



SERMON MATTOT-MASS'EI: TRIBALISM

**Rabbi Gabriel Kanter-Webber, Saturday 15 July 2023 – *bat mitzvah of Ela and Libby*
Brighton and Hove Progressive Synagogue**

1 This week's parashah, Mattot-Mass'ei, takes its name from one of the first words in it: הַמְּטוֹת, 'the tribes'.ⁱ The Israelites were divided into twelve tribes. Well, thirteen if you count the Ephraimites and the Manassites (because Joseph's tribe split into two). But then the number drops back to twelve if we don't count the Levites (because they didn't have their own area of land).

2 Either way, tribes, and the relationships between them, are very important to both of the readings we heard this morning.

3 Libby, you read the story of the Reubenites and the Gadites, who decided not to enter the Promised Land, but instead to settle down just outside it, in a peaceful area of plains and fields, there to raise their sheep.ⁱⁱ In your d'var Torah, you beautifully explained to us the dilemma of fairness that this decision engendered: was it reasonable that those two groups could opt out

of the war of conquest in exchange for not taking any of the land of Israel? Or were they unfairly taking advantage of the other tribes' military courage?

4 Ela, you read about the daughters of Tz'lof'chad, who, having been awarded the right to inherit from their father despite being women,ⁱⁱⁱ were then limited in their choice of marriage partner so as to keep the wealth within his tribe.^{iv} This gave you the perfect example for your d'var Torah: there was a huge step forward – equal inheritance regardless of sex – but then the world still wasn't perfect, and there were still more fights to be had. Why was the dad's tribal lineage so important that it should override his daughters' freedom?

5 Tribes are complicated things. On the one hand, they nurture and facilitate diversity. The Reubenites and the Gadites didn't want to do the same thing as everyone else... and so they didn't. It would have been difficult for an individual in one of the other tribes to take such a momentous decision, but the collective



identity of the two tribes, as a whole, empowered them to do their own thing. On the other hand, tribes can promote insularity and distrust of strangers. The fear of Tz'lof'chad's property passing to an outsider – to someone who wasn't within the fold – was irrational, yet palpable.

6 The *Africa Study Bible* comments on the tribes' trials and tribulations from, unsurprisingly, an African perspective. "Every good thing God has created," it says, "can be spoiled and turned into something that displeases God. The word 'tribalism' can often refer negatively to the sin that arises from an overcommitment to one's tribe and the compromise of the unity that God expects of people. Tribalism can refer to an irrational and selfish loyalty by tribal members at the expense of truth, justice, or the good of society at large. If we go back far enough, practically all Africans share a common ancestry, but we have been divided into tribes and clans based upon factors such as geography, climate, religion and conflict. Like the tribes in the Bible, our tribalism has proven to be both a blessing and a curse."^v



7 This analysis is by no means limited to Africa, though.

Much of the modern world is built on the remnants of historic tribes – from Celts to Slavs to Bedouin – and even the rest of us can, from time to time, be accused of tribalism. The archaeologist Eveline van der Steen has observed: “Tribes can be egalitarian or hierarchical. They can be pastoralists, farmers, raiders or traders, or a bit of everything. Tribes can be warlike or peaceful.

Leadership can be inherited, or restricted to a leading family, or on an achievement basis only. The power of the leader can range from almost absolute to completely dependent on consent within the tribe.”^{vi}

8 What is it that decides the nature of the tribe? More than anything, it’s the leadership. That’s why this parashah starts with the words: וַיְדַבֵּר מֹשֶׁה אֶל-רְאִשֵׁי הַמִּטּוֹת, ‘Moses spoke to the heads of the tribes.’^{vii} What Moses was telling them was the Israelite laws on promises. And why was he only telling the heads of the tribes? Because their promises are overwhelmingly more important than those of others.^{viii} Their promises don’t just affect



their own lives, and they don't just affect the lives of the people around them. They affect the tone of the tribe and they affect the future.

9 Ela and Libby, you've both made promises today.

You've said that you "promise to go on studying" Judaism,^{ix} and to remain as part of your community. That's an important promise, but it's not one I'm planning or able to enforce. Yet it's one I hope you'll keep. You've shown us this morning that you are both going to be enormous assets to the tribe that is the Jewish people, and that, with you as future leaders, we can look forward to an era of openness and tolerance: the very best of tribalism! כן יהי רצון, may this be God's will.

ⁱ Numbers 30:2

ⁱⁱ Numbers 32:1-11

ⁱⁱⁱ Numbers 27:1-7

^{iv} Numbers 36:5-13

^v John Jusu (ed), *Africa Study Bible* (George, South Africa: Oasis International, 2012-16): 190.



^{vi} Eveline van der Steen, *Near Eastern Tribal Societies during the Nineteenth Century: economy, society and politics between tent and town* (London: Routledge, 2013): 17.

^{vii} Numbers 30:2

^{viii} Oznayim la-Torah ad loc

^{ix} *Siddur Lev Chadash* p 591

