

Doubling Down on the Bridge

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As Religious Zionists of America, we are often asked about the oxymoronic nature of our identity. How is it possible to be a religious Zionist who makes their home outside of Israel? Besides the halachic implications, it's an existential question both for our movement and for us as individual members of that movement.

In conceptualizing this question, I come back to a story at the end of Bamidbar, with the Jewish people about to enter the land of Israel. Reuven and Gad come to Moshe with a request - they don't want to go in. They like the lands where they are, it's good for their families, it's good financially. And Moshe - an ardent Zionist who would've given anything to make it into Israel - is pretty upset about this. After some back and forth he agrees with their request but insists on some conditions, including putting half of the tribe of Menashe with them. It seems surprising, both because Menashe never requested to stay on those lands, and also because we've never heard about splitting a tribe in half.

Perhaps Moshe's condition was predicated on the fact that some Jews would always live outside of Israel, for better or for worse. But for it to work, there has to be a strong bridge, a strong influence that's maintaining and strengthening the connection to Israel and to the rest of the Jewish nation. And that bridge was literally Menashe, whose lands bridged the Jordan river and who had a strong presence both inside and outside of the land of Israel. Why Menashe? Maybe because he grew up and learned to survive and thrive outside of Israel, and because as a son of Yosef, he was someone with a deep desire for Israel and a deep connection to the unity of the Jewish people.

To me this epitomizes the role that the Mizrachi movement plays - with our world headquarters in Israel, and branches and shlichim around the world. And it epitomizes the role that we, as religious Zionists in America (and throughout the world) need to be playing, connecting our fellow Jews and serving as a bridge to Israel.

Going into this new year, with all the challenges facing Israel and our local Jewish communities, now is the time for us to double down on our love for Israel, our love for the Jewish people, and our essential role in bridging the two.