimately, Moses' wisdom—his decision to divide Manasseh—teaches us that when people feel disconnected, we don't give up on them. We build bridges. We create structures of belonging. We weave relationships strong enough to stretch across rivers.

So may we, too, be like Manasseh—the tribe that held the people together. And may our community, like theirs, be bound by more than geography—bound by love, by loyalty, and by the unbreakable thread of Jewish destiny.

Shabbat Shalom.