

## **A Weekly Byte... from Isralight**

**(Portion of Massei - reprinted from 2005)**

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*  
From Rav Binny

*Somehow, the computers or the staff making such decisions had really fouled this one up; how could anyone have thought this fellow was suited to be a gunner?*

*His name was Shachar, which means dawn, and the joke was with him around it was always dawn, because he blotted out the sun. He was a massive fellow, and watching him squeeze into the gunner's seat, the smallest, most confined place in the tank, deep in the belly of the turret, was a sight to behold. He told me the reason he had fought so hard to get into sergeant's (commander's) course was because it was the only way he could think of to get out of the gunner's turret...*

*One would think with such a fellow sharing your tank, there would be a lot less room to breathe, but in fact the opposite was true. Somehow, his sharp sense of humor, and the smile always twinkling at the corners of his mouth made it seem like there was lots of room, and late at night when the maneuvers were done for the night, guys would end up hanging out in our tank to shoot the breeze with Shachar. Sometimes nine or ten guys would be crowded on and in the tank, sharing a good laugh, and the smallest bag of pistachio nuts he always carried seemed to go on forever. It fascinated me that at the end of the week, back on base, the room I shared with a different group of guys seemed a lot smaller than the tiny tank turret we all had to maneuver around in.*

*It was only later, in Officer's course that the mysterious truth of this reality really hit home. In the winter, out in the field, it is incredibly depressing to have to sleep out in the tanks. The desert nights where we were training are bitter cold, and finding a spot in and around the tank to stretch out in was extremely challenging. The best place to sleep, strange as it may sound, was usually (barring rain) out on the 'sipun' or flat rear of the tank, on top of the engine. Long after the tank went quiet, the heat of the engine kept the exterior of the tank warm, which made for a cozy night's sleep. Usually, there was a scramble to get your sleeping bag laid out there at the end of the night inspection, so you could get the best spot.*

*Somehow, Shachar had figured out a way for all four of us to sleep out on the sipun. I made sure to watch how we slept as I thought it would be a great trick to share with my crew one day as an officer.*

*But years later, and ever since, as hard as I have tried, I have never been able to replicate Shachar's feat, which is especially strange when considering how much space Shachar himself must have taken up. In fact, one night, in trying to arrange my crew in just such a manner, I nearly rolled off the tank, sleeping bag and all!*

*I guess space isn't about where you are; it is somehow connected to who you are.*

This week's portion, *Massei*, seems to be all about space; lots of it. The portion begins by describing the many journeys of the Jewish people in the desert, on their way to entering the land of Israel. Describing each stop along the way, the Torah delineates no less than forty-two separate places the Jewish people passed through on their way to Israel.

From Ramses, the Egyptian suburb built by Jewish slaves, all the way to the plains of Moab on the banks of the Jordan River, the Torah takes the time to list each and every part of the Jewish journey from slavery to freedom, leaving us to wonder why so much space is devoted to a delineation of geographic progression. Why not just express that over forty years the Jews made it up from Egypt to the staging ground along the Jordan, where the entry to Israel would begin.

Why the need for so many 'pit-stops'? In fact, the desert is all about space, and much less about place. Indeed, it is the place which is really 'no-place'. You don't hike in the desert to get to a specific spot; you go so as not to be in *any* particular spot. We get so focused on our own little places, the desert is a place where we don't get distracted by any particular place; we have the chance to appreciate the vastness and beauty of no place, which is really about all place.

All of which is what makes this list of places and spaces in the desert so strange. Why did we need all these places? Why not just say the Jewish people journeyed through the desert to reach their destination, the land of Israel?

It is interesting to note that these 'pit stops' along the way are presented to us as separate journeys:

*"Eleh masaei' B'nei Yisrael asher yatzu' me'erezt Mitzraim le'tzivotam, be'yad Moshe Ve'Aharon. Vayichtov Moshe et motza'eihem le'maseihem al pi Hashem, ve'eleh maseihem le'motza'eihem."*

*"These are the **journeys** of the children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their hosts (armies?) under the hand of Moshe and Aaron. And Moshe wrote their **departures** according to their **journeys**, at the bidding of Hashem, and these are their **journeys** according to their **departures**." (Bamidbar (Numbers) 33:1-2.)*

After which the Torah proceeds to delineate no less than forty-two stops the Jewish people make along the way, from their original departure from Ramses, the Jewish slave-built suburb of Egypt, all the way to their encampment in the Plains of Moab opposite the banks of the Jordan River. (33:48-49)

This leads us to wonder why these stops are describes initially as separate 'journeys'! Are they not in fact all part of one journey, from their enslavement in the land of Egypt, to their establishment as a free nation in the land of Israel? Why does the Torah describe these stops as "*masaei' B'nei Yisrael*", "*the journeys of the children of Israel*", when they are really all part of the same journey?

Furthermore, why the need to recall each and every stop along the way? Would it not have been enough to list the highlights or simply to recall that they had left Egypt forty

years ago, and were now finally encamped, after forty long years, along the banks of the Jordan River?

There is an interesting descriptive term being used here: the Torah is focusing not on destinations, but on departures: “*motza’eihem*”, a word rooted in the Hebrew word “yetziah” or “*departures*”. In the end, isn’t this entire journey a continuation of one departure, their Exodus from Egypt? Indeed, the term used everywhere in the Torah for this event is actually “*Yetziat Mitzraim*”, or the “Exodus (read departure) from Egypt”.

Why focus on from where we left, instead of where we are headed? Isn’t that backward thinking? Isn’t our own modern day establishment of the State of Israel much more important than how and exactly when we left the camps and shtetels of our two thousand year exile?

Jewish tradition suggests that Mitzrayim, the Hebrew word for Egypt is also a play on the word Meitzarim or ‘narrow spaces. ‘Read not, suggests the Talmud, ‘mi’ Mitzraim, from Egypt, but rather (as well), mi’ meitzarim, from the narrow places. In other words we are leaving the narrow confined experience of Egypt. And the land of Israel where we are headed is described by the Torah as “*Eretz tovah u’rechava*” “a land which is good and spacious.” (Shemot 3:8).

In other words, this journey is from the narrow confines of Egypt, to the wide open spaces of the land of Israel. And, incidentally, this description of the land of Israel as being spacious is said by G-d in the original ‘mission statement’ being given over to Moshe by no less than G-d Himself to Moshe way back at the burning bush. On a certain level, this is not just about geography; this is part of the goal of the entire process.

**Rashi**, in explaining why the Torah chooses to delineate each one of the stops on this long journey, suggests that it is:

*“Le’hodiah chasdav shel ha’Makom.”*  
*“To make known the loving-kindness of G-d.” (33:1)*

Interestingly, one of the many names of G-d, which Rashi chooses here, is Makom, which means literally ‘the place’.

Each stage of the journey affords us the opportunity to appreciate all that Hashem has done for us, by continuing to give manna in the desert even while we were frolicking with the Golden Calf, and by transforming bitter water into sweet water at *Marah*, and allowing us victory in our battle with *Amalek*, and so on and so forth.

Of course, this is larger than just the Jewish people appreciating their journey three thousand years ago; it is the recipe for our appreciation of our own journey each and every day.

Most people will concede that the ability to appreciate all the good that comes into our lives is a valuable part of the journey and even transforms the journey itself. But the Torah may well be suggesting something much more significant. Perhaps the ability to

appreciate what we have been given and where we have come from, is really an essential ingredient without which we will never arrive at our destination at all.

*“Min ha’meitzar karati’ kah. Anani bamerchav kah.”*

*“From the narrow confines I call out to G-d, and he answers me from the wide open spaces.” (Tehillim (Psalms) 118:5)*

Why does King David suggest that we call out to G-d from the narrow confines? Wouldn't it be just as important to call out to G-d from the open spaces? Imagine you are lost in the desert; wouldn't you naturally call out to G-d to save you? And why, if indeed a person is in the narrow spaces, does G-d only answer him from the wide open spaces? Wouldn't it be more powerful for G-d to come into the narrow spaces where we are and be there for us?

Take a close look at the problems we have in life as individuals and in our communities and you may notice that their root is always in the narrow perspectives we allow ourselves to fall into. Too often, we allow ourselves to remain confined to our own narrow view of the world. And the way we tend to look at life as black and white, or from our own limited perspective actually perpetuates that same narrow view.

Indeed, the ability to see things from other points of view, and include others who are different from us in our circle of thinking, actually creates space for more people. The result of widening our own way of looking at the world to allow room for other perspectives and opinions, even though we choose to disagree with those same opinions results in more people being able to 'share' the same space. This essentially transforms the narrow confines we fall into back into the wide open spaces the world is meant to be made up of.

This does not mean, incidentally, that we all have to agree; it just means you cannot disagree with someone until you first respect where they are coming from. And if the Torah tells me that at the end of six days of creation “G-d saw all that he had done and behold it was good” (Bereishit (Genesis) 1:31), then that means that the beginning of everything is always good.

No one starts out bad, and people's ideas and attempts to change the world around them always start from a good place; the hard part is to find that good place and respect what we share in common with how we all began, before disagreeing on where that has to take us. Indeed the ability to make room for other people's way of looking at the world is often a form of largesse, itself a word denoting space. And when we refuse or are unable to do this, we will often be referred to as narrow minded.

And of course, this is what chessed, or loving-kindness is all about. It is about the ability to make room for someone else in your space. Indeed this was really the beginning of everything, because in order for Hashem (G-d) to create the world, he had to first make room for it. After all, before creation, there was only Hashem, also referred to as the Endless One. So if G-d is Endless and everywhere, and unlimited, how is there ever going to be room for me? And where can G-d put the world, if he is already everywhere?

This is one of the inexplicable, wonderful things about a relationship with Hashem; the realization that in all Hashem (G-d)'s greatness, there is still room for me. And that Hashem actually created me, which means I am important enough to be created, and even more, that without me all of creation would be missing something.

Of course, this also means that the same applies to everyone else. Even the annoying person incessantly honking his horn in bumper to bumper traffic is an important and even critical part of the fabric of the world, and if I took the time to spend with him or her, I might even discover why. And doing that actually makes me a larger person, while making more room in the world.

Take for example, the current challenges we face in pursuit of peace in the Middle East. Is there anyone who doesn't want peace? Everyone wants peace, and deep down, we even all want peace for the same reasons, but somewhere along the way we end up on different paths as to how to arrive at that peace. And, truth be told, sometimes we take the wrong paths and find ourselves heading in the wrong direction, maybe even towards war, simply in the pursuit of peace. Crazy, isn't it?

This week, I went down to the little town of S'derot, where the police had approved a mass demonstration against the current disengagement plan. Fifty thousand people came, and some say as many as eighty thousand people. Personally, I went down not to support or negate the particulars of the plan, but more because if eight thousand Jews are going to be uprooted from their homes, then that has to cause all of us pain. Imagine G-d forbid, someone you love has been ill, and the doctors and family members are vehemently disagreeing with whether an amputation is the best course of action. Some might think it would save his life, while others claim the stress of the operation could kill him. And everyone is arguing back and forth while the patient is lying in bed... isn't it important to be there, whatever your opinion, for the sake of the patient?

So there I was, standing in a crowd of fifty thousand fellow Jews of divergent backgrounds and perspectives when one of the speakers, a former brigadier General who is a veteran of the Entebbe raid, a war hero of the Yom Kippur war, called upon the crowd for a moment of silent prayer, and incredibly, the entire crowd, fifty thousand people, adults and children alike, went dead silent. There is a power to a silence like that and I heard people around me, each in their own silent prayers and hopes, crying, and felt a well of emotions well up inside me. And in that moment I felt such conflicting emotions.

On the one hand, you feel so large, so full, to have the privilege of being a part of a moment of hope with fifty thousand people. And on the other hand, you feel so confined and so narrow, because looking around it is easy to realize how many Jews were not there. And I couldn't help feeling that rather than planning a march to Gush Katif, the Jewish people might be better served if all these people walked to Tel Aviv, and opened up coffee and conversation points across the city, not incidentally, to convince anyone of anything; just to share and listen.

The way out of the narrow confines we find ourselves in begins with figuring out what we share in common, and learning to respect each other at the very least for where our

journeys began. And to recognize that every life journey is really a series of little trips and destinations, and that as soon as you arrive at one, you are really ready to begin the next.

And part of this is appreciating every step on our own journeys, and how much we have achieved, and maybe as well where we still need to work. But no less important is learning to appreciate everyone else's journey as well, and the fact that we all come from the same place.

It is not accidental that all this is going on, and indeed this portion is always read, during the three weeks of mourning that mark the terrible period from the breaching of the walls of ancient Jerusalem by the Babylonians and Romans thousands of years ago, to the destruction of our Temples on the ninth of Av. This period is also known as *'bein ha'metzarim'* which can mean between the tragedies, but also can mean, in between the narrow confines.

Two thousand years ago, the rabbis believed we lost everything because we were too narrow, and did not know how to accept and respect each other's view points. (For a broader treatment of this topic see last week's *Matot '05* byte)

And while it behooves us to hope that Hashem grants us all the wisdom to learn to respect and listen to each other as a people, maybe we can begin with this weekly portion of *Massei*. If even one person reading these thoughts, decides to appreciate one other person's journey that is quite different from his or her's own, then this effort will have been worthwhile. Indeed, that would be the greatest journey of all.

Best wishes for a Shabbat shalom, from Efrat and Jerusalem,

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