

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

The portion of Masei includes the sentence that speaks to the commandment of living in Israel. The key phrase is "and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein." (Numbers 33:53)

Rashi is of the opinion that this sentence does not constitute a command to live in Israel. It is rather good advice. Take possession of the land from its inhabitants, otherwise you will not be able to safely live there.

Ramban (Nahmanides) disagrees. In his addendum to Rambam's (Maimonides) Book of Commandments, Ramban notes that Rambam failed to mention living in Israel as a distinct mitzvah. Ramban writes: "We have been commanded in the Torah to take possession of the land which God gave to the patriarchs and not leave it in the hands of others or allow it to remain desolate, as it says 'and you shall take possession of the land and dwell therein.'" (Addendum, Mitzvat Aseh 4)

Some commentators argue that implicit in Rambam is the commandment to live in Israel. So basic is the mitzvah, writes the late former Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi Shlomo Goren, that it need not be mentioned, as it is the basis for all of Torah.

But whether or not one maintains that Rambam believes it is a mitzvah to live in Israel, doesn't this commandment, as certainly understood by Ramban, fly in the face of our mission to be an or la'goyim? How can we be a light to the nations of the world if we don't live amongst Gentiles and are ensconced in our own homeland?

One could argue however, that the mandate to live in the chosen land of Israel is crucial to the chosen people idea. Being the chosen people doesn't mean that our souls are superior. Rather it suggests that our mission to spread a system of ethical monotheism, of God ethics to the world, is of a higher purpose. And that can only be accomplished in the land of Israel.

From this perspective, the significance of the modern state of Israel is not only as the place of guaranteed political refuge for Jews; or as the place where more mitzvot can be performed or where our continuity as a Jewish nation is assured. Rather it is the only place where we have the potential to carry out the chosen people mandate.

In exile, we can develop communities that can be a "light" to others. But the destiny of the Jewish people lies in the State of Israel. Israel is the only place where we as a nation can become an or la'goyim. In the diaspora, we are not in control of our destiny; we cannot create the society envisioned by the Torah. Only in a Jewish state do we have the political sovereignty and judicial autonomy to potentially establish the society from which other nations can learn the basic ethical ideals of Torah.

As we near Tisha B'av, the fast commemorating our exile from the land, this position reminds us of our obligation to think about Israel, to visit Israel, and, most important, to constantly yearn to join the millions who have already returned home. Only there do we have the potential to be the true am hanivhar (chosen people). © 2005 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

The parsha of Maasei represents the culmination of the story of Israel's sojourn in the desert after its escape from Egypt and the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai. The Jewish people are poised to enter the Holy Land and to adjust to a more "normal" national existence. Manna will no longer come from heaven daily nor will there be miraculous traveling wells of water accompanying them. The parsha now deals with the issues of the borders of Israel and its attendant problems and with the methods of the division of the land amongst its inhabitants. All of this is pretty mundane stuff compared to the heady experiences of the desert - miracles, plagues, rewards and punishments, Moshe's masked radiant countenance and the thrill of building and servicing the mishakan. The parsha even tells us that there will be murders and murderers in the Land of Israel and that cities or refuge must be built to house them and protect them from avenging enemies. From the Midrash it may be implied that there were no such murderous occurrences during Israel's sojourn in the desert. In short, the rarified atmosphere and purely spiritual existence of Israel in the Sinai desert is now over. The challenges of creating an ordered, just and Torah society under natural national and human conditions are now the order of the day. It will take four centuries, until the times of Shmuel, Dovid and Shlomo for these challenges to be

**TORAS AISH IS A WEEKLY PARSHA
NEWSLETTER DISTRIBUTED VIA EMAIL AND THE
WORLD WIDE WEB AT [HTTP://AISHDAS.ORG](http://AISHDAS.ORG).
FOR MORE INFO EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

The material presented in this publication was collected from publicly available electronic mail, computer archives and the UseNet. It is being presented with the permission of the respective authors. Toras Aish is an independent publication, and does not necessarily reflect the views of any given synagogue.

**TO DEDICATE THIS NEWSLETTER PLEASE CALL
973-472-0180 OR EMAIL YITZ@AISHDAS.ORG**

successfully met. The transition from the supernatural to the mundane is much harder to accomplish successfully than is the transition from the ordinary to the spiritual.

To help this transition occur, memory of past events is vital. The newness of the experience of the Land of Israel will be seen in perspective by remembering the previous experiences of Egypt and the desert. Faith and confidence will dominate Jewish life when the Jews recall the history of their existence and their survival and triumph over daunting odds. Rashi indicates that the listing of the thirty-eight encampments of Israel during their trek through the Sinai desert is to remind the Jews of their past difficulties and struggles and how they nevertheless prevailed. Part of the difficulty that Israel faces today in attempting to build a "normal" state and nation is that the early founders of secular Zionism not only denigrated the experiences of the Jewish exile but attempted to erase them from the memory of the "new" Jew they wished to create. Thus, the problems that challenge and disturb us today here in Israel - boundaries and demographics, value systems and the creation of a kinder, gentler Israel - are compounded by the lack of memory that could help us make reference to previous generations' wisdom and strengths. The truth is that we have all been here, in one way or another before, and common sense would dictate that we therefore remember what happened then. But amnesia is the greatest Jewish malady of our day. All of the problems and difficulties that we face are in reality byproducts of that amnesia. Maasei teaches us that we should remember where we have been so that we have a sense of faith and confidence in where we want to now go. © 2005 Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com. For more information on these and other products visit www.rabbiwein.com/jewishhistory.

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Amnon Bazak

This week's Torah portion begins with a list of the travels of Bnei Yisrael, starting with Raamses and ending with the Plains of Moav. It is emphasized that this was written by Moshe: "And Moshe wrote their

leaving, for all their voyages, according to the word of G-d" [Bamidbar 33:2]. (This follows the interpretation of Ibn Ezra, who feels that the phrase "according to the word of G-d" refers to the travel and not to the writing.) This gives us the opportunity to determine what Moshe thought was the most important thing to emphasize with respect to the travel.

The majority of the list is written in a repetitive style - "And they went ... and they camped..." Most of the time the events that took place while the people camped are not mentioned. For example, it is written, "They left Refidim and they camped in the Sinai Desert" [33:15], without mentioning the events at Sinai at all. In the next verse, it is written, "They left the Sinai Desert and they camped in Kivrot Hata'avah" [33:16], without any mention of the tragic meaning of death behind the name of the place.

There are a few exceptions to the dry style of the list. First, the passage through the Red Sea is mentioned briefly. "And they traveled from Pnei Hachiroth and went through the sea to the desert. And they went along a route for three days in the Eitam Desert and camped at Marah." [33:8]. But it is likely that the main reason for mentioning the passage through the Red Sea is to describe the route that Bnei Yisrael took. There are also two comments related to water. "And they traveled from Marah and came to Eilim. And in Eilim there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there." [31:9]. "And they traveled from Alush and camped in Refidim, but there was no water there for the nation to drink" [31:14]. It is not easy to understand why just these two facts were singled out. The Ramban writes, "The miracle of the water at Marah was not mentioned, nor was the affair of the Manna. The point is that the affair at Refidim was so great, when the nation tested G-d, and the site was named Masah U'Meriva because of the controversy, and in the end G-d was sanctified before their eyes by bringing water out of the rock, and this was followed by the war against Amalek. All of this was summarized in the short phrase, 'there was no water there for the nation to drink.' This was a well known and recognized place."

Near the end of the list of sites there is a startling departure from the pattern. "And Aharon the Priest rose up on the double mountain according to the word of G-d, and he died there in the fortieth year after Bnei Yisrael left Egypt, in the fifth month, on the first of the month. Aharon was 123 years old when he died on the double mountain. And the Canaanite, the King of Arad, heard, while sitting in the Negev in the Land of Canaan, that Bnei Yisrael came." [31:38-40]. Why was this emphasized in this case?

Evidently, the death of Aharon and the war with Canaan that happened soon afterwards (see Bamidbar 21:1, including Rashi) was perceived by Moshe as a very important event. This is the only event about which Moshe gives a precise date, except for the redemption from Egypt. It seems that Moshe viewed this as the day

when his punishment began, starting with Aharon and leading to Moshe. Aharon's death was a tangible expression of the fact that this time the Almighty would not forgive, and that Moshe would in fact not be able to enter the land in spite of his prayers and requests. As a result of Aharon's death Moshe understood that he would not be the one to finish the list he was writing. The last journey on which he would lead Bnei Yisrael would be the one that had now brought him to the Plains of Moav.

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Kinder & Gentler Killers

This week we read about the cities of refuge. A man who kills someone accidentally is exiled to an Ir Miklat, a city of refuge. In addition to killers, a very distinguished group of people, the Levites, lived in those cities. Their job was something similar to today's Rabbis. They traveled throughout Israel, teaching and preaching. The Levites would return to their homes and neighbors, people who killed through carelessness, who were convianslaughter of sorts. They played an integral role in the killer's rehabilitation.

The sentence imposed on the killers was also very unique. It was not defined by time, but rather by circumstance. The killers would go free only when the Kohen Gadol (High Priest) would die. The Talmud in Makos tells us that the Kohen Gadol's family members were quite worried. They were not concerned that there would be an assassination plot against the Kohen Gadol's life. They were worried that the convicts would pray that the Kohen Gadol would die before his due time, thus releasing them early. In order to dissuade them, the mother of the Kohen Gadol would distribute food and clothing to the inmates to deter them from praying that her son die.

It is hard to understand. Are there no loved ones waiting for these outcasts with food and clothing to be offered upon release? Were the Kohen Gadol's mom's cookies worth exile in the city of refuge? How did these gifts work as bribes?

Reb Aryeh Levine took it upon himself to visit Jewish inmates, mostly members of the Irgun, held under British rule prior to Israel's statehood. He became like a father to those prisoners, bringing them food, clothes and love. For years, despite sweltering heat and frigid rains, he never missed a Shabbos visit, save one.

Once, in the midst of a Shabbos service, a very excited messenger called him out of the prison. Reb Aryeh's daughter had become paralyzed and the doctors were helpless. He was needed for support at home, immediately. After the Shabbos, an Arab messenger was sent by the concerned inmates to inquire what tragedy interrupted the weekly visit.

The next Shabbos, despite the enduring tragedy at home, the Rabbi went to the prison as usual. Normally during the Torah reading, prisoners would

pledge a few coins to charity. This week the donations were far different.

"I will give up a week of my life for the sake of Reb Aryeh's daughter," the first convict pledged. Another prisoner announced that he would give a month from his. Each one called to the Torah upped the previous pledge until the last prisoner cried out, "what is our life compared to Reb Aryeh's anguish? I will give all my remaining days for the sake of the Rabbi's daughter."

At this unbelievable display of love and affection, Reb Aryeh broke down and wept. Miraculous as it may sound, that Saturday night Reb Aryeh's daughter began to move and within days was fully recovered.

The cities of refuge were not jails, nor were they mere detention camps. They were environments in which reckless people became aware that careless actions have serious ramifications. They were constantly under the influence of their neighbors, the Levites. They would observe them pray, learn, and teach others. They would see the epitome of awareness and care for fellow beings.

The mission of the Kohen Gadol's mother was not just to distribute food. It was to develop a bond with those people whose carelessness spurred a death. They saw the love a parent had for her son as she subconsciously plead with the inmates to spare her child. They saw how a total stranger, despite her great esteem, would make sure that their needs in the city of refuge were cared for. They may have even thought of the loved one they killed and his family.

After developing an awareness of life, they would never be able to pray for the death of anyone, even if it meant their own freedom. In fact, they, like Reb Aryeh's prisoners, may have offered their years for the merit of the Kohen Gadol.

The Torah can not punish without teaching and rehabilitating. It infuses a love for life and spirituality into former careless killers. Its goal is to mold a new person whose attitudes will cause him to be kinder, gentler, and a lot more careful. *The story was adapted from A Tzadik in Our Time, by Simcha Raz, © 1976 Feldheim Publishers. © 1997 by Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and Project Genesis, Inc.*

RABBI PINCHAS WINSTON

Perceptions

These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who left Egypt as a nation under the leadership of Moshe and Aharon. (Bamidbar 33:1)

Journeys: Life is about journeys - your journey, my journey, the next person's journey. We're all on a journey, and not only in this lifetime but throughout history. We travel through the course of one lifetime and then stop after death for a bit to integrate the lessons of the previous journey before moving on again into another incarnation. We are born into the world and into a family, and it feels as if it is the first time we're here,

but it isn't. It is only the next stop on our cosmic journey to personal completion before G-d.

When one learns Sha'ar HaGilgulim (the Gates of Reincarnation) by the Arizal, one gains an appreciation of just how true this is. The following is one of the more famous examples of a soul in motion throughout the ages: As we already know, a Ruach cannot reincarnate until the Nefesh has done so and has been rectified. When the Ruach has been rectified, then the Neshamah will also undergo rectification. In Hevel's case, though the Nefesh and Ruach were damaged and mixed together with evil, his Neshamah remained completely good. Thus, when his Nefesh reincarnated, it first went into Shais, the son of Adam HaRishon. This caused the evil to be separated out and later given to Bilaam, the evil one. Both of these levels, the good and the evil of the Nefesh had previously been included in Hevel, as his name alludes, with the Heh of Hevel alluding to the good which was given to Shais. This is the sod of the posuk, "Everything You placed (shattah) under his feet" (Tehillim 8:7), which has the letters Shin-Tav (Shais) and Heh (of Hevel) . . . The evil of Hevel's Nefesh is represented by the letters Bais-Lamed, which is the sod of the posuk, "Such judgments, they know not (Bais-Lamed)" (Tehillim 147:20). For, these two letters refer to the Klipos and the Bais-Lamed of Bilaam (Bais-Lamed-Ayin-Mem). We mentioned before that even the level of evil that was separated from the good must, by necessity, contain an element of Holy Sparks. This is the sod of Bilaam the prophet and what Chazal mean when they say that "he was equal to Moshe" (Bamidbar Rabbah 20), who was from the good of Shais, as we will explain. The little amount of good that was in Bilaam, reincarnated into Naval HaCarmelli, and that was the beginning of the tikun. Bilaam's only power was in his mouth by speaking loшон hara and cursing. Therefore, after Pinchas killed him, he reincarnated into a rock that could not speak, to rectify the loшон hara that came from his mouth; as we have said: a person can reincarnate into a Domaim, Tzomayach, Chayah, or Medabeh (Mineral World, Vegetation World, Animal World, and Human World) . . .

However, when Naval followed in his ways and spoke loшон hara about Dovid HaMelech saying, "Who is Dovid and who is Ben Yishai?" (I Shmuel 25:10), he reversed the tikun. Not only did he not rectify the previous sin but he added to the damage. Therefore, it says, "and he was a rock" (I Shmuel 25:37) since his mazel saw how previously he had reincarnated into a silent stone, and then "His heart died within him." (Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Ch. 29)

Hevel, of course, was Adam HaRishon's second son, born at the beginning of history and died shortly thereafter. Part of his soul went into Shais, who was Adam's third son born 130 years later, and the other part of his soul, the bad part, went into Lavan (hence: LAMED, BAIS, Nun), Ya'akov Avinu's father-in-law over 2,000 years later. After he died, the Bais-

Lamed part of Hevel's soul reincarnated into Bilaam who lived in Moshe Rabbeinu's time, hundreds of years later.

After that, to rectify Bilaam's problem with loшон hara, he returned again inside of a rock for a period of time, before returning to the world in human form in Naval HaCarmelli in Dovid HaMelech's time, again hundreds of years later. More than likely that soul, like so many others, has since returned many other times, but Sha'ar HaGilgulim only goes up until the 1500s.

SHABBOS DAY:

When I was a young boy, there was a program called "The Time Tunnel." For those who do not recall it, it was about two scientists who were part of an experiment to travel through time, which they did by walking the length of some cone-shaped spiral tunnel. The experiment only partially worked; they were able to go into the past but could not come out of it. So, basically, the program was a dramatized history show, with the two main characters going in and out of major events of the past, knowing what was going to happen because they were from the future, but unable to change anything because it was history. All they could do was bear witness to what had unfolded, and play some sort of role along the way, knowing full well that their true lives lay beyond their present, fictitious lives.

It is a good analogy for life. Our souls are time travelers, though our bodies are not. Our souls know the past because they were there, and they can even know the future since they are capable of rising above time, even at night while we sleep. In fact, *déjà vu*, when a person has a sense that he already knew what was going to happen before it actually did, might simply be some of that future knowledge filtering down into the physical brain, allowing for a sense of recognition at the time of the event.

So much has already been written about this idea, movies have been made, and some psychiatrists even use hypnosis to perform past-life regression. As to whether or not it is possible today to truly know who we were in previous lives remains to be seen, in spite of the claims of success. (I have personally heard some pretty convincing stories from reliable people.) There is no question that in the past it was indeed possible to know such information, as Sha'ar HaGilgulim makes perfectly clear.

One of the dramatic elements of "The Time Tunnel" was how the crew back home was some how able to get the main characters out of a life-threatening jam just in the nick of time by moving them into another period of history. And, as involved as the two characters had been in the slice of time they had just visited, once they began to roll through time again, they could afford to just let go of the past, though the characters they left behind were stuck in it.

Life is very, very absorbing. It has a way of convincing us that nothing ever existed before it and

nothing will ever exist after it. So much appears to be a matter of do-or-die, and as a result, people invest so much into the present with little or no regard for the future. And, I don't just mean future as in tomorrow, next week, or even the next decade, but future as in the next lifetime, and principally, as in the World-to-Come.

The trick in life is being able to rise above it. It's like being a rocket ship trying to break free of the earth's gravitational pull. It's a real tug-of-war as gravity madly pulls downward as the rocket thrusters violently push the space ship upward, until the rocket gets to a height where gravity is too weak to hang on, and the space craft is finally able to drift effortlessly into the quiet of space.

We know what pulls us down, what holds onto us with great power, and what keeps us from being objective: life itself. Between temptations and crises, we are constantly being kept on earth and mired in subjectivity. The question is: What has the ability to thrust us up and out in order that we see life in a more objective manner, in order to make decisions that take into account far more than just the immediate past, present, and future?

The answer to that question is short on letters but long on understanding: Insight. However, we're not talking merely about a new approach to an old idea, but about actual insight, or more accurately, the ability to see in.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

The Pri Tzaddik on this week's parshah points out that the Jewish people made forty-two stops in the course of their forty years of wandering. This is significant, he explains, because each stop corresponded to one letter of G-d's forty-two letter Name, which you can see from the prayer called "Ana b'Koach" in all siddurim. This prayer is comprised of seven stanzas of six words each, and when the first letters of each word are brought together, they formed one of the forty-two letter Names of G-d.

What is the point of this correlation? Explains the Pri Tzaddik, each letter from this Name represents a particular level of spiritual growth on the path to a person's personal completion. When a person acquires all forty-two letters, (stops along their personal journey to completion,) he has no need for any further rectification; he is said to have acquired HIS world, that is, his intended portion in the World-to-Come.

The Arizal explains in Sha'ar HaGilgulim that it can happen in a single lifetime. And, if it does not happen in a single lifetime then it is likely to happen over several lifetimes. And, if history comes to a close before the person can acquire all forty-two levels of growth, then there is Gihennom to finish off the refinement process - not a pleasant prospect.

Eventually, when history has ended and we stand before the Heavenly Tribunal on our day in court, they will replay all of our gilgulim. We will watch with the Bais Din all the events of all of our lives, and we will be

shown how each particular event was designed to help us move a notch or two in the direction of personal completion.

We will be detached from the situation, like time travelers who happened to drop in on the past, and we will see ourselves act out in ways that are obviously incorrect, literally wasteful. We will be amazed at how easily we were overwhelmed by the situation at hand, emotionally drawn in until we acted in a way that suggested there was no tomorrow. And, we will probably say to ourselves: "If only I knew then what I know now."

The truth is, if we knew now what we will know then, it would be impossible to exercise free-will. We'd be like the scientists in the program who knew the outcome of events while the people around them did not, and we could afford to make the appropriate sacrifices because we'd know what the pay off will be and what it will not be. There would be no reason for us to be rewarded in Heaven for that.

Therefore, Heaven compromised for our benefit. We don't get to know much about our pasts or our futures, at least not much that we can translate into conscious knowledge and use to better navigate the present. But we do get to learn works such as Sha'ar HaGilgulim, or the idea of reincarnation, and past lives surface in one way or another to sensitize us to the possibility so that we can take some time to contemplate the finiteness of the events of everyday life. All that lives on past them was our response to the crisis.

Ultimately, this is what the Vilna Gaon has taught us. He has said that life is about sheviras hamiddos, the overcoming of bad character traits, like anger, for example. Nothing allows for this more than being able to rise above of the moment until you become an objective observer instead of a subjective participant. It is when one can do this that one is able to correctly assess a situation and appropriately respond to it, each time earning another one of the letters of G-d's Name and one's own completion.

I say this because there is much happening in the world today, and more which promises to only intensify the struggle to break free of that which wants to dishearten us. All of it will be a test of our ability to rise above the moment and the crisis, and remain positive in the face of tremendous negativity. The redemption of G-d can come in the blink of an eye, and even faster if we remain positive and trust in G-d.

MELAVE MALKAH:

Hear the word of G-d, O House of Ya'akov and all the families of the House of Yisroel . . . (Yirmiyahu 2:4) These are the first words of this week's Haftarah, the second Shabbos of the Three Weeks. They are pure rebuke by the prophet who brought us Eichah. The entire Haftarah is about how the Jewish people strayed and turned to idol worship instead of seeking out G-d. It

doesn't even end on a positive note, which is why the First Temple was destroyed shortly thereafter.

Actually, it is the fast of the 17th of Tammuz today as I write this, the first day of the Three Weeks. I have just gotten off the phone with someone who has told me, in the name of a certain Mekubel, that events will occur by the Shabbos of the parshah for which this is being written that will impact the entire world. Apparently certain signs are supposed to occur to indicate this, and have been quickly since last Lag B'Omer.

The news doesn't faze me. The truth is, I am usually better prepared for the Three Weeks long in advance, but this year my son's Bar Mitzvah was somewhat of a distraction, coming on Rosh Chodesh Tammuz. That ended, and all of a sudden the 17th of Tammuz is upon me, and the period of disengagement that seemed months away is actually here.

The tension is unbelievable. The situation is serious, but we don't yet know how serious. Yesterday, the government admitted what seemed to be the case from the start: disengagement has very little to do with appeasing the Arabs and everything to do with making George Bush happy. Entire cities that took years to build up and millions of dollars of investment to make into an example of beauty and efficiency is about to be scrapped for political agendas that have little, if anything, to do with the safety of the Jewish people.

As the prophet says in this week's Haftarah, the people we turned to in order to defend ourselves have themselves become the persecutors. And what about us? So close to the moment of crisis and we're not quite sure what to think: for disengagement, against disengagement, or impartial to it? Tie an orange ribbon or don't tie an orange ribbon? Make a stand or don't make a stand? It's a done deal; no, it's not a done deal? Be positive; give up the ship already?

There are a lot of people doing a lot of talking, and it becomes more confusing by the moment. However, the prophet offered one solution that puts all of it in perspective: HEAR, specifically, "Hear the word of G-d." If you are quiet for a moment, you can hear it, like a breeze rustling through the trees on a quiet day. That's what Adam HaRishon heard in the Garden of Eden: Then they heard the voice of G-d moving through the garden like the day breeze, and the man and his wife hid from G-d among the trees of the garden. (Bereishis 3:8)

To many it seems as if G-d is holding out, keeping His peace while we go through Gihennom down here. It's not true. The difficulties we encounter are to get our attention, which is only meaningful if there is something to hear. That is what the Three Weeks are about: learning to become a listener to the Divine message that resonates through every event and thing in Creation, but even more so when history intensifies.

If we incline our minds to listen, our ears will learn to hear. Then the positive ending can finally come,

and our journey through history can end gracefully. Otherwise, G-d will just keep talking louder until we learn to pay attention.

CHAZAK!

May we see a happy ending in our time. © 2005
Rabbi P. Winston & torah.org

RABBI LABEL LAM

Dvar Torah

They journeyed from Rephidim and encamped in the Wilderness of Sinai. They journeyed from the Wilderness of Sinai and encamped in Kivros HaTaava. (Bamidbar 33:16-17) Why does the Torah bother to tell us, for each of the 42 journeys, where they traveled from? It's always the prior destination.

The Talmud (Shabbos 9A) tells us that Rabbah would begin his Torah lessons with a joke. Part of the reason for this practice was to ready the students to learn something new. To hear a new idea one must be willing to shed some old assumptions. A good joke has that quality of being able to challenge our ordinary perceptions of reality. As we try to make sense out of life or a given scene, we tend to fill in the details with facts based upon our prior experiences. Some of that old baggage may actually run interference with the ability to understand the new. Then we are surprised. Our conceptual boxes are suddenly burst, our paradigms shattered, and in need of adjustment. We are now ready to learn.

A farmer came to the big city to be fitted for his first suit so he could be in fashion- step at a family wedding. He came to a tailor with a fine reputation who took careful note of the man's measurements and specifications before selecting a worthy bolt of cloth. The farmer returned on the day of the big family event to pick up his new custom made suit. The tailor confidently handed it him and pointed him to the dressing room.

The poor farmer was could hardly squeeze his first leg in and then only with great effort again his second leg. He was ready to shout out with frustration when he found himself completely distorting his body only to be able to clasp the suit pants closed. The jacket was equally a disaster. Hardly able to breath, the farmer shouted gruffly to the tailor, "What did you do to me? I have nothing to wear to the wedding tonight! You have ruined me!" Alarmed at first, the tailor took a good look, chuckled, and replied, "Foolish farmer! Before you try on a new suit you must first remove your over-alls!"

Someone coming for a first Shabbos, or going to Israel for the very first time, or encountering a Rebbe has no idea what goodness lies ahead. No amount of words could prepare that person. Similarly, someone transitioning from work to home has to make an astronaut-like adjustment to adapt to an environment with a completely different set of values. He may be the big boss there but it won't work here. When leaving the

parental home for marriage the Torah admonishes early on, "Therefore a man should leave his mother and father and cling to his wife..." (Breishis 2:24) He is not expected to literally abandon his parents but rather to rid him-self of his selfish and dependant attitude.

The best one might do to adjust to the new is to be ready to shed any old and inapplicable assumptions of the past. Then, with the old coat of paint removed, one is more mentally and emotionally available for a new coat, with a fresh look- at life. © 2005 Rabbi L. Lam & torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd they journeyed from Livnah and pitched in Rissah. And they journeyed from Rissah and pitched in Kehelatah. And they journeyed from Kehelatah and pitched in Mount Shefer. And they journeyed from Mount Shefer and pitched in Haradah. And they journeyed from Haradah and pitched in Mak'helot." (Numbers 33:3-37)

To the modern ear, some sections in the Torah sound as if they could use editing. However, a basic dictum of the tradition of Sinai is that every word is necessary. Not one letter - let alone word - is superfluous.

This has to be kept in mind when we come across passages like the opening chapter in this week's double portion of Mattot-Mass'ei, with its listing of all the encampments of the Jews during their 40 years in the desert. The quotation above is only the beginning of the list: Elim, Dofka, Alush, Refidim, Hatzerot, Ritmah ... the Torah gives us the names of all 42 camps in virtually the same repetitive style.

Invariably, the reader will ask himself: Why the listing of all these difficult-to-pronounce place names, the majority of which appear nowhere else in the Torah?

And, indeed, it is as if the Torah itself second-guesses our difficulty, specifically stating: "Moses wrote their goings forth, stage by stage, by the commandment of the Lord." (Num. 33:2)

According to Nahmanides, it was God Himself who commanded Moses to write these journeys down, "stage by stage" in exact and accurate sequence.

Rashi explains that the Israelite encampments are detailed in such a way in order to teach us the extent of divine compassion for our ancestors. Since there were 14 stopping-points in the first year and eight in the last, the bulk of 38 years in the desert occasioned only 20 journeys - allowing plenty of rest time.

The Sforno sees the catalog of wanderings as a compliment to the generation of the desert, which moved and rested in accordance with the will of the Almighty.

In his Guide for the Perplexed (Part III, Chapter 50), Maimonides suggests two reasons for this detailed

account. First of all, the great medieval philosopher argues, later generations may come to doubt the accuracy of the biblical story, questioning the historical veracity of the early Israelite experiences.

Such geographic precision allows later generations to confirm the accuracy of a document more than 3,500 years old, preserving the exact route of our ancestors.

Moreover, as a result of such record-keeping, the Exodus from Egypt and the subsequent 40 years of wandering in the desert force us to confront the logistics of 600,000 people surviving for so long in a harsh and arid landscape. This naturally sets the stage for the great miracle of the manna.

Secondly, adds Maimonides, were the 42 camps not detailed, we might be left with the impression that although the entire desert was significant, each individual place was far less significant. Consequently the Torah comes to teach us that each and every place in which the Israelites stopped was important in its own right.

Maimonides's insight assumes added significance in light of the rabbinic dictum that the actions of our ancestors serve as a sign - a presaging - of what will happen to their descendants.

Without stretching the imagination too much, the 40 years of wandering in the desert before arriving in the Promised Land can be seen as a prefiguration of the Israelites' wandering throughout the "deserts" of the world - not just for 40 but for nearly 2,000 years, before eventually arriving at the gates of the Promised Land in our own time.

The two journeys, one relatively short and the other perilously long, have much in common.

In the early stages of the Zionist dream, there was a significant movement which wanted to forget the entire experience of exile, casting it off like a soiled garment that had sullied the authentic biblical Jews.

With this attitude came antagonism for Yiddish and Ladino and contempt for all the customs - musical, cultural, emotional and, especially, religious - that had evolved over 2,000 years in exile.

To this day, there is an uneasy truce between the modern Israeli's search for an indigenous Israeli culture carved in the shadow of Western imaginings, and the more traditional segments of society which often glorify the past Jewish cultures of Lublin and Vilna, Fez and Yemen.

Maimonides is saying that the reason the 42 places are mentioned in the Torah is that they are significant in defining the totality of the Jewish personality.

When we speak of our wanderings, we have the right and the duty to state proudly: "We camped in Sura, and we camped in Alexandria; we camped in Seville, and we camped in Amsterdam. We camped in Tangiers, and we camped in Constantinople. We

camped in Cracow and we camped in Belz. We camped in London and we camped in New York City ..."

Each of our encampments was important, because each added to our composite culture, to our unique experience. Each added to the corpus of Torah and custom which is our legacy.

Our 2,000 years of exile should not, therefore, be viewed as a blurred nightmare of persecutions and pogroms, a series of undifferentiated comings and goings, but rather as made up of specific stopping points where God commanded us to make camp until His next decree that we journey again.

In each place we suffered and survived, learned and taught, preserved and created, endured and enobled.

And if we add to this insight the notion that the nation of Israel must learn from the desert/exile experience that its movements from place to place have all been in accordance with the divine will, can anyone doubt that our exile has concluded, and that we must make for our final destination - the Promised Land of Israel?

We must learn from our wanderings - but we must also learn when to cease wandering.

It's time to come home. ©1994 *Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin*

RABBI LAZER DANZIGER

Journeys

“**T**hese are the journeys of the children of Israel by which they went out of the land of Egypt.”

Why is the plural of journey used here. For, although it took 42 journeys for the Israelites to reach the Holy Land, 41 of those stages were not going "out of the land of Egypt." Leaving Egypt took only one journey—from the Egyptian city of Ramses to the place called Sukot, outside of Egypt's borders.

The word Mitzrayim, "Egypt," is derived from the word Meitzar which means limitations. The exodus from Egypt was not only a physical liberation from the outside forces of enslavement, imprisonment and "limitations," but also a spiritual liberation of the Jews from the idolatrous depravity of Egyptian culture as well as from their own "limitations"—their bad habits and inclinations. This inner liberation took many progressive stages, many "journeys," and each journey was an exodus from the "Egypt"—the limitation -- of the previous stage. For today's accomplishments in self-liberation from evil are tomorrow's "Egypt." Yesterday the person freed himself, to a certain degree, from his former unwholesome traits, he left Egypt. But today he cannot be satisfied with yesterday's standards of accomplishment. Not only is yesterday's liberation from evil insufficient, imperfect—it is, for today, a limit, an Egypt from which an exodus must be experienced.

The daily service of man through prayer reflects a similar pattern of successive stages or journeys "out of Egypt."

First, one prepares to pray. One contemplates, "I am a person with a G-dly soul entrapped within a physical body. I am about to pray to the Alm-ghty.

Who is infinite and utterly without limitations." This sobering thought is uppermost in his mind when he prepares to daven. The very act of setting himself to daven has driven his material concerns out of his mind—he has already left Egypt.

But his sense of self, his "ego" though now refined, is still ever-present in his awareness. However, as he starts to say the actual words of prayer, he beings to leave even this limitation, this "Egypt." Finally, the climax of daving, the Shemona Esrei is reached and all Egypts are left behind. The worshipper loses all sense of "self"; he stands "as a servant before his master." He has reached a level of complete self-abnegation. The final exodus has been accomplished. The "Holy Land" has been reached. ©1995 *Rabbi L. Danziger*

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

Parshat Maasei lists the many places where the Jews in the desert traveled through and camped.

Since the Torah doesn't waste any words or letters, it would seem strange to list places that the Jews visited, if it meant nothing for us today. As commentaries help explain, when you love someone, you want to remember everything you did together, and G-d's love for us is no different. This love that G-d has for us is the reason why the Torah spends so many Pessukim (verses) listing the places the Jews visited. As Rabbi Twerski asks, though, at each point the Torah says (33:1-12) that they "traveled from A and camped at B. They traveled from B and camped at C", when it could have saved words and simply said that they camped at A, B, and C?

Commentaries help us understand this by explaining that the forty years that the Jews spent in the desert was filled with spiritual growth, and the "travels" represented that growth. The Torah attests to the fact that not only did the Jews travel to point A, but they camped/grew there. The lesson for us is simple and true: If you want to "travel" through Torah growth, make sure you not only travel along a solid path, but make sure you "camp" at every stage, and make sure you're comfortable with it, before you move onto another level. For example, you can't jump to Kaballah (mysticism) before you know Halacha (law) and Talmud. There's a process that requires "camping" at every step of the way. So before we venture off to see the wonderful sites the Torah has to offer, make sure you take a road map (Torah), a guide (Rabbi), and patience! Only then will you truly enjoy the ride! ©2004 *Rabbi S. Ressler & Lelamed, Inc.*