



Chabad.ORG

“A Jewish view on America’s birthday”

READ MORE



ב"ה

Women of Menasseh

By Menachem Feldman

At the conclusion of the fourth book of the Torah, the Jewish people are camped at the eastern bank of the Jordan River, ready to cross into the Promised Land. This is the final segment of the saga of the Jewish people described in the Torah. (The fifth book consists of Moses’ repetition of the first four books.)



Art by Rivka Korf Studio

We would expect the final verses of the fourth book to capture an important story, idea or lesson that expresses the culmination of the story of our people. Yet, the concluding story seems trivial, and inconsequential for us today.

In this Torah portion, we read about how the members of the tribe of Menasseh approached Moses, concerned about the possibility of the five daughters of Zelophehad marrying members of another tribe. Earlier in the story, in response to their request, the daughters of Zelophehad were granted the right to inherit their deceased father’s portion of the Land of Israel. If the daughters of Zelophehad would marry members of another tribe, they would ultimately pass the inherited land to their own children. The land would then be transferred from their tribe to the tribe of their husbands (as the tribal division is patriarchal), depriving the tribe of Menasseh of tribal land. Moses agreed with the members of Menasseh and instructed the daughters to marry within their tribe. The book concludes by telling us that the women did just that:

The concluding story seems trivial

Machlah, Tirtzah, Choglah, Milcah and Noa married their cousins. They married into the families of the sons of Manashe, the son of Joseph, and their inheritance remained with the tribe of their father's family.¹

Upon deeper analysis, the story of these five women does, in fact, capture a central theme of the Torah, and, indeed, symbolizes the purpose of the Jewish people on this earth.

The backstory is as follows: two of the tribes, Reuven and Gad, requested that they be granted land east of the Jordan, outside the borders of the land of Israel. After some discussion, Moses reluctantly conceded to their request and allocated the land east of the Jordan to them. Surprisingly, although they did not request it, Moses also decided to settle half the tribe of Menasseh east of the Jordan.

Why did Moses split the tribe of Menasseh and place half the tribe outside the land of Israel?

Moses, explains the Rebbe, was teaching us that our mission is not merely to live a holy and wholesome life in Israel; rather, our task is to spread the holiness of Israel to the rest of the world. While Reuven and Gad did not want to enter Israel, Menasseh, divided between both banks of the Jordan, had a foot in both worlds. Half the tribe was in Israel, and half the tribe was tasked with expanding the holiness of Israel to foreign soil.

More than anyone else in the tribe, the five sisters embodied this message. For while the collective tribe of Menasseh lived on both sides of the Jordan, each individual member of the tribe lived either in Israel or outside of Israel. The five daughters of Zelophehad, however, inherited their own land within the Land of Israel and then married cousins who lived on the other side of the Jordan. Thus, by settling on both sides of the Jordan, they optimized the Torah's central purpose: to first create a holy environment in Israel, and then to spread that holiness all throughout the earth.

First create a holy environment, then spread that holiness

We who live outside of Israel must look to these remarkable women for inspiration. Our presence in the diaspora should not be a rejection of the holiness of Israel, as was the attitude of Reuven and Gad, but rather, like the five sisters of the tribe of Menasseh, we are tasked with spreading the wholeness of Israel wherever we may be. Like Machlah, Tirtzah, Choglah, Milcah and Noa, we stand with a foot on either side of the Jordan River. May we succeed in ushering in the era when “G-d will expand your boundaries”² and “the (holiness of) land of Israel will spread to all lands.”^{3 4}

Daughters of Zelophehad

Parshah

Matot

FOOTNOTES

1. [Numbers 36:11-12](#).
2. [Deuteronomy 12:20](#).
3. Sifri, Devarim.
4. Adapted from the teachings of the Rebbe, *Likkutei Sichot*, Matot-Massei, vol. 28.



By Menachem Feldman

Rabbi Menachem Feldman serves as the director of the Lifelong Learning department at the Chabad Lubavitch Center in Greenwich, Connecticut.

[More from Menachem Feldman](#)

© Copyright, all rights reserved. If you enjoyed this article, we encourage you to distribute it further, provided that you comply with Chabad.org's copyright policy.