



ICJW Bea Zucker Online Bible Study Program

“The Five Books of Moses: Contemporary Issues and Classic Perspectives”

By Dr. Bonna Devora Haberman

43 Mase'ei — Supple Sacred Boundaries

Text

במדבר לד

ב צו את-בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם כי-אתם באים אל-הארץ כנען ז את הארץ אשר תפ' ל' לכם בנחלה ארץ כנען לגבל' תיה. ג והיה לכם פאת-נגב ממדבר-צן על-ידי אדום והיה לכם גבול נגב מקצה ים-המלח קדמה. ד ונסב לכם הגבול מנגב למעלה עקרבים ועבר צנה והיה (והיו) תוצא' תיו מנגב לקדש ברנע ויצא חצר-אדר ועבר עצמ'נה. ה ונסב הגבול מעצמון נחלה מצרים והיו תוצא' תיו הימה. ו וגבול ים והיה לכם הים הגדול וגבול זה-יהיה לכם גבול ים. ז וזה-יהיה לכם גבול צפון מן-הים הגד' ל' תתאו לכם ה'ר ההר. ח מה'ר ההר תתאו לב' א חמת והיו תוצא' ת הגבל צדדה. ט ויצא הגבל זפר'נה והיו תוצא' תיו חצר עינן זה-יהיה לכם גבול צפון. י והתאויתם לכם לגבול קדמה מחצר עינן שפמה. יא וירד הגבל משפם הרבלה מקדם לעין וירד הגבל ומחה על-כתף ים-כנרת קדמה. יב וירד הגבול הירדנה והיו תוצא' תיו ים המלח ז את תהיה לכם הארץ לגבל' תיה סביב.

במדבר לו

א ויקרבו ראשי האבות למשפחת בני-גלעד בן-מכיר בן-מנשה ממשפח'ת בני יוסף וידברו לפני מ'שה ולפני הנשאים ראשי אבות לבני ישראל. ב וי' אמרו את-אד'ני צנה יהוה לתת את-הארץ בנחלה בגורל לבני ישראל ואד'ני צנה ביהוה לתת את-נחלת צלפחד אחינו לבנ' תיו. ג והיו לאחד מבני שבטי בני-ישראל לנשים ונגרעה נחלתן מנחלת אב' תינו ונוסף על נחלת המטה אשר תהינה להם ומג'רל נחלתנו יגרע. ד ואם-יהיה הי' בל לבני ישראל ונוספה נחלתן על נחלת המטה אשר תהינה להם ומנחלת מטה אב' תינו יגרע נחלתן. ה ויצו מ'שה את-בני ישראל על-פי יהוה לאמר כן מטה בני-יוסף ד' ברים. ו זה הדבר אשר-צנה יהוה לבנות צלפחד לאמר לטוב בעיניהם תהינה לנשים אך למשפחת מטה אביהם תהינה לנשים. ז ול' א-תס'ב נחלה לבני ישראל ממטה אל-מטה כי איש בנחלת מטה אב' תיו ידבקו בני ישראל. ח וכל-בת י' רשת נחלה ממטות בני ישראל לאחד ממשפחת מטה אביה תהיה לאשה למען יירשו בני ישראל איש נחלת אב' תיו. ט ול' א-תס'ב נחלה ממטה למטה אחר כי-איש בנחלתו ידבקו מטות בני ישראל. י כ' אשר צנה יהוה את-מ'שה כן עשו בנות צלפחד. יא ותהינה מחלה תרצה ונחלה ומלכה ונ'עה בנות צלפחד לבני ד'יהן לנשים. יב ממשפח'ת בני-מנשה בן-יוסף היו לנשים ותהי נחלתן על-מטה משפחת אביהן. יג אלה המצו'ת והמשפטים אשר צנה יהוה ביד-מ'שה אל-בני ישראל בערב'ת מואב על ירדן ירחו.

Bamidbar 34

² Instruct the Israelite people and say to them: When you enter the land of Canaan, this is the land that shall fall to you as your portion, the land of Canaan with its various boundaries:

³ Your southern sector shall extend from the wilderness of Zin alongside Edom. Your southern boundary shall start on the east from the tip of the Dead Sea. ⁴ Your boundary shall then turn to pass south of the ascent of Akrabbim and continue to Zin, and its limits shall be south of Kadesh-barnea, reaching Hazar-addar and continuing to Azmon. ⁵ From Azmon the boundary shall turn toward the Wadi of Egypt and



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terminate at the Sea. ⁶ For the western boundary you shall have the coast of the Great Sea; that shall serve as your western boundary. ⁷ This shall be your northern boundary: Draw a line from the Great Sea to Mount Hor; ⁸ from Mount Hor draw a line to Lebo-hamath, and let the boundary reach Zedad. ⁹ The boundary shall then run to Ziphron and terminate at Hazar-enan. That shall be your northern boundary. ¹⁰ For your eastern boundary you shall draw a line from Hazar-enan to Shepham. ¹¹ From Shepham the boundary shall descend to Riblah on the east side of Ain; from there the boundary shall continue downward and abut on the eastern slopes of the Sea of Kinnereth. ¹² The boundary shall then descend along the Jordan and terminate at the Dead Sea. That shall be your land as defined by its boundaries on all sides. //

Bamidbar 36

¹ The family heads in the clan of the descendants of Gilead son of Machir son of Manasseh, one of the Josephite clans, came forward and appealed to Moses and the chieftains, family heads of the Israelites. ² They said, "The Lord commanded my lord to assign the land to the Israelites as shares by lot, and my lord was further commanded by the Lord to assign the share of our kinsman Zelophehad to his daughters. ³ Now, if they marry persons from another Israelite tribe, their share will be cut off from our ancestral portion and be added to the portion of the tribe into which they marry; thus our allotted portion will be diminished. ⁴ And even when the Israelites observe the jubilee, their share will be added to that of the tribe into which they marry, and their share will be cut off from the ancestral portion of our tribe." ⁵ So Moses, at the Lord's bidding, instructed the Israelites, saying: "The plea of the Josephite tribe is just. ⁶ This is what the Lord has commanded concerning the daughters of Zelophehad: They may marry anyone they wish, provided they marry into a clan of their father's tribe. ⁷ No inheritance of the Israelites may pass over from one tribe to another, but the Israelites must remain bound each to the ancestral portion of his tribe. ⁸ Every daughter among the Israelite tribes who inherits a share must marry someone from a clan of her father's tribe, in order that every Israelite may keep his ancestral share. ⁹ Thus no inheritance shall pass over from one tribe to another, but the Israelite tribes shall remain bound each to its portion." ¹⁰ The daughters of Zelophehad did as the Lord had commanded Moses: ¹¹ Mahlah, Tirzah, Hoglah, Milcah, and Noah, Zelophehad's daughters, were married to sons of their uncles, ¹² marrying into clans of descendants of Manasseh son of Joseph; and so their share remained in the tribe of their father's clan. ¹³ These are the commandments and regulations that the Lord enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.

Context

Closing Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, parshat Mase'ei begins with a summary of each leg that the Israelites journey and camp, from the exodus from Egypt until their arrival in the steppes of Moab, at the bank of the Jordan River. At the border of the Promised Land, God instructs Moshe about how they will enter, conquer, and possess the land, and apportion it among the tribes. The text sets out the geographic boundaries, including the area to be held by the two and a half tribes that are to remain on the east side of the Jordan River.



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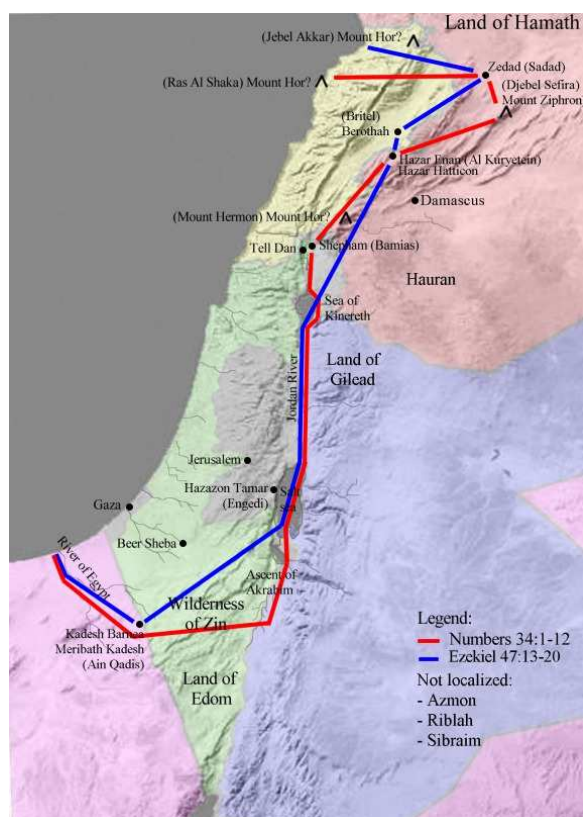
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Towns and pastures are to be designated for the Levites. Six cities of refuge are to be established to protect people-slaughterers from the relatives of their victims who would seek to avenge the blood of their kin. Until the alleged murderer is properly tried by a court of law, a person who kills another is protected in an *ir miqlat*. At least two witnesses are required for a capital case – where there is a death penalty.

The book concludes by settling the case of a Josephite tribe in which the Zelophehad daughters are to acquire the inheritance. The daughters are required to marry within their tribe in order not to diminish its portion – it was assumed that women leave for their spouse's family when they marry.

Explorations



Parshat Mase'ei is occupied with the physical Land of Israel – defining the borders, and assigning the portions. The detailed description of the borders offered in our parasha, in Bamidbar 34 is very different from a passage in Bereishit, the “covenant between the pieces”,

On that day the Lord made a covenant with Avram, saying, "To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates" (Ber. 15:18).

In the earliest stage of the Jewish story, Avram is promised land from the Nile River in Egypt to the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia – most of the Middle East. When the land is a distant object of longing, the Torah speaks in expansive terms about a massive sweep of territory. However, our parasha addresses the Israelites who are encamped at the brink of the Promised Land, preparing to actually enter it. Mase'ei deals with dividing up concrete portions. When the Jewish homeland is no longer an abstract fantasy, the Torah offers a much more modest promise – the area West of the Jordan River extending from the latitude of the northern Mount Hor to the Dead Sea in the south (see the [map alongside](#)). A pasuk in Shmuel I

describes an even smaller Israel, "And all of Israel, from Dan to Be'er Sheva, knew that Shmuel was a trustworthy prophet..." 3:20). The “Dan to Be'er Sheva” formula appears frequently in the books of Shmuel and a few other places in the Tanakh (Shoftim 20:1, 1 Shmuel 3:20, 2 Shmuel 3:10, 2 Shmuel 17:11, 2 Shmuel 24:2, 2 Shmuel 24:15, 1 Kings 4:25, 1 Chronicles 21:2, and 2 Chronicles 30:5).



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The tremendous variance in the boundaries of the land raises important political issues that cannot be resolved here – this is not the place for such a debate. Based on the Tanakh, we cannot make claims to an absolute definition of the borders of the land of Israel. It is clear in the Tanakh that the borders of Israel are not fixed and absolute – they change with conditions over time.

The sages introduced the distinction between Biblical boundaries and the actual areas held by the Jews in second temple times. The sacred laws about the produce of the land obtain only in the latter more limited areas. Today, lands tilled by non-Jews even within the realm recognized halakhically as Eretz Israel are not obligated by such rules. Only active ownership by Jews obligates farmers to sanctify the produce of their land.

The purpose of defining borders might seem to express a territorial claim about sovereignty over land – entitlement to the land, to conquer, possess, and control it. Often, verses from Bereishit, and not from our parasha are cited to support such claims about the greater Land of Israel – *Eretz Yisrael HaShlema*, the “whole” land. However, Rashi and many interpreters of this passage are primarily interested in understanding where the special commandments that apply to Israel are binding. Here is Rashi's comment,

[This is the land that shall fall to you \(Bamidbar 34:2\)](#): Since many precepts apply to the Land [of Israel] and do not apply outside the Land, the Torah found it necessary to chart the outer limits of its boundaries from all sides, to inform you that the precepts apply everywhere within these borders.

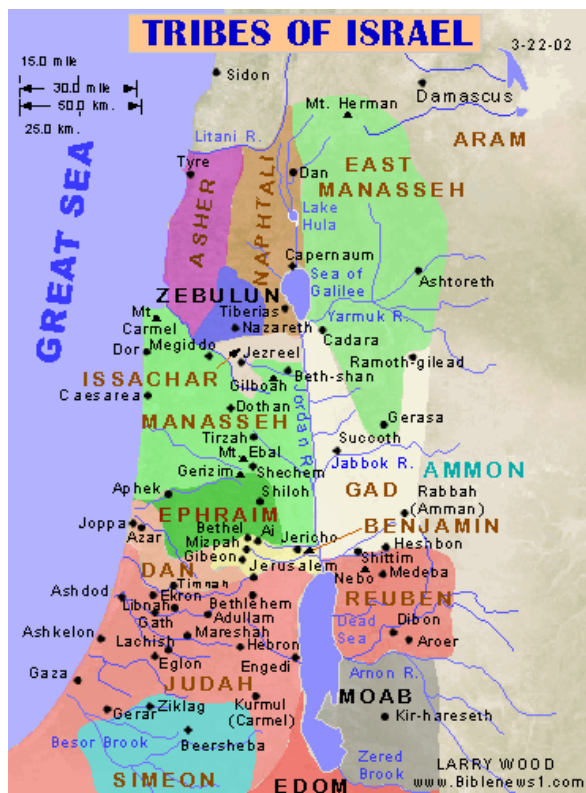
Rashi's attitude is grounded in the first order of the Mishna, *Z'raim* that interprets the special rules governing the produce of the land and the fruits of the trees within the boundaries of Israel. Many of the special commandments that depend on the land of Israel connect the agricultural cycle and its fruit with sacred service. In the eyes of the Torah, sacred service thoroughly integrates social and ritual obligations. The dignified sustenance and protection of all members of society, the health of the earth and all who inhabit it, and the functioning of the Temple all derive from the sanctification of living in the land, working, and stewarding it. Tithes and offerings, firstfruits, portions for the poor, orphan, stranger, and widow, Levites, and Kohanim come from the same harvest. All are to rest, and restore a wholeness and balance among people and earth according to the cycles of the *shmita*-sabbatical and *yovel*-jubilee. To enter and live in the land involves special social and spiritual responsibility.



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Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his treatise, *Halakhic Man* (sic) writes passionately about the sacredness of the activities of performing commandments in our earthly world,

The task of the religious individual is bound up with the performance of commandments, and this performance is confined to this world, to physical, concrete reality, to clamorous, tumultuous life, pulsating with exuberance and strength. ..Therefore, holiness means the holiness of earthly here-and-now life. (p. 33)

Reading this approach into our parasha suggests that the significance of the borders is to define an area where there is special attention to divinely-inspired action. Indeed, it is possible to understand that special attention to fulfilling divinely-inspired action actively constitutes the sacredness of the land.

Within the boundaries set out in Mase'ei, the Torah assigns each tribe to a specific part of the Land; leaders are given the task of apportioning the land of each tribe. Within Israel's compact area, there are

many distinct geographic regions, each with quite unique conditions – topography, climate, soil, flora and fauna. While there are many ways to divide regions and sub-regions, the general areas are:

- the Mediterranean Sea coastal plain – the Western Galil, the Carmel Region, the Sharon Plain, the Central Coastal Plain, the Southern Coastal Plain – western Negev
- the central hills - the lower and upper Galil, the Samarian Hills, the Judean Hills
- the Jordan Rift Valley continuing south to the Arava Valley (part of Syrian East-African Rift), east and south of the central highlands, and
- the Negev Desert.

Every family, indeed every Israelite has a specific place. In parashat Behar, the Torah specifies that every Jubilee cycle, every 50 years, each family returns to its original portion,

You shall sanctify the fiftieth year. You shall proclaim release throughout the land for all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: each of you shall return to her/his holding and each of you shall return to her/his family. (VaYiqra 25:10)

Accordingly, every Israelite receives and bequeaths to future generations a connection to a specific area; each has roots in a particular zone and aspect of the land. This connectedness helps explain the petition of the Zelophehad family at the end of the parasha. The accepted



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biblical practice was for a woman to leave her family to live with her spouse's family. In order to keep their inherited portion within the tribe – the Zelophehad daughters marry their cousins.

In most cultures, the land is figured as a woman – often a territory conquered and possessed. According to the ancient Babylonian myth, *Enuma Elish*, Tiamat's defeated, torn body is formed into the heavens and earth. “Marianne” is the national emblem signifying *La France*; the Elizabethan virgin queen was considered to have been chaste and intact as the British homeland; mother earth is the symbol of Nature, sometimes a helpless maiden, often violated and in need of “protection”, sometimes an old wise and powerful matron who wreaks havoc and revenge, etc. This symbolism has both negative and positive aspects. It certainly genders our conversations, images, and roles in respect to land and nation.

In the broader cultural context, “motherland” signifies not only the place a person was born, but the birthplace of an entire nation. It implies an earthly rootedness, a commitment to the land, which itself is understood to be a living entity, nurturing and abundantly fruitful. (Assaf Sagiv, “[Zionism and the Myth of Motherland](#)”)

In his essay, Sagiv goes on to argue that contemporary Zionism has come to prefer technology to land, and has thereby passed up on the unique connection to *her* expressed in Judaism. I conclude this current discussion of our parasha with a personal poem about my relationship to the land of Israel from my book, [ReReading Israel: The Spirit of the Matter](#) – from a chapter entitled “(Re)Entering the Garden”,

Pulse of fresh water at the sources of the Jordan,
blood surging in my veins;
skeletal ridges of the Carmel,
cage of my ribs;
rolling contours of the Galil,
my shoulders and hips;
fertile wadis in winter splendor,
lush germinating womb;
ripening figs, grapes and pomegranates,
my fruitfulness aroused;
proud cypress,
my nimble limbs;
parched gold of thistled fields,
seasons of my wisdom,
sand and shore,
my outer encasement;
jasmine-infused Jerusalem evening,
carnal incense,
azure blue sea and sky,
my crystal vision of creation.



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Questions for Discussion

- Discuss Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's ideas in relation to our parasha – the boundaries of the land define a domain where unique commandments are binding. Explain how you agree or disagree. Consider the meaning and relevance of these ideas to contemporary Israel.
- Consider the meaning of the sacredness of the Land of Israel. Do you believe that sacredness inheres in the land, independent of our actions, or does it depend on our behavior? What are the pros and cons of holding to each of those alternatives?
- How do you interpret the variations in the definitions of the borders of the Land of Israel – in the Tanakh, and in our time?
- Explore the concepts, “Motherland” and “Fatherland”. When and why are they used differently? Analyze their associations and meanings.
- Compare and contrast the specific kind of connection you experience to your land and to the Land of Israel.

Study Links

For a more detailed discussion of biblical border discrepancies see [this webpage](#).

See this brief statement of the eternal hope for the greater Land of Israel from the religious organization Ohr Sameach, “[Israel Forever](#).”

[This interpretation](#) of two different forms of loving the Land of Israel inspired by teachings of the early religious Zionist Rabbi Kook – for the purpose to “merit inheriting the Land through love and wholeness and inner strength.”

[This site](#) explores the meanings and significance of the Virgin Queen of England, Elizabeth I. About the metaphor of America as woman, see this book by Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor As Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. [Here](#) is a brief summary of Kolodny's social critical approach.

[Here](#) is a post WWII statue of La France. These are images of la France from a “Vive la France” series, some bordering on pornography: <http://www.odessaapartments-ukraine.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/vivelafrance.jpg>;
http://fc09.deviantart.net/fs71/f/2010/082/9/1/Viva_la_France_by_chatgr.jpg;
<http://omarortiz.files.wordpress.com/2012/08/vive-la-france-140-x-180.jpg>

[This essay](#), “Nature being represented as woman,” explores the meaning and sources of the symbolism.



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Summary of Issues

We might interpret much of this parasha as making territorial claims about entitlement to the Land of Israel. This attitude also corresponds to the cultural symbolism of land as woman, a material being who is too often conquered and possessed. Rabbinic texts suggest how the borders set out in our parasha establish a domain in which heightened sacred intention and action are binding - spiritual and social responsibility.

Methods & Observations

We often import contemporary perspectives when we read the Torah, and make assumptions about meaning on that basis. Whereas so much contemporary discourse focuses on the borders of Israel in relation to territorial dispute, the entitlement of competing claimants, and negotiations for peace, parshat Mase'ei might intend borders to indicate something completely different.

Contact

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