

D'var Torah
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Parshah Matot-Masei

Numbers 30:2 – 36:13

3rd Year of the Triennial Cycle • Num. 33:50 – 36:13

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Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Gut Shabbos. Shalom Aleichem.

I want to start as I always do by thanking Rabbi Weinblatt for giving me the honor of delivering a d'var Torah. A big thank you to Cantor Kapell for helping me to elevate my prayer with such beautiful music. Welcome, again, Rabbi Tow. And I want to say thanks, as I always do, to you. It is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence. In today's discussion about place and family, this place is my second home and you are all my extended family. Thank you.

How many of you remember the old Wrigley's Double Mint Gum commercial, "double, double your excitement, double, double your pleasure"? You are in luck today because we have a rare double Parshah. As a result of the double parshah, this d'var Torah will be twice as long as usual. Today, you get not just one hour, but two. You're welcome.

This parshah speaks to me on a personal and professional level because I travel all the time for work, and occasionally for pleasure and inspiration. While the last thing I ever wanted to do was to travel for fun, I credit Wendy for showing me the power of meaningful travel.

Mas'ai recounts the wanderings of the Children of Israel before they – we – enter the promised land. Mas'ai opens:

"Ehleh mas'ai v'nay Yisrael esher yetzhu ma'aretz Mitzrayim."

וְהָיָה כִּי יֵצֵאוּ מִצְרָיִם וְיֵצְאוּ מִן הַיָּם וְיֵצְאוּ מִן הַיָּם וְיֵצְאוּ מִן הַיָּם

"These were the marches of the Israelites who started out of Egypt."

One of the better ways to summarize this parshah is this: You cannot know where you are going unless you know where you have been. This portion is part rear view mirror and part windshield.

The Hebrew Bible is in many ways a travel journal, a Michelin guide, or a Yelp! review. Egypt, no starts. Canaan, after the wars, five starts. Maybe there is a review out there that says, “the wandering is not so great, but if you join the caravan you must stay for Shabbos, because you get a double portion. See the hostess, Miriam, she always has plenty of fresh water. Stay close to Caleb, he knows where the milk and honey are stored.”

Jews have been on physical and metaphorical journeys since Abraham first saddled his donkey and set out from Ur, following a God he could not see, going to a place he did not know. The same is true for our ancestors who visited 42 places in 40 years. It may also be true for us today.

Two weeks ago, we read about Balam. Rav Kook looked at the words that Balam spoke and observed that tents are for wanderers. Dwelling places are for people who have found homes. After more than a generation of wandering this parshah offered the Israelites a sense of place. Now, finally, they had dwelling places. They had homes.

In offering this d’var Torah, I want to talk about the where, the what, and the wow. The where is a sense of place, the what are several events mentioned in this parshah, and the wow is the appreciation that was not always offered on the Israelites’ journey across the desert.

Once you have achieved a home, you should look to how you got there, who helped get you there, and what you learned on that journey. We are told that there were 42 stops along the 40-year journey. When you take a closer look at these places, most of them were places of tragedy or discord. This listing of 42 places recounts just three events. Three obscure events that to many represent a burying of the lead and putting page ten on the front page.

Let’s start with the where. Numbers 33 begins a long list of the places the Israelites have been, from Ramses in verse 5 to Moab in verse 49. We know from the study of Torah that everything in the book is there for a reason and there is a reason for what is not in the book. Why list these places? Why leave out others?

In the commentary Akeidat Yitzchak, Rabbi Isaac ben Moses Arama wrote that in each of these 42 places, God performed one sort of kindness or another for the Jewish people. Yet some key places and events are left out and more obscure places and events are put in. Nu? Not on the list is Yam Suf where God split the sea. Sinai is also not on the list. Sinai?! Can you imagine a travel log of the Jewish people that leaves out Sinai? It’s like Fodors leaving out the Leaning Tower of Pisa in a book about Pisa.

One explanation of the listing of places comes from Rashi who said that this list is to thank God for the things He did for the people. On the other hand, Obadya Sforno, a 16th Century Italian commentator, said the listing of places was to praise the people for their service to God. Sforno said that sometimes we are glad to stay and sometimes we are glad to leave. Follow me here: Jacob stayed in Haran after meeting Rachel at the well. Jacob woke from a dream and said “mah nora ha’makom”, “how awesome is this place!” Ruth said “ki el asher telekhi elekh”, wherever you go, I go. And on the other hand, the Sefat Emet says that this enumeration reminds us to keep the perspective that we could not have gotten to the Promised Land without effort and faith. You think milk and honey grows on trees? Rambam’s commentary for this retelling is obvious. He said that we record the wandering so that future generations will know what their ancestors went through. We know from the Haggadah that we must feel as if we, ourselves, left Egypt. Making a nation takes work -- mental, emotional, and physical work. A whole generation of people, and its leaders, had to die before reaching the Promised Land.

Now let’s look at the what. In this long list of places only three events are mentioned: Rifidim is one place and one event and Hor Ha’Har is one place with two events.

In Refidim the Israelites had no water. Remember back in Beshalach when the people kvetched about not having water? “You brought us into the wilderness to starve”, they said. As commanded by God, Moses hit a rock and brought forth what became known as “Miriam’s well.” This was the second time of three times the Torah tells us the Jews had no water. The first is Marah and the third is Kadesh. I will get Marah and Kadesh in my second hour.

Refidim, the second water place, made the cut beyond many other seemingly more important events because the rock and the water represent a turning point in our ancestors’ relationship with God. The God that smote the first-born Egyptians, the God that turned a river in to blood, and the God that drowned Pharaoh’s army is the same God who commanded Moses to use that same staff to bring forth clear, fresh water that came with the Israelites for the next 40 years. When the people asked back in Beshalach, “is God really among us, or not?” God answered them with water. We have a God that we cannot see, but his presence is all around us. Some forty years later the second generation of Israelites still treat Moses and Aaron as if they brought the people out of Egypt and as if they are the water keepers. God again solved the problem telling Moses pass among the people and make sure they watch what he does. From the rock, a second time in the Torah, God delivered for His people. Here, Refidim is a reminder that it is God that provides the water, not Moses and Aaron.

The only other two events mentioned on this list both occur in Hor Ha’Har. This is where Aaron was sent to die and it’s where the Canaanite king heard of the impending arrival of the Israelites. Right before Hor Ha’Har, the people again whine about water. Aaron’s death, in full view of the people, shortly after Moses infamously hit the rock for the last time,

and this time doing so by failing to follow God's instruction, is a reminder to the people that Moses and Aaron are mortal and there is but one Eternal. The third and final event listed in the travel journal is when the Canaanite king heard of the impending arrival of the Israelites. Here, the people turned for help not to Moses, but to God directly. This is the final chapter, literally, in the book, where the Children of Israel ultimately realize that they are a nation under God.

Refidim and Hor Ha'Har are signs to the second generation, the generation that inherits the Promised Land, that after all this wandering and after all this wondering, that God is still with His people.

Let's go back for a moment to look again at the places listed in the travel log and find a sense of place after all of that wandering and all that wondering.

Commentators have said that the number 42 – for the 42 places along the Exodus route – allude to a mystical 42-letter name of God. This indicates that the Jewish people acquired a greater spiritual awareness as they traveled through the desert. Each stop along our geographic and metaphoric journeys makes us stronger and often it's the journey that is more important than the destination. This is true for me and perhaps for many of you.

Abraham, our first wanderer, traded the worship of idols that stared at him for that which he could not see. Abraham left relative comfort going to a place he knew not. For Abraham it was the journey, not the destination. The same was true for the Israelites of the Exodus. Here, in Mas'ai, the Jews stopped wandering.

The Torah says, *vayisu*, and they traveled and *vayakhanu*, and they stopped. This appears not only in the parshah, but in another great Jewish book, *Tevye the Milkman*. Tevye, naturally cites this passage with regret as Jews wander from one catastrophe to the next. Here, the parshah tells us that after 40 years of wandering, we have reached Bayitanu, our home; Ha'Makon, the place.

Yet our wandering was not over when we reached the steppes of Moab. Our journey was just beginning. The list of places, good and bad, march on. There's Vienna, Lisbon, Provence, Warsaw, the Lower East Side, Tel Aviv, Kutchers, Miami Beach, Highland Park, Pittsburgh, and Poway.

In my travels I have seen the good and the bad. Like Blanche DuBois, I have always relied on the kindness of strangers. I have also seen the worst in people on my travels. From my own internal and external travel experiences, I have become a more tolerant visitor and a more patient host. Rabbi David Wolpe of Sinai Temple in Los Angeles said that even though

you are Jewish and you are reading the Haggadah at the Seder, if you do not thank the people who are serving you a meal, you are just an Egyptian. At the Seder we express gratitude for God for getting us to the table and we must also express gratitude to the people who serve us. It's the wow – the gratitude – that separates from being masters or slaves; it's what allows us to be free. This is the wow.

Wherever I travel I try to express my gratitude as often as I can. There is an army of people, seen and unseen, that help make my travel possible. The Torah is often about delayed gratification and if 40 years of wandering is not delayed gratification than I do not know what is. Again, channeling Rabbi Wolpe, while gratification may be delayed, you should never delay gratitude. That's what the story of Mas'ei teaches us.

When I travel, I take care to thank the housekeeper that cleans my hotel room, not just by leaving her a tip, but by writing "thank you" on the hotel pad. I thank the porter who waxes the lobby floors, the gate agent who gets me out of a center seat, the janitor who cleans the bathrooms, and more. Yet there are many parts of my travel that I do not see. My bags move from place to place as if by a miracle, or my bags never arrive because of a cursed force meant only to single me out for punishment and no one else. Much of my mundane travel is like Mas'ei. Yet my travel has opened my heart and my mind. On my travels, I have found God in erev Shabbos services in Warsaw and in a Sukkah in Berlin. And I have even found God while I was standing the barracks of Dachau. I saw God in the bazar of Istanbul where I met a shopkeeper who was Jewish and he wrote his number on a scrap of paper. He said, "If you need help, if you have a problem while you are here, call me any time." I saw God in the Sukkah in Berlin where I stumbled upon an Ushperin about to start. The mother asked me if I could take photos to email them to her since she left her camera at home. I gratefully obliged. Last year, 9 years after this Ushperin, the mother emails me again and says her computer crashed and she wants the photos as the boy is approaching his bar mitzvah. Do I still have the photos? Of course I still had the photos and I emailed them again. This is what *Klal Yisrael* is all about. I have seen God in the narrowest of places and I have seen God in the widest of spaces.

I am the visible part of my journey, but there are countless people behind me and ahead of me that get me where I need to go. And, of course, there is God, the least visible but most present part of my travels who, as it says in the Tefilat Ha'Derech, leads my footsteps toward peace, and helps me to reach my desired destination for life, gladness, and peace. I changed the pronoun here to the singular since it's my travel I am talking about, but while the Tefilat Ha'Derech is often recited individually, it's written in the plural: may You lead us to peace, help us reach our destination. The plural helps bind every individual traveler with Klal Yisrael. It's what brings strangers together in Istanbul and Berlin.

We all make journeys of the heart, of the mind, and of the body. God is not just a synagogue and home is not always in a house. One of my favorite music groups is a husband/wife British duo, Everything But the Girl and one my more listened to songs of theirs is *One Place*, a song about traveling and finding a sense of place. After suggesting that they travel too much and that they have lost their sense of place, they sing: “in the end, if you take care/you can be happy on the road, happy anywhere.”

Our journeys often never end and that’s good. At the end of the Seder we say, “*L’Shana Haba’ah B’Yerushalayim*”, “next year in Jerusalem.” You say this even if you are sitting in Jerusalem, even if you are standing at Ha’Kotel. Our journey to the heart of ourselves, our faith, and to God never ends.

I will close, as I always do, by boldly offering to you a blessing and accepting the grace that you might bless me in return. Like our ancestors who wandered from Marah, a place of bitterness, to Elim, a place of sweetness, may we do the same. On whatever journeys we take and whether we are travelers or hosts, I hope that we can all take a few moments to remember where we came from and how we got there. I hope we can all pause to also reflect on who got us there. There are many who offered assistance to us along the way who are not always in front of your eyes. As we travel, let us remember that it’s not just the places, but also the events; it’s not just the destination, it’s the journey. Finally, when we travel, may we do so from strength to strength. *Hazak, Hazak, Venit Hazek.*

Gut Shabbos. Aleichem Shalom.