

## Joshua 22:8-12, 21-24, 26-29

### Reuben and Gad Build an Altar

This is the Haftarah reading for **Numbers 32**. Reuben and Gad's request to settle beyond the Jordan came at first from selfish concern for their cattle and possessions, which they valued more than their children.

In this passage, we see that their concern for their children and future generations returns to the forefront.

[Also note that this week's reading in the "Seven of Consolation" contains this promise from **Isaiah 54:13** - "And all thy children shall be taught of the Lord, and great shall be the peace of thy children."]

This incident - like their original request for settling beyond the Jordan and the request of Zelophehad's daughters - is another example of negotiating in openness and good faith to come to an outcome that satisfies everyone.

### Background

To understand why Reuben and Gad chose to settle prematurely east of the Jordan, we need to look at Jacob's blessing on these two sons of his in **Genesis 49:1-27**.

Reuben, Jacob's firstborn, was not given the traditional rights of the firstborn because Reuben had sexual relations with one of his father's concubines. Jacob stated that Reuben was "as unstable as water" and therefore would never excel. He was essentially disowned. Reuben's characteristic of instability would be passed along and realized within his tribe over the centuries. By Saul's time Reuben had been absorbed into the tribe of Gad and disappeared. The reason was that, by remaining nomadic shepherds, they had little reason to settle or control and defend their territory.

Jacob gave Gad the briefest of blessings and it was a very strange blessing indeed. The blessing was: "Gad, a troop will troop on him, but he will troop on their heel." Better translated as: "Gad, a troop will raid him, but he (Gad) will raid on their heel." The word "Gad" is associated with the Hebrew root *gedud* (a noun meaning "troop") and its associated verb *yegudenu* meaning "raided." Gad was going to be a tribe of warriors. This is why they volunteered to be the vanguard for Israel's war against the Canaanites. The Hebrew word for the kind of special troops being offered is *nechalats* - literally it means to be picked out or specially selected, the fiercest fighters.

Gad, which became the stronger of the two tribes, actually provided a military buffer for the rest of Israel by their position east of the Jordan River. So that became a positive outcome of their decision for Israel. But the negative was they would constantly be fighting, and eventually become the first to go into exile.

See <https://www.torahclass.com/old-testament-studies-tc/37-old-testament-studies->

numbers/228-lesson-34-numbers-32-33

### **Military Service Completed**

**Joshua 22:1-9** - Reuben, Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh complete their military service and are blessed by Joshua and return to their wives and families on the west side of the Jordan.

The rabbis say this took 14 years - seven years in subduing the land and seven more in the division among the tribes.

**Joshua 22:10** - "And when they came unto the borders of Jordan, that are in the land of Canaan, the children of Reuben and the children of Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh built there an altar by Jordan, a great altar to see to."

or "an impressive altar" (NET)

The LXX has "*bomos*" or "high place" instead of "altar" throughout this passage. High places usually included sacrifice and an altar. When the Tabernacle was set up, sacrifices could only be brought to the "entrance of the tent of meeting" (**Leviticus 17:2-4, Deuteronomy 12:5-7**) Later the Tabernacle and the ark resided on high places in Israel.

Solomon sacrificed at the "great high place" at Gibeon (**1 Kings 3:3-4**). But all high places became forbidden after the Temple's sacrificial system was established.

### **Suspicious of Idolatry**

**Joshua 22:12** - "And when the children of Israel heard of it, the whole congregation of the children of Israel gathered themselves together at Shiloh, to go up to war against them."

Upon hearing reports of the altar, they imagine the worst from their brethren.

But the procedure laid down in Deuteronomy about suspicions of idolatry is to inquire, talk, search out the truth first, before taking any action.

- **Deuteronomy 13:12-16** - "If thou shalt hear say in one of thy cities, which the Lord thy God hath given thee to dwell there, saying, Certain men, the children of Belial, are gone out from among you, and have withdrawn the inhabitants of their city, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which ye have not known; Then shalt thou enquire, and make search, and ask diligently; and, behold, if it be truth, and the thing certain, that such abomination is wrought among you; Thou shalt surely smite the inhabitants of that city with the edge of the sword, destroying it utterly, and all that is therein, and the cattle thereof, with the edge of the sword. And thou shalt gather all the spoil of it into the midst of the street thereof, and shalt burn with fire the city, and all the spoil thereof every whit, for the Lord thy God: and it shall be an heap for ever; it shall not be built again."

Later Jewish writers say the defection of a city was to be tried by the great sanhedrim. If it appeared that they were thrust away to idolatry, they were to send two learned men to admonish them. If they repented, all was well; if not, all Israel was to go up and execute this sentence. Once the city has been breached, they are to set up many courts of judicature, and they judge them; and against whomsoever two witnesses come that he served idols, after they have admonished him they separate him; if all the worshippers be the fewest, they stone them, and the rest of the city are delivered; if they are found the greater number, they bring them to the great sanhedrim, and finish their judgment there, and they slay all those that have served with the sword:(Maimonides, Obede Cochabim, c. 4. sect. 3. 6.)

The later rabbis tried to put a hedge around the action of Phinehas when he killed the couple in their tent (**Numbers 25**). All other death penalty cases required a just and fair inquiry and the rule of law rather than a hasty infliction of punishment by one man.

### **Don't Jump to Conclusions**

In Nicodemus' defense of Jesus before the Sanhedrin, he emphasizes that the Law does not allow for rash judgments:

- **John 7:51** - "Doth our law judge any man, before it hear him, and know what he doeth?"

- **Proverbs 18:13** - "He that answereth a matter before he heareth it, it is folly and shame unto him."

Phinehas in this instance is put in charge of this delegation to the suspect tribes, which in contrast to the spontaneous response at Peor will carry out the legal procedure to the letter.

**Joshua 22:17** - "Is the iniquity of Peor too little for us, from which we are not cleansed until this day, although there was a plague in the congregation of the LORD"

Phinehas was intimately involved in the execution of the idolaters who worshipped Baal in that incident.

**Joshua 22:19** - "Notwithstanding, if the land of your possession be unclean, then pass ye over unto the land of the possession of the LORD, wherein the LORD'S tabernacle dwelleth, and take possession among us: but rebel not against the LORD, nor rebel against us, in building you an altar beside the altar of the LORD our God."

"if the land of your possession be unclean" - i.e. if idolatry is so deep in the land where you settled that it can't be dislodged

Out of love, they were offering to give up some of their own land to accommodate these two and a half tribes to avoid a schism and to spare them from temptation to idolatry.

*Are we willing to help someone turn from themselves, break free from sin or addiction or some other idolatry even if it costs us in time or money?*

**Joshua 22:22** - "The LORD God of gods, the LORD God of gods, he knoweth, and Israel he shall know; if it be in rebellion, or if in transgression against the LORD, (save us not this day,) That we have built us an altar to turn from following the LORD, or if to offer thereon burnt offering or meat offering, or if to offer peace offerings thereon, let the LORD himself require it;"

Rashi - God of all the divine creatures [angels], He is the Lord, who knows that not in rebellion nor in transgression, etc. The repetition of the Name of God [is for the purpose of proclaiming their belief in one God both] in this world and in the world to come.

### **The Purpose of the Altar as a Witness and a Pattern**

**Joshua 22:24** - "And if we have not rather done it for fear of this thing, saying, In time to come your children might speak unto our children, saying, What have ye to do with the LORD God of Israel?"

Rashi - Because of the fear of insulting words we have done this, as the Scripture explains: Lest in time to come, your children say, to insult our children when they go to sacrifice in the Tabernacle of Shiloh, lest they say, 'what have you to do with the Lord? Did he not place the Jordan between us and you as a border?' We feared this, and made [the altar].

The altar was not to be a rival to the one in the Tabernacle. No sacrifices or oblations would be offered there.

### **A Sign of Unity, not Rebellion**

The Jordan River divided their lands. They feared that the the appearance of separation might become a reality in the future.

**Joshua 22:27** - "But that it may be a witness between us, and you, and our generations after us, that we might do the service of the LORD before him with our burnt offerings, and with our sacrifices, and with our peace offerings; that your children may not say to our children in time to come, Ye have no part in the LORD."

Rashi - A witness that we have not withdrawn ourselves from the law of the altar.

### **A Pattern**

**Joshua 22:28** - "Therefore said we, that it shall be, when they should so say to us or to our generations in time to come, that we may say again, Behold the pattern of the altar of the LORD, which our fathers made, not for burnt offerings, nor for sacrifices; but it is a witness between us and you."

"pattern" = *tabniyth* - a model, an exact replica

- **Exodus 25:9** - "According to all that I shew thee, after the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the instruments thereof, even so shall ye make it."

- **1 Chronicles 28:11-12** - "Then David gave to Solomon his son the pattern of the porch, and of the houses thereof, and of the treasuries thereof, and of the upper chambers thereof, and of the inner parlours thereof, and of the place of the mercy seat, And the pattern of all that he had by the spirit, of the courts of the house of the LORD, and of all the chambers round about, of the treasuries of the house of God, and of the treasuries of the dedicated things"

**Joshua 22:31** - "And Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest said unto the children of Reuben, and to the children of Gad, and to the children of Manasseh, 'This day we perceive that the LORD is among us, because ye have not committed this trespass against the LORD: now ye have delivered the children of Israel out of the hand of the LORD.'"

"we perceive that the LORD is among us" - we perceive the Shekinah among us (Targum)

See **Psalms 133:1** - "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity"

**Joshua 22:34** - "And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar Ed: for it shall be a witness between us that the LORD is God."

The word "*Ed*" or "witness" is left out in the original Hebrew and has to be added.

Rashi - This is one of the 'short verses.' It requires the addition of one word: "And the children of Reuben and the children of Gad called the altar 'Witness...'"

Some rabbis say they engraved this name on the altar to clarify its purpose, so that no one would try to make a sacrifice on it.

### Lessons:

First, a concern and zeal for God's holiness.  
 Courage to confront someone, but with love.  
 Make an attempt to reconcile first.  
 Be willing to sacrifice to help them.  
 Attempt to look at the situation from another's point of view.  
 Believe the best of one another (Philippians 4:8)

**A problem** - why an altar as a witness? Usually in the Bible people would set up stones

or a pillar to serve as witnesses. Jacob and Laban (**Genesis 31:44-48**) the stones set up at the crossing of the Jordan (**Joshua 4:1-24**) and the pillar set up by Joshua at Shechem (**Joshua 24:27**)

Recent archaeological finds show that while the Temple was standing, synagogues had art and furniture that depicted the architecture of the Temple and its sacred utensils, like the altar and the lampstand.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/09/world/middleeast/magdala-stone-israel-judaism.html>

This was probably in the same sentiment as the altar of Reuben and Gad - to depict the pattern and point back to the original as a remembrance and a symbol of unity with the center of Jewish worship.

Spiritually, the Lord's Supper offers a similar pattern for believers, a symbolic ritual established by Jesus for his future generations, by which we remember Christ's death "until He comes." Like Reuben and Gad and the half tribe of Manasseh we are part of Israel, yet separated by the gulf between this world and eternity. Citizens of both and seated with Him in heavenly places, we are yet struggling through trials and temptations here below. The Afikomen / Lord's Supper elements of bread and wine point to His real body and blood, which we partake of spiritually through faith.