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## Reuven and Gad: (How) Should Jews Live in the Diaspora?

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*As part of the Hartman Fellowship for Emerging Jewish Thought Leaders, fellows were given a deceptively simple task: write a short persuasive essay or create a persuasive piece of multimedia that grapples with big Jewish ideas. The fellows proved themselves equal to the challenge and responded with an array of remarkable and powerful projects on a vast array of subjects, representing a wide array of political positions. We have highlighted a number of the pieces which showed particular originality or writing and production excellence below.*

## Reuven and Gad: (How) Should Jews Live in the Diaspora?

[Statistics](#) | [Numbers 32](#) | [Rashi](#)

In 2019, 6.7 million Jews lived in Israel, 45% of the 14.8 million Jews worldwide. This number has been steadily increasing for many years, and as it approaches and surpasses 50% in the near future, we have to ask ourselves – what is the role of diaspora Jews in relation to Israel? I believe that if someone chooses to live in exile, they nevertheless hold significant responsibility and should feel a deep connection to the land of Israel. These days, Jews have more freedom on this issue than ever before; Jews live in safety and freedom both in Israel and, for the most part, in places like the United States and France. I will explore this question through the example of two of the earliest willfully diaspora communities: the tribes of Reuven and Gad.

Numbers 32 recounts the Reuvenites' and Gadites' request to settle on the East bank of the Jordan rather than enter the land of Israel:

*The Reuvenites and the Gadites owned cattle in very great numbers. Noting that the lands of Yazer and Gilead were a region suitable for cattle, the Gadites and the Reuvenites came to Moses, Eleazar the priest, and the chieftains of the community, and said, 'the land that the LORD has conquered for the community of Israel is cattle country, and your servants have cattle. It would be a favor to us,' they continued, 'if this land were given to your servants as a holding; do not move us across the Jordan.'*

Moshe's initial response is to rebuke them. However, the two tribes continue to plead, and eventually a compromise is reached. Ultimately, the tribes of Reuven and Gad are permitted to dwell in the cattle country outside of Eretz Yisrael, as long as they fight alongside the rest of B'nai Yisrael in battle. I believe that this event contains a lot of significance for American Jews in the 21st century. Reuven and Gad were the first Jewish communities to make the active decision to live in the Galut at a time where most Jews lived in the land of Israel. As diaspora Jews at a time when, once again, half of the Jewish people are Israeli, we have a lot to learn from this biblical model. In examining the details of this exchange with Moshe, we can get an impression of the way diaspora Judaism should look as intended by Hashem. First of all, we need to understand why Moshe initially objected to the proposal; we read in Numbers 23:6-7:

*Moses replied to the Gadites and the Reuvenites, 'Are your brothers to go to war while you stay here? Why will you turn the minds of the Israelites from crossing into the land that the LORD has given them?'*

Moshe then recounts the story of the twelve spies, the messengers who also turned the hearts of B'nai Yisrael from going into the land. As a result, the generation of the spies had to die in the desert and only their children were allowed into the promised land.

Rashi, in his commentary on the Tanakh, explains why Moshe disapproves of the plan at first:

*ולמה תניאון — Why do you dishearten. [Why do you] turn aside and restrain their hearts from crossing, for they will think that you are afraid to cross because of the war, and the strength of the cities and the people.*

Moshe is afraid that, by not going into the land, the two tribes will demoralize the other ten from also going into the land and fulfilling God's covenant. He believes the tribes are dishonest in their intentions; they are just afraid of following Hashem and going to war.

In the end, Reuven and Gad are sincere, and they make a compromise that allows them to settle to the East of the Jordan (Numbers 32:16-19):

*Then they stepped up to him and said, 'We will build here sheepfolds for our flocks and towns for our children. And we will hasten as shock-troops in the van of the Israelites until we have established them in their home, while our children stay in the fortified towns because of the inhabitants of the land. We will not return to our homes until every one of the Israelites is in possession of his portion. But we will not have a share with them in the territory beyond the Jordan, for we have received our share on the east side of the Jordan.'*

Reuven and Gad agree to not only go to war alongside B'nai Yisrael, but to be shock troopers on the front lines of battle. They will be allowed to settle in the lands of Yazer and Gilead, but they do not escape the responsibility of supporting their fellow Jews as they go into Israel; they have to risk their lives for it.

This has many implications for modern-day Jews. Despite living thousands of years later, diaspora Jews can use this as a template to determine what responsibility they have towards Jews in Israel. This text indicates that, while it is preferable to live in the land, it is permissible to live outside of it. However, those in exile share an equal amount of responsibility in protecting Israel with their Israeli counterparts. Moshe says that the tribes of Reuven and Gad must "be present" with B'nai Yisrael as they enter the land. In my opinion, this does not necessarily translate directly into an obligation for American Jews to join the IDF. While this is an admirable and important thing to do, there is much more to the idea of "being present." To be present with the part of the Jewish people who live in Israel, diaspora Jews must form a connection with Israeli Jews and stand with

Israel, whether that means being patriotic on Israeli Independence day or speaking up about an Israeli policy one disagrees with. We may be able to live outside of the land, but we can never separate ourselves from it.