

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

Portion of Matot-Massei

The second of this week's portions, *Massei*, 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, from whence the entry to Israel would begin.

Why the need for so many 'pitstops'? 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 also interesting to note that these 'pitstops' along the way are actually presented to us as separate journeys:

*"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)

Which leads us to wonder why these stops are described 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?

And why the need to recall each and every stop along the way?

And there is an interesting descriptive term being used here: "*motza'eihem*" which is 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 where we have 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?

It is interesting to note that 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*; 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. 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'.

In other words, each stage in the journey affords us the opportunity to appreciate all that Hashem has done for us, by continuing to give us 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.

And 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. And 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, and actually 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.

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 *chesed*, or loving-kindness, is all about. It is about the ability to make room for someone else in your space.

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?

The way out of the narrow confines we find ourselves in begins with appreciating that every life journey is really a series of little trips and destinations, and we need to focus on the journeys we share in common and learn to respect each other at the very least for where all our journeys began.

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 viewpoints. Perhaps it is time to broaden our perspectives and do some rebuilding....

Best wishes for a Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

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