

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

THE AISHDAS SOCIETY

Aspaqlaria

by Rabbi Micha Berger

Parashas Mas'ei opens with a description of Benei Yisra'el's trip through the desert, and lists the forty-two stops made along the way. An oft-quoted Zohar identifies the stops in the desert with each of the letters in Hashem's forty-two letter name. What's the particular significance of the journeys and stops in Sinai that give them such cosmic significance?

Jean-Paul Sartre, when asked to summarize the existentialist movement in philosophy, gave the following dictum: Existence precedes essence. What that means may be most easily explained by contrasting people to tables. With a table, you can study the plans for the table, the wood and other materials from which it will be built, and with a little math and science know everything there is to know about the table. The essence of the table precedes its actual existence. With human beings, it's the reverse. I've existed since (at least) my birth. But who I am, my essence, is not what I was or even knowable back then. With human beings, our existence comes before our essence.

Another existentialist, Soren Kierkegaard characterized his religion in a way we can apply to ours. Following him, we could say: the ideal is not to be a good Jew, but becoming one.

The same point was made earlier by the Kotzker Rebbe. The Kotzker asked his Chassidim, "If you see two people on a ladder, one on the fourth rung and one on the tenth, which is higher?" The chassidim, even though they probably knew it was only a leading question, answered the obvious, "The one on the tenth rung." "No," the rebbe replied, "he might be descending the ladder. It is the one who is climbing upward."

When we stand for Shemoneh Esrei we do so with our feet together to emulate the angels. "Veragleihem regel yisharah - and their legs are one straight leg [each]." (Yechezqeil 1:7) Angels stand on a single leg, a pedestal, stationary. As Zechariah (3:7) repeats Hashem's message to Yehoshua Kohein Gadol, "then I will give you to walk (mehalkhim) among these that stand still (ha'omedim)." People are mehalkhim, goers; angels, omedim, standing still.

Angels might be on a higher rung on the ladder, but since only people have the power to ascend it, we have the potential to be loftier.

This is because we have free will, the ability to make and remake ourselves. The power of teshuvah.

In short, life is a journey, not a destination.

And so, Mas'ei benei Yisrael, the journey and growth in the desert, was to imbue the Jewish people with the essence of being a nation of kohanim. Therefore, it truly is His Name, a representation of Hashem's Presence in this world. © 2010 Rabbi M. Berger and The AishDas Society

RABBI MORDECHAI KAMENETZKY

Patton's Levites

It was time to avenge the honor of both Israel and the Almighty after the debacle with Midian and its licentious plot against the Children of Israel. The call for war went out and the recruitment process imposed.

Hashem spoke to Moshe saying Take revenge for the Children of Israel against the Midianites; afterwards you will be gathered to your people. Moshe spoke to the people, saying, Arm from among you men for the army, which they can be against Midian, and carry out the revenge of Hashem against Midian. A thousand for each tribe, a thousand for each tribe, from all the tribes of Israel you shall send into the army. From the thousands of Israel one thousand was given over for each tribe, twelve thousand armed for battle (Numbers 31:1-5).

It is interesting to note that Hashem calls upon the revenge for Rashi revenge for the Children of Israel while Moshe calls to carry out the revenge of Hashem against Midian. But that is for another Faxhomily. This year, I'd like to focus upon Rashi who is bothered by a seeming redundancy. The Torah commands Moshe to select, A thousand for each tribe, a thousand for each tribe, from all the tribes of Israel. If there is a command to send one thousand troops from each tribe, why repeat from all the tribes of Israel. Which one would not send? Rashi quotes the Sifri that notes the extra words, all the tribes and comments, this is meant to include the tribe of Levi. The Levites were the scholars and teachers of Israel. Yet, explains the Sifri they were asked to join in the war effort. Why?

Commentators are bothered by another problem. The Torah tells us that there were twelve thousand armed for battle. However, there were twelve tribes in addition to the tribe of Levi. (The tribe of Yoseph was divided into two tribes, Ephraim and Menashe.) Thus, if Levi also sent 1000 men, there

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should have been 13,000 men going into battle. Why does the Torah only count 12,000?

In December of 1944, already six months after D-Day, General George Patton's third Army found itself bogged down in Belgium. It was not only the Germans who were causing the problem, it was the weather. Rain, fog and extremely swampy conditions were making the advance and liberation of Eastern Europe and the defeat of Germany virtually impossible.

So Patton made an unprecedented military move. He called upon the chaplain of the third Army, Msgr. James O'Neill, and charged him with a task. I'm tired of having to fight mud and floods as well as Germans. See if you can get G-d to work on our side. Compose a prayer to stop this rain.

The Chaplain typed the following prayer on a 3x5 index card. O'Neill composed the following short but powerful entreaty: Almighty and most merciful Father, we humbly beseech Thee, of Thy great goodness, to restrain these immoderate rains with which we have had to contend. Grant us fair weather for battle. Graciously hearken to us as soldiers who call Thee that, armed with Thy power, we may advance from victory to victory, and crush the oppression and wickedness of our enemies, and establish Thy justice among men and nations. Amen.

General Patton read the prayer and returned it to O'Neill with a directive: have 250,000 copies printed and see to it that every man in the Third Army gets one. We've got to get every soldier in the Third Army to pray.

Indeed they did. As if by magic, six days of perfect weather followed. The rain stopped, the fog lifted, the sun shone and earth dried. The Third Army advanced confidently, handing the Germans a crushing defeat.

Shortly afterwards, Patton called the Reverend into his office and pinned a Bronze Star on him, for an act that far surpassed his mortal military machinations.

The Maharal of Prague explains the presence of the Levites with a point that was expounded by later commentators (Beir HaSadeh). Of course the tribe of Levi was asked to join the war effort. But they were not included in the actual fighting force. They were there to pray by the Aron Kodesh, the Holy Ark. The Almighty charged everyone in the effort, but each soldier according to his mission had a specific job. Some were there to fight, others to daven. There were 12,000 in the

field of battle and another 1,000 in the field of prayer. And each one did their job faithfully in unifying effort that brought ultimate victory. © 2010 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RISKIN

Shabbat Shalom

“**A**nd Moses recorded the places of origin toward the places of destination... and these are the places of destination toward the places of origin” (Numbers 33:2)

Undoubtedly, the Exodus stands as the central event of our nation's collective consciousness, an event that we invoke daily in the Shema, on the Sabbath, on festivals, and after every meal. Still, when we consider the detail that our portion of Masei devotes to recording all 42 stops of the 40-year desert sojourn, we're a little taken aback. One chapter devotes 45 verses to listing all 42 locations, and since each location was not only a place where the Israelites camped, but also a place from which they journeyed, each place name is mentioned twice. Why such detail? Different commentators take different approaches.

The Sforno maintains that the plethora of locations is a way of highlighting the merit of the Jewish people who, "in the loving kindness of their youth, followed G-d into the desert, a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2). And the Sefat Emet suggests that the names of the encampments are included to demonstrate that wherever the Jewish people traveled through our long history, we have been able to create Tikkun Olam - making a profound impact on our environment.

This week, I would like to concentrate on the commentary of Nahmanides. Apparently, he is troubled not only by the delineation of each stage of the journey, but also by the additional declaration that "...Moses wrote their goings forth, according to their stations, by the commandment of G-d..." (Numbers 33:1-2). These words suggest that the actual recording of these journeys has importance. In approaching the issue, Nahmanides first quotes Rashi who says that Moses "set his mind to write down the travels. By doing this, he intended to inform future generations of the loving kindness of G-d... who protected His nation despite their manifold travels." Nahmanides then quotes Maimonides (Guide for the Perplexed, 3:50), who understands the detail as a means of corroborating the historical truth of the narrative. He adds that later generations might think they sojourned in a "desert that was near cultivated land, oases which were comfortable for human habitation, places in which it was possible to till and reap or to feed on plants, areas with many wells..." - hence the enumeration of all these way-stations is to emphasize the extent of the miracle of Israelite subsistence. After quoting these views, Nahmanides concludes with his own most intriguing comment: "The recording of the journeys was a Divine

commandment, either for reasons mentioned above, or for a purpose the secret of which has not been revealed to us..." Nahmanides seems to be prompting us to probe further.

I would submit that the secret he refers to may indeed be the secret of Jewish survival. After all, the concept of "ma'aseh avot siman l'banim" - that the actions of the fathers are a sign of what will happen to the children - was well known to the sages, and one of the guiding principles of Nahmanides' Biblical commentary. Perhaps the hidden message of this text is an outline of the future course of Jewish history. From the time of the destruction of the Temple, until our present return to the Land of Israel, the "goings forth" of the Jewish people certainly comprise at least 42 stages: Judea, Babylon, Persia, Rome, Europe, North Africa and the New World. As Tevye the Milkman explains in Fiddler on the Roof when he is banished from Anatevka, "Now you know why Jewish adults wear hats; we must always be ready to set out on a journey!"

Moreover, each Diaspora was important in its own right, and made its own unique contribution to the text (Oral Law) and texture (customs) of the sacred kaleidoscope which is the Jewish historical experience. Are not the Holocaust memorial books, where survivors try to preserve what little can be kept of lost worlds, examples of our sense that G-d commanded us to write things down - to remember? Perhaps the Jews didn't invent history, but they understood that the places of Jewish wanderings, the content of the Jewish lifestyle, and the miracle of Jewish survival are more important than those hieroglyphics that exalt and praise rulers and their battles. The "secret" Nahmanides refers to may not only be a prophetic vision of our history, but a crucial lesson as to what gave us the strength, the courage and the faith to keep on going, to keep on moving, to withstand the long haul of exile.

If we look at the verse where Moses writes down the journey according to the command of G-d, we read that Moses recorded "their starting points toward their destinations at G-d's command and those were their destinations toward their starting points." What does this mean? Why does the same verse conclude "destinations toward starting points?" Fundamental to our history as a nation is that we are constantly traveling - on the road to the Promised Land, on the journey towards redemption. That direction was given to us at the dawn of our history: in Hebron, with the Cave of the Couples, beginning with Abraham and Sarah, and their gracious hospitality to everyone, their righteous compassion and just morality; and in Jerusalem, the city of peace. Even as we move down the road of time, we must always recall the place of our origin.

When S.Y. Agnon received the Nobel Prize for Literature, he was asked about his birthplace. To the interviewer's surprise, he answered that he was born in Jerusalem. The interviewer pointed out that everyone knew he had been born in Buczacz, a town in Galicia.

Agnon corrected him: "I was born in Jerusalem more than 3,000 years ago. That was my beginning, my origin. Buczacz in Galicia is only one of the stopping-off points."

Only two princes of tribes who served as scouts reached the Promised Land: Caleb and Joshua; Caleb, because he visited the graves of our Patriarchs and Matriarchs in Hebron, and Joshua, because the name of G-d, the author of the revelation, was added to his name. Only these two set out for the Promised Land with their place of origin at the forefront of their consciousness. Only those with a proud past can look forward to a glorious future.

As long as we wander with our place of origin firmly in mind, we will assuredly reach our goal. We may leave our place of origin for our destination, but our places of origin in Israel will remain our ultimate destiny.
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RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

Besides the 12,000 soldiers sent to enact revenge against Midyan for trying to corrupt the Children of Israel, both spiritually ("for the matter of Pe'or," i.e. causing them to worship Pe'or) and morally ("and for the matter of Kuzbi," Bamidbar 25:18), Moshe also sent Pinachas (31:11) as the Kohain Gadol anointed for wartime. Rashi quotes three reasons why Pinachas went rather than Elazar (his father), with the second being "that he went to enact the vengeance of his grandfather (meaning a grandparent on his mother's side), Yosef." Yosef had been sold as a slave to Egypt by Midyanite merchants (Beraishis 37:36), and his great-grandson Pinachas was going to "even the score" by leading the war against Midyan.

The commentators raise several issues regarding this reason for sending Pinachas. For one thing, Yosef was sold as a slave 270 years before this war was fought; are we supposed to hold a grudge for hundreds of years? Secondly, it was only those merchants that sold Yosef; why is the entire nation of Midyan held accountable for something done only by one caravan of merchants? Additionally, selling things bought in one location for a higher price in a different location is how merchants make a living, and slaves were a normal commodity; why are these merchants considered to have done anything wrong if this was their profession?

The Maharal (on Chumash and on Sotah 43a) says that the point is not really Pinachas taking revenge for what had been done to his great-grandfather, but that Pinachas, his makeup and what he represented, was the appropriate foil for Midyan. They were extremely immoral, which is why they sent their daughters to seduce Israel, while Yosef, who overcame the temptation of Potifar's wife, and Pinachas, who took a strong stand against the immoral behavior going on

when he killed Zimri and Kuzbi, were completely removed from immorality. Whereas the immorality of Midyan had been victorious over Yosef when they sold him, Pinachas reversed the situation when he destroyed Midyan in this war.

Others only address how merchants can be blamed for doing what merchants normally do. The Taz says that the Midyanites realized Yosef's potential for greatness, and in order to prevent him from ever attaining such greatness, purposely sold him to Egypt, where slaves were never allowed to leave. However, Rashi had told us (Beraishis 37:25) that G-d arranged for the caravan that brought Yosef to Egypt to be carrying pleasant-smelling perfumes and spices, rather than the foul-smelling wares they usually sold, and the verse says explicitly that this caravan's destination had been Egypt even before Yosef became part of their cargo. Even if they were happy that this was their destination because it meant Yosef would never be able to get out, Pinachas likely didn't know that, and couldn't blame them for not changing their itinerary once Yosef was sold to them. Besides, the brothers knew where the caravan was headed before they sold Yosef to them, which is how they knew to look for him in Egypt when they went down to buy grain during the famine (see Rashi on Beraishis 42:13); it would be the other Tribes that Pinachas should "enact vengeance upon," not the merchants who were heading to Egypt anyway. [It should be noted that according to Sefer Hayashar the brothers planned on selling Yosef to the caravan (they knew to be) heading for Egypt, but ended up selling him to the Midyanite merchants who pulled him out of the pit. When the Midyanites regretted buying Yosef (fearing retribution from the powerful "Hebrews"), they sold him to the caravan that the brothers had first spotted, who brought Yosef to Egypt. Nevertheless, this sale was made out of fear, not to subject Yosef to Egyptian slavery. (Since the brothers knew where Yosef was, they must have found out from these merchants that they sold Yosef to the caravan heading for Egypt.) Either way, Pinachas shouldn't have blamed the merchants for causing Yosef to be sold to Egypt.]

The Netziv (in his commentary on the Sifri, which is Rashi's source), says that Yosef surely told them who he was, and that they would get paid even more money if they returned him to his family. Because they preferred selling him as a slave over making more money, they were not being "merchants," and were held accountable for Yosef being sold as a slave. (Rabbi Peretz Steinberg, shlita, makes a very similar suggestion in "Pri Eitz Hachayim," which he published in 1991.) Although Sefer Hayashar (which the Netziv references) says that the Midyanite merchants recognized that Yosef was too dignified (etc.) to be a slave, and that Shimon identified himself and his brothers as being the sons of Yaakov, they feared suffering repercussions for having Yosef, and probably did not think they could sell him back to his family for a

large profit. It's also hard to imagine that they would believe their captive slave's claim that they could get a better deal from his family, as the captive would likely say anything to get back to his family.

Midyan was one of the sons of Keturah (Beraishis 25:2), the wife Avraham married after Sarah died. The people of Midyan were therefore relatives of the Children of Israel, but more than being related, Midyan should have been aware of who the Children of Israel were and what their status was. Lavan, the grandson of Avraham's brother (Nachor), knew that Avraham was "blessed of G-d" (Beraishis 24:31), and they (Nachor's family) were honored to have their daughter/sister marry into this blessed family. What perspective of Avraham's (other) family (Yitzchok's grandchildren) was embedded in the consciousness of the nation of Midyan? Did they respect Israel's mission of fulfilling G-d's word? Did they ignore it (or forget about it)? Or, did they resent it? Had Midyan taught his children about their ancestry, that they also descended from Avraham, who brought monotheism (back) to the world, they would have been in awe of Yaakov and his sons, and respected them. Even the merchants would know of them, and would never consider selling one of them as a slave. Either the special status of Israel never made an impression on Midyan (the nation), or they resented it, thus allowing these merchants to deal with Yosef as they would with any other business dealing (or worse). It wasn't just the merchants that had "sinned" against Yosef, but the entire nation, starting from Midyan himself, for not valuing Avraham's message or the people who were carrying it out.

When they tried corrupting Israel, getting them to worship another deity and to engage in illicit behavior, it became apparent that Midyan didn't just ignore Israel's special status, but resented it. In retrospect, it showed that ignoring Yosef's pleas was more than just a result of not valuing Avraham's message and the mission of the Children of Israel; they wanted to help thwart that mission, and selling Yosef to Egypt (they thought) would help accomplish that. Therefore, when sending an army to destroy the nation that would otherwise continue trying to thwart the mission of the Children of Israel, Moshe included Yosef's great-grandson, who understood the danger Midyan posed, and would make sure that the war against them would end successfully. © 2010 Rabbi D. Kramer

RABBI AVI WEISS

Shabbat Forshpeis

In one of this week's portions, Reuven, Gad and half of Menashe request to remain on the eastern side of the Jordan. A cursory review of their request gives us insight into why these particular tribes tried to remain outside Israel.

Reuven was, of course, the first son of Yaakov (Jacob). When the brothers returned from Egypt and

told their father that the viceroy (who was really Joseph) insisted they bring Binyamin (Benjamin) to Egypt before they would be given more food, Reuven steps forward. Turning to his father he declares: "If I do not bring Benjamin back you can kill my two sons." Yaakov rejects Reuven's overture. (Genesis 42:37-38)

Only after Yehuda comes forward saying he would be a surety for Binyamin "if I don't return him I will have sinned to you all my days" does Yaakov relent. (Genesis 43:9)

The difference between Yehuda and Reuven is obvious. Yehuda assumes responsibility. He expresses a total commitment to Binyamin and is ready to put himself on the line if he fails. Not so, Reuven. He guarantees Binyamin's safety by using his children as collateral rather than himself.

Not surprisingly the children of Reuven who don't understand the message of areivut, of caring for others, bear children and a tribe that prefers to remain apart from Israel.

Gad is one of the children of Zilpah, Leah's handmaid. He is described as being very strong. In the words of Yaakov's blessing as explicated by Rashi: Troops (armies) shall be found of Gad. (Genesis 49:19) Still when Joseph is sold Gad does not come forward to protect him. Here again, it is understandable that Gad becomes a tribe that asks to live outside Israel.

Menashe is the eldest son of Joseph. When he is born Joseph calls him Menashe, "For G-d has made me forget (nashani, the root of Menashe) all my toil and all my father's house." (Genesis 42:51) Here is a description of one who breaks with his home. Not coincidentally Menashe's children wish to separate from Israel.

Moshe (Moses) tells the two and a half tribes that they may live outside Israel but only after they first help conquer and settle the land. Here Moshe teaches the message of areivut to those who come from a tribe where the sense of caring is missing. And these tribes get the message. They lead the way in helping liberate the land. They were able to turn around the lack of areivut in their family history into a sense of real commitment to the Jewish people.

An important message especially now for Jews in the Diaspora - in times of need we should, like the two and a half tribes, run to Israel rather than from Israel. ©2010 Hebrew Institute of Riverdale & CJC-AMCHA. Rabbi Avi Weiss is Founder and Dean of Yeshivat Chovevei Torah, the Open Orthodox Rabbinical School, and Senior Rabbi of the Hebrew Institute of Riverdale.

RABBI DOVID SIEGEL

Haftarah

This week's haftarah continues the theme of the three weeks and introduces the month of Av. The prophet Yirmiyahu reprimands the Jewish people and reminds them, in the name of Hashem, of all of the

favours they have received over the years. Hashem asks, "What wrong did your fathers find in Me that distanced them from Me and resulted in their following the empty practices of idolatry diminishing the Jews to nothingness? They didn't turn to Hashem who brought them up from Egypt and led them through the desolate dangerous desert." Hashem continues, "And I brought them to the fertile land of Israel to partake of its fruits and goodness. But they defiled My land and disgraced My inheritance." (Yirmiyahu 2:5) Hashem faults the Jewish nation for presently rejecting Him and resorting to the shameful ways of idolatry.

Hashem says, "They forsook Me, the source of the waters of life; to dig empty cisterns." But the blame wasn't limited to the common folk, it even extended to their leaders and prophets. Hashem describes their spiritual decline in the following terms, "The Kohanim didn't revere Me and the upholders of Torah didn't publicize My name, the kings rebelled against Me and the prophets delivered false prophecy." (2: 8) This bleak picture of the Jewish people was certainly not a comforting one and almost promised immediate retribution and destruction.

Yet, we discover that Hashem's response to all the above was one of concern and compassion. Hashem surprisingly responded, "Therefore I will continue to quarrel with you and even with your grandchildren." Hashem vowed to send more prophets and continue showing them and their descendents the proper path. Although every attempt thus far had been unsuccessful Hashem remained determined to help His people. Hashem refused to reject them even after the numerous rejections they showed him. The present leaders were not loyal to Hashem and didn't inspire the nation to repent and follow the proper path. Perhaps the next group of leaders would be more loyal and could successfully leave their imprint on the Jewish people. Although the Jews had reduced themselves to the point of emptiness and nothingness Hashem still cared about them with deep compassion. He wouldn't leave His people until every last avenue had been exhausted and it had been determined that there was literally no more hope for them.

This unbelievable degree of compassion is explained in the verses immediately preceding this week's haftarah. Hashem says, "I remember you for the kindness of your youth, the love of our initial relationship when you blindly followed Me in the desert." Even after all the offenses the Jewish people committed against Him, Hashem still remembered His initial relationship with His people. Hashem never forgets those precious years wherein He enjoyed a perfect relationship with His people. Hashem actually longs for the opportunity of returning to that relationship and will do virtually anything to restore things to their original perfection. This explains Hashem's persistence in sending prophets to the Jewish people attempting to persuade them to return. In truth, Hashem views the Jewish

people from an entirely different perspective than their present rebellious state. Hashem sees them through the visions of the past. True, they have presently gone totally astray but Hashem sees in them their perfect past as the devout people whose intimate relationship with Him directed them to follow blindly wherever they were led. Hashem therefore expresses His sincere desire that the present Jewish nation live up to His perfect vision of them, the glorious vision of the past. Through this perspective the Jewish people deserve every last chance they can to return to their glorious era.

With this insight in mind we can truly appreciate the words of Chazal in Midrash Tehilim (137) which reveal Hashem's indescribable love and compassion for His people. The Midrash relates that the Prophet Yirmiyahu accompanied the Jewish people into their exile until the Euphrates River, the doorstep of Babylonia. He then informed them that he would be leaving and returning to the segment of Jewish people left behind in the land of Israel. Suddenly there was an outburst of uncontrollable weeping from the Jewish people who realized that they were being abandoned by Yirmiyahu. He responded with the following words, "I testify in the name of Hashem that if this sincere cry would have transpired moments ago, when we were still in our homeland, the exile would never have come about." So great is Hashem's love for His people that even after all the atrocities they committed, rebelling against Hashem and intentionally spiting Him, one sincere gesture from the Jewish people was all that was needed. Even one emotional outburst, sensing Hashem's rejection would have sufficed to hold back the terrible calamity they now faced. Hashem loves His people so deeply that even at the last moments He still awaited their return to Him and was prepared to call off their imminent exile. In Hashem's eyes we will always be seen through the perspective of our past, a perfect devout people ready to serve Him unconditionally. And Hashem is therefore always prepared to do anything He can to restore us to that glorious position, His perfect nation. © 2010 Rabbi D. Siegel and torah.org

RABBI SHLOMO RESSLER

Weekly Dvar

One of this week's Parshiot, 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 (as often discussed in the Daily Aliya blog), 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! © 2010 Rabbi S. Ressler and LeLamed, Inc.

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

This week's parshiyot mark the conclusion of the book of Bamidbar, the book with the longest narrative of the events that befell the Jewish people during their sojourn in the Sinai desert. On the whole, the events described in Bamidbar are fairly depressing. The great hopes of marching into the Land of Israel on a short three-day journey which appear at the beginning of the book were dashed by the acts of rebellion and foolishness committed against G-d and Moshe recorded in the latter part of the book.

Moshe himself is also destined to die now, never to reach the Land of Israel. So the recitation of all of the stops and oases that marked the Jewish journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel conjures up bittersweet memories. There is always a sense of what might have been, of opportunities lost and mistakes made.

I think that is probably true of all of us when we look back at our lives, journeys, decisions and behavior. Life many times is made up of a series of regrets. But the danger is to dwell constantly on those matters. It prevents further positive planning and actions and it weakens one's resolve to live productively and meaningfully.

The recitation of the places in the desert where Israel dwelled is a reminder of both insights. It allows the people to recall the mistakes of the past but it points them towards the fulfillment of their goal of entry into the Land of Israel. One should never operate an automobile without looking regularly into the rear view mirror, yet one's attention must constantly be riveted on looking through the front windshield to see the road and conditions ahead.

Over the long exile of the Jewish people and our complete dispersion over the face of the globe we have stopped at many locales. Sometimes the stop was a relatively short one but most times it was for the duration of many centuries. Babylonia (present day Iraq) was a Jewish home for millennia, while Iberia, North Africa, Poland, Germany and many other European countries housed us for eight hundred years. But, somehow, no matter how long we stayed in a certain place and how productive and secure we may have felt regarding our situation, all of our stops along the way proved to be temporary and impermanent.

The journeys of the Jewish people proved to be, in a manner of speaking, an endless trek. But it always seemingly had a goal. The great Rabbi Nachman of Breslov stated that "every step I take on this earth leads me towards Jerusalem." All of the stops, no matter how long their duration in the Exile of Israel, were eventually nothing more than way stops.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk summarized it succinctly in his ringing assessment of Jewish exile: "Woe to the ones who imagine that Berlin is Jerusalem." Well, we now all know that Berlin was far from being Jerusalem but there are names of other current cities in the Jewish Diaspora that can easily be substituted for Berlin in his prescient statement. We pray that our travels are finally coming to an end and that we can strengthen ourselves in that hope on this Shabat of chazak. ©2010 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

MACHON ZOMET

Shabbat B'Shabbato

by Rabbi Shlomo Shok; Translated by Moshe Goldberg

The most serious element of a human being's personality is honor. But there is more than one type of honor. We can achieve honor based on the nobility of the image of G-d that is within us, raising our unique personality to ever greater heights. This type of honor presents us with a shine which can help us to cast off any attempt to expel us, to send us outside of the way our true character is fashioned.

"The great and righteous Rebbe Menachem Mendel of Lubavitch, the author of the Tzemach Tzedek, once visited the cities Pinsk and Minsk-fortresses of the 'Mitnagdim' who opposed Chassidut-and was greeted with great honor. Thousands of Chassidim from towns near and far gathered around his hotel, and many great men of the Torah joined him in his room, discussed Torah with him, and gave him great honor. One of his sons who had accompanied him on the trip wrote a letter from Pinsk to his mother, who had remained in Lubavitch. He wrote, among other things, that he very much enjoyed the respect that his father had been

shown in Pinsk. When the Rebbe returned home he saw his son's letter and he was very angry. He called his son to him and scolded him. His wife turned to him and asked, Why all this fuss, what has he done that is so wrong? And the Rebbe replied, 'My blood has been spilled like water, and this gives him pleasure?'" [Rabbi Zevin, Chassidic Tales].

Even as righteous a man as the great Tzemach Tzedek was afraid of the blurring of the boundary between honor that can help improve us and honor which can ruin us. When honors are heaped upon us from the outside, there is a danger that we will become addicted to great pleasure and we will come to depend on the question of how other people relate to us. Our personal image becomes dependent on others. Honor becomes a highly desired psychological necessity, and we become ready to do almost anything in order to absorb our dose of imaginary honor. When we have become completely addicted, we are ready to turn in any direction that the others expect in order to flood ourselves with external honor. We move farther and farther away from our true selves, we are no longer ashamed of trying to ingratiate ourselves with others, and we lose our true exalted honor. Instead of a relationship with our surroundings based on transparency and truth, the surroundings are transformed into a poor and crude device for our own honor. Delicate contacts that could have blossomed with our surroundings become a stage where our miserable honor puts on a show.

CHIEF RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

The Israelites are almost within sight of the promised land. They have waged a victorious campaign against the Midianites. We feel the tempo quicken. No longer are the Israelites in the desert. They are moving inexorably toward the Jordan, to the west of which lies their destination: the land 'flowing with milk and honey'.

The members of the tribes of Reuben and Gad, though, begin to have different thoughts. Seeing that the land through which they are travelling is ideal for raising cattle, they decide that they would like to stay there, to the east of the Jordan. Moses is angry at the suggestion: "Moses said to the Gadites and Reubenites, 'Shall your countrymen go to war while you sit here? Why do you discourage the Israelites from going over into the land the Lord has given them?'"

The tribes meet his objection with a compromise formula: "Then they came up to him and said, 'We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children. But we are ready to arm ourselves and go ahead of the Israelites until we have brought them to their place. Meanwhile our women and children will live in fortified cities, for protection from the inhabitants of the land. We will not

return to our homes until every Israelite has received his inheritance. We will not receive any inheritance with them on the other side of the Jordan, because our inheritance has come to us on the east side of the Jordan."

We are willing, they tell Moses, to join the rest of the Israelites in the battles that lie ahead. Indeed we are willing to go on ahead, to be the advance guard, to be in the forefront of the battle. It is not that we are afraid of battle. Nor are we trying to evade our responsibilities toward our people as a whole. It is simply that we wish to raise cattle, and this land to the east of the Jordan is ideal. Warning them of the seriousness of their undertaking, Moses agrees. If they keep their word, they may settle east of the Jordan.

That is the story on the surface. But as so often in the Torah, there are subtexts as well as texts. One in particular was noticed by the sages, with their sensitivity to nuance and detail. Listen carefully to what the Reubenites and Gadites said: "Then they came up to him and said, 'We would like to build pens here for our livestock and cities for our women and children.'"

Moses replies: "Build cities for your children, and pens for your flocks, but do what you have promised."

The ordering of the nouns is crucial. The men of Reuben and Gad put property before people: they speak of their flocks first, their women and children second. Moses reverses the order, putting special emphasis on the children. As Rashi notes: "They paid more regard to their property than to their sons and daughters, because they mentioned their cattle before the children. Moses said to them: 'Not so. Make the main thing primary and the subordinate thing secondary. First build cities for your children, and only then, folds for your flocks.'"

The midrash (Bamidbar Rabbah 22:9) makes the same point through a dazzling interpretation of the line in Ecclesiastes: "The heart of the wise inclines to the right, / but the heart of the fool to the left." (Ecclesiastes 10:2)

The midrash identifies 'right' with Torah and life: "He brought the fire of a religion to them from his right hand (Deut. 33:2). 'Left' refers to worldly goods: "Long life is in her right hand; / in her left hand are riches and honour." (Proverbs 3:16)

The men of Reuben and Gad put 'riches and honour' before faith and posterity. Moses hints to them that their priorities are wrong. The midrash continues: The Holy One, blessed be He, said to them: "Seeing that you have shown greater love for your cattle than for human souls, by your life, there will be no blessing in it."

One of the most consistent patterns of Jewish history is the way communities through the ages put children and their education first. Already in the first century Josephus was able to write: "The result of our thorough education in our laws, from the very dawn of intelligence, is that they are, as it were, engraved on our

souls." In twelfth century France a Christian scholar noted: "A Jew, however poor, if he has ten sons, will put them all to letters, not for gain as the Christians do, but for the understanding of G-d's law- and not only his sons but his daughters too."

In 1432, at the height of Christian persecution of Jews in Spain, a synod was convened at Valladolid to institute a system of taxation to fund Jewish education for all. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years' War, the first thing Jewish communities in Europe did to re-establish Jewish life was to re-organise the educational system. In their classic study of the shtetl, the small townships of Eastern Europe, Zborowski and Herzog write this about the typical Jewish family: "The most important item in the family budget is the tuition fee that must be paid each term to the teacher of the younger boys' school. Parents will bend in the sky to educate their son. The mother, who has charge of household accounts, will cut the family food costs to the limit if necessary, in order to pay for her sons schooling. If the worst comes to the worst, she will pawn her cherished pearls in order to pay for the school term. The boy must study, the boy must become a good Jew-for her the two are synonymous."

In 1849, when Samson Raphael Hirsch became rabbi in Frankfurt, he insisted that the community create a school before building a synagogue. After the Holocaust, the few surviving yeshivah heads and Hassidic leaders concentrated on encouraging their followers to have children and build schools.

It is hard to think of any other religion or civilization that is as child-centred as Judaism, nor any that has predicated its very existence on putting their education first. There have been Jewish communities in the past that were affluent and built magnificent synagogues-Alexandria in the first centuries of the Common Era is an example. Yet because they did not put children first, they contributed little to the Jewish story. They flourished briefly, then disappeared.

Moses' implied rebuke to the tribes of Reuben and Gad is not a minor detail but a fundamental statement about Jewish priorities. Property is secondary, children primary.

Civilizations that value the young, stay young. Those that invest in the future, have a future. It is not what we own that gives us a share in eternity, but those to whom we give birth and the effort we make to ensure that they carry our belief and way of life into the next generation. © 2010 Chief Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and torah.org

