

Toras Aish

Thoughts From Across the Torah Spectrum

RABBI LORD JONATHAN SACKS

Covenant & Conversation

This week's parsha opens with an account of the laws of vows and oaths. What is it doing here near the end of the book of Numbers, as the Israelites approach the destination of their journey to the promised land?

Vows and oaths are obligations created by words. They are commitments to do something or refrain from doing something. A vow, *neder*, affects the status of an object. I may vow not to eat something. That something is now, for me, forbidden food. An oath, *shevuah*, affects the person not the object. What is now forbidden is not the food but the act of eating it. Both acts bind: that is the primary meaning of the word *issar*.

Such is the sanctity of such undertakings that there are demanding rules that have to be met if they are to be annulled. You cannot do it yourself: the parsha sets out some of the ground rules, the rest of which were supplied by the oral tradition. So seriously does Judaism treat verbal undertakings that one act of annulment, *Kol Nidrei*, takes place at the start of the holiest day of the year, *Yom Kippur*.

The superficial reason for the law of vows appearing here is that the previous section of the Torah dealt with communal sacrifices. Individuals also brought sacrifices, sometimes because they were bound to do so but at other times because they voluntarily chose to do so. Hence the laws of voluntary undertakings.

But there is a deeper reason. The Israelites were nearing the land. They were about to construct a society unlike any other. It was to be a free society based on a covenant between the people and G-d. The rule of law was to be secured not by the use of force but by people honouring their moral commitments, their voluntary undertaking to G-d that what He commanded, they would do.

A covenantal society is one in which words are holy, sacrosanct. This is the principle at the heart of Judaism as a code of collective freedom, a constitution

of liberty.

This needs explanation. Any society needs laws. Without that, it descends into anarchy. There are three reasons why people obey laws. The first is that they will be punished if they don't. This is a society based on power. The second is that it is to their advantage to do so. This is a society based on self-interest.

Both have shortcomings. Power corrupts. So, at times, does the pursuit of self-interest. When power is corrupted, there is a loss of freedom. When self-interest prevails, there is a loss of social cohesion. When people care about themselves but not others, the successful thrive while others suffer. Justice and compassion give way to greed and exploitation.

The Torah sets forth a third way, in which people obey the law because they have voluntarily undertaken to do so. This is a society based not on power or the pursuit of self-interest but on freely embraced moral obligation. The Torah is the story of how the Israelites came to this unique and radical idea: the politics of covenant.

Ironically it was one of the great critics of Judaism, Friedrich Nietzsche, who had the insight to see that the capacity to bind ourselves by words is the basis of both morality and human freedom. This is what he says in his book, *On the Genealogy of Morality*:

To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? Is it not the real problem of humankind?

Homo sapiens is distinguished from other animals by its use of language. That is well known. What Nietzsche saw, however, is that we use language in many different ways. We use it to describe, communicate, categorise and explain. Language in this sense is a kind of picture of reality, a translation of what is into a set of signs, symbols and images.

But we can also use language in a quite different way – not to describe what is, but to commit ourselves to some form of behaviour in the future.

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Issur ben Yocho
and
Alter Mayer ben Gittel Rivkah
for a *refuah shelaima*



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So for instance when a groom says to his bride under the chuppah, "Behold you are betrothed to me . . ." he is not describing a marriage. He is getting married. He is undertaking a set of obligations to the woman he has chosen as his wife. Philosophers nowadays call this a performative utterance.

Nietzsche saw how fundamental this is to the human condition: In order to have that degree of control over the future, man must first learn to distinguish between what happens by accident and what by design . . . and before he can do this, man himself will really have to become reliable, regular, necessary, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable for his own future!

When we bind ourselves by words we are using language not to describe but to create – to create an orderly future out of the chaos of human instincts and desires. What makes humans unique is not just the use of language. Other animals use forms of language. Dolphins do. So do primates. Even bees do complex dances that convey information to other bees.

What is unique to humans is that we use language to bind our own future behaviour so that we can form with other human beings bonds of mutuality and trust. One such bond is the promise. Another is marriage. A third – unique to Judaism – is society understood as a covenant, a set of mutually binding promises between the Jewish people and G-d.

It is this use of language, not to describe something already in existence but to create something that didn't exist before, that links us to G-d. G-d used words to bring the natural universe into being: "And G-d said . . . and there was." We use words to bring a social universe into being. What the Torah is telling us is that words create because words are holy: that is to say, they bind. When words bind, they generate trust. Trust is to society what predictability is to nature: the basis of order as opposed to chaos.

Social institutions in a free society depend on trust, and trust means that we keep our word. We do what we say we are going to do. If we make a vow, an oath, a promise, a verbal undertaking, then we hold ourselves bound by it. This means that we will actually fulfil our commitment unless we can establish that, due to circumstances unforeseeable at the time, we are simply unable to do so.

If trust breaks down, social relationships break down, and then society depends on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer free. The only way free human beings can form collaborative and cooperative relationships without recourse to force is by the use of verbal undertakings honoured by those who make them.

Freedom needs trust; trust needs people to keep their word; and keeping your word means treating words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct. Only under very special and precisely formulated circumstances can you be released from your undertakings. That is why, as the Israelites approached the holy land where they were to create a free society, they had to be reminded of the sacred character of vows and oaths.

The temptation to break your word when it is to your advantage to do so can sometimes be overwhelming. That is why belief in G-d – a G-d who oversees all we think, say and do, and who holds us accountable to our commitments – is so fundamental. Although it sounds strange to us now, the father of toleration and liberalism, John Locke (England, 17th century) held that citizenship should not be extended to atheists because, not believing in G-d, they could not be trusted to honour their word.

So the appearance of laws about vows and oaths at the end of the book of Bamidbar, as the Israelites are approaching the holy land, is no accident, and the moral is still relevant today. A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate G-d by using language to create.

Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully, create the possibility of a free society.

So – always do what you say you are going to do. If we fail to keep our word, eventually we will lose our freedom. ©2016 Rabbi Lord J. Sacks and rabbisacks.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 travelled 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”. Nachmanides, 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’s 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 which 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. ©2016 Ohr Torah Institutions & Rabbi S. Riskin

RABBI BEREL WEIN

Wein Online

Throughout the entire Torah it seems clear that the Jewish people were to maintain the system of separate tribes with separate leaders. At first glance, it seems that this system of separate tribes would always guarantee a strong element of disunity within the Jewish people. Would it not have been better to discard the original tribal system of the house of Jacob and build instead a more unified community?

Also, when the Land of Israel was settled and inhabited by the Jews at the time of Joshua, it was distributed in tribal sections, according to the rules of the Torah. The next few centuries, as the Bible itself records for us in the book of Judges, disunity, if not even chaos reigned in the Jewish community. Each tribe looked at itself as a separate and distinct entity having little responsibility or connection to the broader Jewish community.

Eventually, the sad fact would arise that the tribes at certain stages of biblical history, would even conduct civil war amongst themselves. The Torah obviously was aware of this danger but continued to emphasize the tribal nature of the Jewish people and of its leaders. The Torah explicitly names the individual leaders of the tribes and counts the population of each tribe separately, one from another. Though this question is rarely addressed directly by the commentators to the Torah, it does underlie much of their insights and viewpoints into the Jewish story of the biblical period.

It seems to me that the Torah here is emphasizing the important, but often overlooked, difference between unity and conformity. Each of the tribes, and certainly each of the leaders of those tribes, bring something different to the table of society. The Talmud teaches us that just as the physical features of human beings differ one from another so too do their opinions, thought processes and worldviews differ.

Conformity amongst human beings is against our very nature. That is why children raised in the very same home and who are products of the very same genetic makeup, are frequently very different from one another in temperament, behavior and opinion. Often, these differences present problems in families and in societies. Nevertheless, the Torah is willing to deal with these problems rather than enforce a rigid conformity upon the Jewish world.

The unifying force in Judaism and in Jewish society is the Torah itself. Every Jew has a share in it and is bound with a commitment to honor, study, observe and live by its values. But that unity, as is evident from an even cursory observation of the Jewish world today, and in fact of all of past Jewish history, never advocates a society of conformity.

Dictators and tyrants have from time immemorial attempted to impose conformity on their subjects and citizens. Eventually such attempts fail simply because they are contrary to human nature. The task of ancient and modern Israel - and of the Jewish people as a whole, is to create the unity of spirit and commitment that the Torah represents, without falling into the trap of tyrannical conformity. ©2016 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

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 G-d 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 G-d 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). ©2016 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.

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Hatarat Nedarim

*Translated for the Encyclopedia Talmudit
by Rabbi Mordechai Weiss*

A person who vows and then regrets making this vow, may approach a Rabbi to have it annulled. Our sages have stated that the term in Hebrew for annulment (Hatarat) means to untie that which was previously tied. Others say that it comes from the word "Heter" (permissible) as opposed to "Issur" (forbidden).

As to the source for "Hatarat Nedarim" (annulment of Vows) some Rabbis state that it's source is this week's portion when it states "Lo Yachel Devaro" to mean that the one making the vow cannot be forgiven for his words (coming from the Hebrew word "Mechila") however someone else can give him "Mechila" (forgiveness).

Our Rabbis further state that "Hatarat Nedarim" really has no basis in the Torah and is a law given to Moses from Almighty G-d and in essence gives the Rabbi the ability to annul vows using the formula sited, even though it has no logical or scriptural basis.

With reference to the annulment itself, the Rabbi who annuls the vow in essence destroys the vow from its source as if it never existed. This is the difference between a Rabbi who annuls a vow and a husband who annuls the vows of his wife (Hafarat Nedarim). The former destroys the vow from its source, while the latter only nullifies the vow from the moment the husband becomes aware of his wife's vow, but not

prior.

What is the actual annulment ceremony? The person comes before the Rabbi or three laymen and announces his regret for making the vow. At that time they say "The vow is annulled" using the Hebrew formula "Sharu Lach" or "Mutar Lach" or "Machul lach" or similar language signifying the annulment of the vow. Some have the tradition of reciting the formula three times as a sign of strength, however even if said once it is sufficient. ©2016 Rabbi M. Weiss and Encyclopedia Talmudit

RABBI KALMAN PACKOUZ

Shabbat Shalom Weekly

The Torah tells us that when the tribes of Reuben and Gad made their request to settle east of the Jordan, they offered to be in the forefront of the army conquering the Land of Israel. They told Moses that: "pens for the flock shall we build here for our livestock and cities for our small children" (Num. 32:16).

Rashi states that the words of Gad and Reuben, placing the provisions for their livestock before that of their children, indicates that they accorded greater value to their possessions than to their children.

We may ask, how could anyone possibly give greater importance to their possessions than to their children? We may indeed be critical of Gad and Reuben, and be totally unaware that many of us are guilty of the same thing.

Today, a parent returns home from work late, and equipped with a cell phone, his mealtime with the children is interrupted. Whatever time he or she could spend with them is commandeered by business calls.

There is nothing that should take preference over our children. We must teach our children and we must discipline them, because without discipline they cannot possibly make an optimum adjustment to life. But at all times, our primary concern must be what is best for them, rather than what is best for us. If these two should conflict, the child's welfare must be given preference. *Dvar Torah from Twerski on Chumash by Rabbi Abraham J. Twerski, M.D.* ©2016 Rabbi K. Packouz and aish.com

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, 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. ©2016 Rabbi S. Ressler & LeLamed, Inc.

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 convicted of involuntary manslaughter of sorts. They played an integral role in the killers' 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, he was called out of the prison by a very excited messenger. Reb Aryeh's son-in-law came to the prison to say that 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 bribed by the concerned inmates to visit Reb Aryeh's home and 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 an environment 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 cannot 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. ©1996 Rabbi M. Kamenetzky & torah.org

RABBI DOV KRAMER

Taking a Closer Look

"**A**nd they traveled from Eilim and they camped by the Yam Suf" (Bamidbar 33:10). Being that they had crossed the Yam Suf (often translated as "the Red Sea" and "the Sea of Reeds") a couple of stops prior to this (33:8; this was their third encampment after crossing), it is a bit curious that the Children of Israel were back at the same sea they had crossed. Why did they return to the Yam Suf?

Since they were headed for Mt. Sinai (33:14-15, compare with Sh'mos 19:2), and where they were headed directly impacts why they were back at the Yam Suf, the location of Mt. Sinai may help. There has been much discussion recently (in scholarly circles) regarding whether Mt. Sinai is in the Sinai Peninsula (as has seemingly always been assumed) or in Saudi Arabia (as well as specifically where in those areas). Therefore, let's take a slight detour by discussing the issues surrounding whether Mt. Sinai is on the Sinai Peninsula or in Saudi Arabia. (For a full detour, see <http://tinyurl.com/hzlczsy>.)

One of the reasons people started looking for possible locations outside the Sinai Peninsula is the lack of archeological evidence there from the time period of the exodus from Egypt. Although it is true that, generally speaking, a lack of evidence is not evidence in and of itself, the expectation of archeologists and biblical scholars is that if a nation said to consist of 600,000 adult males (Bamidbar 2:32) besides women and children had been there, there would be evidence that they were. Since there is none, many question how the Sinai Peninsula could be considered a candidate for the location of Mt. Sinai. The fact that it is called the Sinai Peninsula doesn't mean that Mt. Sinai must be on it, as it was called the Sinai Peninsula precisely because it had been thought that Mt. Sinai was there.

Besides the suggestion by some that being on the constant move and having few belongings to leave behind precludes a lack of evidence from being evidence, we are taught that the nation was led by, and surrounded by, "clouds of glory" that did numerous wondrous things. It "lowered terrain that was high, raised [terrain] that was low, and killed snakes and scorpions [along the way]" (Rashi, Bamidbar 10:34). Their clothing never wore out (D'varim 8:4 and 29:4) because "the clouds of glory would rub against their clothing and clean them" (Rashi on 8:4), so there was no trail of discarded worn out clothing. Not only that, but the Tribe of Dan traveled in back of everyone, picking up (and returning) anything left behind (Rashi on Bamidbar 10:25). Therefore, any location they had

been at or through was left clean, without any garbage (even the food they ate was completely absorbed into their bodies, with no waste). Is it any surprise, then, that no evidence was left to "prove" where the Children of Israel had traveled or camped?

The "burning bush," which was atop Mt. Sinai (Sh'mos 3:1-2), occurred when Moshe was living with his father-in-law, Yisro, in Midyan, tending his sheep. Mt. Sinai must then be within grazing range of Midyan, which is fairly well accepted to be in Saudi Arabia, specifically on the eastern bank of the Gulf of Aqaba, which is the eastern fork of the Yam Suf. It would have been quite a distance for Moshe to travel from Saudi Arabia to the Sinai Peninsula (see Tur on Sh'mos 3:1), especially to its southern part. However, there are several reasons why Moshe would have ended up far from Midyan.

When Moshe first arrived in Midyan, he came across Yisro's daughters shepherding their father's sheep, but being hounded by the local shepherds (Sh'mos 2:16-17) because their father had abandoned his idolatrous ways (Rashi). Yisro's status as an outcast likely didn't improve after Moshe's arrival, so when Moshe took over the shepherding duties, it makes sense that he didn't do so locally, but traveled far enough away that he wouldn't be bothered by the local population. Additionally, Moshe purposely led the sheep into the desert (3:1) in order to avoid grazing on private property, which would be stealing (Rashi). The Torah says he led them into the desert, as in the known desert. Which desert would Moshe be familiar with? The one he had to cross when fleeing from Egypt to Midyan, the Sinai desert, on the Sinai Peninsula.

The Zohar (2:21, quoted by Torah Sh'laima, Sh'mos 3:18) says that Moshe was able to sense a special holiness in that desert, so purposely went there; it follows that he would go as far into the desert as this holiness he sensed led him. Pirkay d'Rebbe Eliezer (40) says that Moshe shepherded his father-in-law's sheep for 40 years; he likely kept them out grazing for extended periods of time, certainly long enough to come across "G-d's mountain." Since G-d wanted to communicate with him to send him on a very special mission, Moshe was likely divinely led to this mountain despite it being so far from Midyan. The Midrash (Sh'mos Rabbah 2:2) says that a young goat (or sheep) ran away, and Moshe ran after it, with the commentators explaining that it ran to Mt. Sinai so that G-d could speak to him there.

Therefore, even though placing Mt. Sinai in Saudi Arabia may seem more intuitive because of its proximity to Midyan, there are enough reasons why Moshe might have led his sheep (or been led) to the distant Sinai Peninsula.

When Moshe went back to Egypt (from Midyan) to lead the Children of Israel out, he was met by his brother Aharon at "G-d's mountain" (Sh'mos 4:27).

Moshe was traveling from Midyan back to Egypt, and Aharon was told to “go meet Moshe in the desert” (ibid), and the place they happened to meet up (“vayifg’sheihu”), obviously with some divine help, was at Mt. Sinai. It would therefore follow that Mt. Sinai is somewhere between Midyan and Egypt, with both Moshe and Aharon taking the same route (from opposite directions). If Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia, it would only be on the way from Egypt if Midyan did not extend all the way to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba and Mt. Sinai is in the strip of land between the northern border of Midyan and the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba. [None of the proposed Saudi Arabian sites for Mt. Sinai are there, but further east, putting it miles out the way when traveling between Egypt and Midyan.] Besides, by the time Aharon and Moshe met at “G-d’s mountain,” Moshe had already traveled far enough to check into a place of lodging (4:24), and it was considered as if he had already “returned to Egypt” (4:20). It doesn’t sound like Mt. Sinai is close to Midyan; if anything, Moshe and Aharon seem to have met somewhere in the middle, perhaps even closer to Egypt. It should also be noted that Aharon’s instructions were to “go meet Moshe in the desert,” without specifying which desert. The only desert that Aharon could have been familiar enough with for it to be referred to as “the desert” is the one right outside Egypt, on the Sinai Peninsula.

The Torah (D’varim 1:2) says it was an “11 day trip from Choreiv (Mt. Sinai) to Kadesh Barneya taking the road to Mt. Seyir.” Since Mt. Seyir is northeast of the Sinai Peninsula, and Kadesh Barneya is directly north of it, there should be no reason to take the road to Mt. Seyir to get from Mt. Sinai to Kadesh Barneya. If, on the other hand, Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia, the road to Mt. Seyir takes them northwest, from where they could travel further west to Kadesh Barneya. Nevertheless, taking “the road to Mt. Seyir” doesn’t necessarily mean taking it all the way to its final destination, just as taking the highway that goes to Tel Aviv from Jerusalem to get to Beit Shemesh doesn’t mean going all the way to Tel Aviv. And, as I have previously shared (<http://tinyurl.com/hnru4gu>), “the road to Mt. Seyir” may have been a relatively short road that goes from the southern end of the Sinai Peninsula to the northern tip of the Gulf of Aqaba, where it meets other major roads. If “the road to Mt. Seyir” didn’t really go to Mt. Seyir, but met with the major trade route that did (“The King’s Highway,” see Bamidbar 20:17), we can understand not only why it’s called “the way to Mt. Seyir” even if it doesn’t go there, but why the Children of Israel would take it despite not going to Mt. Seyir. Once they reached the end of that road (or the appropriate crossroads), they took “the road to the mountains of the Emori” to Kadesh Barneya.

If Mt. Sinai is on the Sinai Peninsula, the nation would have followed a southern route somewhat

parallel to the coastline of the Yam Suf (the same route Aharon took when he went to meet Moshe because of the water sources along that route), starting from the north end of the Gulf of Suez (the western fork), traveling south (and east, since the peninsula resembles a “V”) all the way around to the east and north near the Gulf of Aquaba (the eastern fork). It is not surprising, then, if along the way, one of the stops was not just parallel to the coast, but on the coast itself, especially where the coast is recessed a bit (see Chizkuni on Bamidbar 33:10).

[This is similar to how Tosfos (Arachin 15a, see also Chizkuni on Bamidbar 33:8) explains the second stop at Yam Suf, although they envisioned the coastline going straight across from west to east, not a “V” shaped peninsula. The M’chilta (B’shalach, Vayasah 1) understands the second stop at Yam Suf to be a retreat; I am presenting explanations more consistent with Tosfos.]

If Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia, even though the crossing of the sea occurred near the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez (see <http://tinyurl.com/jjf3bd3>, which wouldn’t work if it was the Gulf of Aqaba since it is so far from Egypt), the second stop at the Yam Suf would have been on the Gulf of Aqaba, right before or right after they entered Saudi Arabia. Please note, though, that since there were two stops at “Yam Suf,” and both couldn’t have been on the Gulf of Aqaba (since they would have already been on the other side after they crossed it), even if Mt. Sinai is in Saudi Arabia, the part of the Yam Suf that the nation crossed had to be the Gulf of Suez. ©2016 Rabbi D. Kramer

