To Listen and to Discern

Parashat Mattot, the first of the two parashiyot this week, opens and closes with the idea of meaningful and thoughtful communication. At the beginning of the parashah, Moses speaks to the leaders of the tribes, warning them to fulfill their promises. Once a vow is uttered, especially before the people, it is the responsibility of the leader to fulfill that vow. The message is certainly not lost on our modern ears, as we are vividly reminded of ubiquitous campaign promises spewed by candidates running for political office. All too often, vows sadly remain unfulfilled. Moreover, Mattot closes with a curious exchange between Moses and two tribes. The Reubenites and Gadites request that they be granted territory in the Transjordan. Given their wealth of cattle, these tribes argue that the land of Transjordan is most suitable for grazing. Angrily, Moses responds to their request, “And now you, a breed of sinful men, have replaced your fathers, to add still further to the Lord’s wrath against Israel. If you turn away and God abandons them once more in the wilderness, you will bring calamity upon all this people” (Num. 32:14–15). Moreover, he accuses them of abandoning their brethren at the time of greatest need. How are we to understand the Reubenite and Gadite request as well as Moses’s heated response?

Joseph B’khor Shor, a medieval commentator from Orleans, makes a valuable point. He writes,

Moses responded in this way because they [the Gadites and the Reubenites] said “do not move us across the Jordan” (Numbers 32:5). Moses reasoned that they did not want to cross over for fear of war. But they responded, “We ourselves will cross over as shock-troops (halutzim), at the instance of the Lord, into the Land of Canaan; and we will keep our hereditary holding across the Jordan” (Numbers 32:31–32). In other words, they said that they will go first as it says in Joshua 6:13, “the vanguard (he-halutz) marched in front of them.” Just as we took the first territorial possession, so too will we be the first to go to war. Moses, however, focused on the words, “do not move us across the Jordan” (Num. 32:5). This led to a tragic misunderstanding. It is for this reason that the B’khor Shor underscores the use of the word halutzim, meaning pioneers or vanguard. The Reubenites and Gadites promise Moses that they will serve as “shock troops,” and that once the Israelite mission is accomplished, they will return to the lands of Yazer and Gilead (the Transjordan).

This exchange is pregnant with meaning. Before hearing the entire argument of these two tribes, Moses jumps to an unwarranted conclusion. Granted, Moses is undoubtedly exhausted from the many trials he has faced in the desert—the Golden Calf, Korah, the waters of Merivah, and Ba’al Peor, just to name a few. Past expectations and experience compel Moses to expect the worst. And for their part, the Reubenites and Gadites are not sensitive enough to the fragility and exhaustion of Moses. If they had immediately expressed their desire to fight on behalf of their fellow Israelites, rather than saying, “do not move us across the Jordan,” perhaps Moses would have acquiesced immediately.

Parashat Mattot and the B’khor Shor encourage us to communicate in more thoughtful and intentional ways. By becoming more deliberate in speech, we can journey together toward the Promised Land more fruitfully and constructively.

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Parashah Commentary

This week’s commentary was written by Dr. Walter Herzberg, Assistant Professor of Bible and Professional and Pastoral Skills, JTS.

“They Said” / “They Said”

In this week’s parashah, we are told that the children of Reuben and Gad “had a very great multitude of cattle” (verse 1) and the land of Gilead on the eastern side of the Jordan was an excellent “place for cattle.” They, therefore, hoped that Moses would permit them to stay on the eastern side of the Jordan and not cross over to Canaan/Israel proper when the time would arrive to enter the Land.

So “the Reubenites and Gadites came and they said (vayomeru) to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and unto the princes of the congregation, saying: ”[the towns of] Atarot, and Dibon, and Jazer, and Nimrah, and Heshbon, and Elealeh, and Sebam, and Nebo, and Beon . . . is a land for cattle, and your servants have cattle” (verse 2).

They are still the speakers; Moses has not yet responded. Nevertheless, the Torah repeats the introductory statement vayomeru as they continue speaking: “they said: if we have found favor in your eyes, let this land be given to your servants as a possession; do not make us cross the Jordan” (verse 5).

Identifying the Question/Problem

We’ve just noticed an occurrence of a not uncommon literary phenomenon in the Torah I call it the “vayomer/vayomer” (he said / he said) phenomenon: a character continues speaking while an additional and seemingly superfluous vayomer (he said) is inserted. Notice the phenomenon is the first step. Understanding why it occurs is the next and more challenging one. Both traditional Jewish commentators and contemporary translators and commentators are aware of the phenomenon, but do not agree as to the nature of its function. Let’s examine the interpretations of a few commentators about the occurrence of this phenomenon in our parashah.

Exploring the Commentators’ Answers to the Question

Ibn Ezra (Abraham Ibn Ezra, 1089–1167, Spain) comments that the Torah adds another “they said” because the Reubenites and Gadites’ opening remarks were so lengthy (verses 3 and 4). In other words, the interminable list of towns Atarot, Dibon, Jazer, etc.—nine in all—required that an additional “they said” be inserted (verse 5) in order to remind the reader that the Reubenites and Gadites are still speaking. This interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s understands the vayomeru/vayomeru phenomenon here simply as a stylistic device with no special meaning intended.

Or Hahayyim (Hayyim Ben Altar, 1696–1743, Morocco/Israel) also suggests that the second vayomer serves a stylistic purpose by marking the explicit articulation of the request that follows their statement of conditions supporting it. In other words, according to Or Hahayyim, the first vayomer ought to be translated “they stated,” while the second ought to be translated “they asked.”

Abarbanel (Don Isaac Abarbanel, 1437–1508, Portugal/Spain/Italy), like Or Hahayyim, understands
the occurrence of the second “they said” to mean “they requested.” However, he sees the second “they said” as far more than a stylistic device, and rather one overflowing with psychological insight. For him, the use of the vyayomer/vyayomer phenomenon here and in other places in the Torah signifies some sort of pregnant pause residing between the two statements. Abarbanel literally reads between the lines, interpreting the empty white space on the page between the two statements of the Reubenites and Gadites: Abarbanel suggests that they made their request implicitly in their first statement (“the land is a land for cattle and your servants have cattle”), only hinting at their desire to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan because they were embarrassed to make their request “explicitly and openly.” Moses understood their intentions well enough, but refused to take the hint. “He did not rebuke them immediately, but rather kept silent” waiting for them to articulate their request explicitly. When the Reubenites and Gadites saw that Moses was silent and did not respond to their implicit request, they had no choice but to make the request absolutely clear. And that’s why a second “they said” is included, according to Abarbanel. After waiting in vain for the hoped for offer from Moses, they implored: “bring us not over the Jordan.” As soon as they completed their appeal, Moses began to chastise them: “Shall your brethren go to war while you remain here?”

Deriving Lessons from Abarbanel’s Comment
What might be the lesson of Abarbanel’s psychologically nuanced comment? Since Moses did not rebuke the Reubenites and Gadites until they made their request explicit, perhaps we, too, should show restraint by not responding quickly even in a situation where we are almost certain that we understand the intention of another’s indirect statement. We thereby do not rebuke another without being absolutely certain on the one hand, and simultaneously provide others time to reconsider their position. In the end, we may not really know what people intend even though we are quite certain; sometimes we overestimate our ability to decipher people’s intentions. That restraint indeed leads to acquiring and modeling the attribute of humility. Interestingly, Abarbanel is also speaking of humility on the part of the petitioner, suggesting that “frequently it will happen that the humble person will be embarrassed [or uncomfortable] making an outright request of his superior and will [therefore] make the request indirectly as did the Reubenites and Gadites.” Thus the qualities of restraint and humility on both the part of the hopeful petitioner and the one being petitioned are highlighted in this comment for our serious consideration—ensuing from our interpretation of the empty space or silence between the two occurrences of vyayomer.

Exploring One More Comment
Tzeror Hamor (Avraham Saba, 1440–1508, Spain/Portugal/Morocco) approaches our question concerning the two occurrences of vyayomer in a similar fashion to Abarbanel, also reading between the lines and suggesting that the second vyayomer (they said) was triggered by Moses’s deafening silence and the angry expression on his face. The Reubenites and Gadites thought that Moses was angry with them because they had not acceded him the honor due him as the exalted leader of the people. When they made their first statement (preceded by vyayomer), they addressed it to Moses, and to Eleazar the priest, and unto the princes of the congregation (verse 2). Thinking that Moses was offended that they included Eleazar and the princes in their address, they tried to rectify their mistake by speaking once again, this time addressing Moses alone (verse 5) when making their request to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan (verse 5). Tzeror Hamor states that it was as if the Reubenites and Gadites were apologizing and saying “everything is in your hands, and you are the leader, and even though we addressed everyone [originally], don’t be angry with your servants because you are the one [with the power] to give and take none other.” Therefore Moses responded immediately by saying, “shall your brethren go to war while you sit here?” (verse 6). Tzeror Hamor interprets Moses’s response saying that it’s as if Moses were responding as follows: “I’m not worrying about my honor, but rather about the larger community: is it fair that your brethren will go to war while you remain here?”

Deriving Lessons from Both Tzeror Hamor and Aarabanbel’s Comments
Tzeror Hamor seems to be contrasting the interests of a relatively small group within a communal entity with the needs of the larger community as a whole. As the narrative unfolds, Moses recommends that the Reubenites and Gadites be allowed to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan only if they commit to joining the other tribes in the battle for the Land of Canaan that will take place on the western side of the Jordan in Canaan/Israel proper. Although more than pveed at their request to remain where they were, Moses finds a way for the Reubenites to fulfill their communal obligations while allowing them to serve the needs of their families in the best way they see fit. Balancing and considering competing personal needs and communal or business obligations is indeed challenging. Moses helps the Reubenites strike that balance.

While studying and teaching this material this past week with students in the program Nishma: A Summer of Torah Study in the JTS Beit Midrash, Roni Tabick, one of the participating rabbinic fellows, made an insightful comment that emerges from our analysis—that the Reubenites and Gadites misunderstood the reason for Moses’s anger because they were projecting onto him their own concerns or lack thereof. In Roni’s own words (British spelling included), “The Reubenites and Gadites see in Moses the flaw they have in themselves. They prioritise themselves as individual tribes over the good of the nation, so they assume that Moses too prioritises his own honour over the other leaders.”

Roni’s psychological reading leads us into our concluding comments. Because of their assumption that Moses was concerned with his own honor, the Reubenites misread his silence; their misreading between the lines resulted in Moses’s harsh rebuke, according to Tzeror Hamar, Abarbanel, on the other hand, says that Moses got it right. His reading between the lines of the intent of the statement of Reubenites and Gadites was absolutely correct. The fact that Abarbanel and Tzeror Hamor’s close readings of these verses—and especially of the silent spaces within—are very different highlights the significant challenges of literally and figuratively reading between the lines of the Torah text and of situations in our own lives. To quote from Steven Kepnes’s new book The Future of Jewish Theology: “In this form of exegesis . . . the Torah helps us cope with and understand life. This form of exegesis requires that a dialogue between the Torah text and the reader occurs. And . . . it is not clear whether we are interpreting the Torah or the Torah is interpreting us.”

The comments above were intended to demonstrate a three-stage methodology whereby one identifies a textual problem in the Torah text, then examines the responses of various commentators to the textual question, and finally attempts to derive meaning from the comments. The methodology encourages readers to seriously engage with the Torah through close reading of the text, to become aware of the multivalent nature of the text by examining different interpretations of the textual question at hand, and to have the opportunity to consider the possibility of many personally relevant issues that may ensue from this intimate engagement with the Torah portion. This approach is a result of my work with Professor Steven Kepnes (Finard Chair of Jewish Studies, Colgate University) on our book Reading the Bible for Meaning: A Biblical Theology of Exegesis, scheduled for publication next year.

1. The NJPS translation actually addresses the problem by translating the second vyayomer not as “they said,” but rather “they continued.”
2. The term “iterated quotation formula” is used at times in academic literature.
3. Other examples of the phenomenon include Genesis 15:1–5, 16:9–11, and 37:21–22; and Exodus 1:15–16.
4. Among them Ibn Ezra (12th century), Radak (12th to 13th centuries), Abarbanel (15th to 16th centuries), Alshikh (18th century), Or Hahayyim (18th century), Malbim (19th century), Umberto Cassuto (20th century), Nechama Leibowitz (20th century), and Robert Alter (contemporary).
5. The Modern Language Bible actually translates it as “they petitioned.” Umberto Cassuto suggests that, as a rule, the first vyayomer should be translated as “they said,” while the second one should be translated as “they thought,” meaning that the second one was never spoken—only “an elucidation of the inner meaning of [the first] words.”
6. See Abarbanel on Genesis 15:2–3, where he incidentally references our example from Numbers 32.
7. Others favor this general approach as well, including Alshikh, Malbim, Nechama Leibowitz, and Robert Alter.
8. Abarbanel makes this statement in his comment to Genesis 15:2 when referencing our verse concerning the Reubenites and Gadites.
9. In the Hebrew it is very clear because they use only the singular form when making their request—speaking to Moses alone. In older translations such as the OJPS, the singular thy is used instead of your.