YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH | ישיבת חובבי תורה
Setting the standard in rabbinic education

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER
Volume 2, Issue 41 | *July 16, 2015*
Section 1
Parashat Pinchas
July 12–18, 2015 | 25 Tammuz–2 Av 5775

FROM THE PRESIDENT

Anger Management
Rabbi Asher Lopatin

It's the Three Weeks, and it is hot (at least outside of the Southern Hemisphere, where we now have a YCT *musmakh*!). These days are stressful for the Jewish people. We started with the long, long fast of Shiva Asar B'Tammuz (17 Tammuz), and we end with the long fast of Tisha B'Av (9 Av). In between we have three weeks to focus on being sad about losing both Temples, the failed Bar Kokhba revolution, losing the first tablets, and the death of the first generation of Israelites in the desert, before they entered the Holy Land. These are weeks of introspection and asking questions: Why hasn't Mashiach come? Why do we Jews, in the Diaspora and in Israel, still face so many challenges and so many enemies in the world? Why is there so much disagreement within our own people?

As we enter the Shabbat in the middle of the Three Weeks, at the start of the Nine Days, I do not have the hubris to answer these questions. I believe that we are training the future leaders—we have trained nearly 100 so far—who will work toward solving these problems, moving the Jewish people closer to the Messianic era, each in his own way. So instead of trying to answer these questions, I would like to suggest that we look at the first of this week's *parshiot*, Parashat Matot, to gain some inspiration from Moshe.

Moshe commands the Israelites to avenge the Midianites, who tried to destroy the Jewish people by getting the men to worship idols with Midianite women. This is one of those parts of our Divine Torah that, as Rabbi David Hartman might say, should make us cringe a bit as we read it, which of course we must. This is the word of God, but it needs a lot of perspective and interpretation.

The Israelites follow Moshe's command, but it seems they didn't realize that they were supposed to kill the women and male children in addition to the men. When Moshe discovers this, he becomes furious and utters words that he may regret: "Moshe said to them, '[I can't believe it, but] you allowed the women to live!!!'" (Bamidbar, 31:14–15). In verse 21, Rashi quotes a critical Midrash which declares that, because Moshe got angry, he made a mistake and forgot the laws of koshering the vessels of Gentiles. Basically, although he was right—the Israelites *were* commanded by God to kill all the adult women and male children in addition to the men—Moshe should not have gotten so worked up about it.

Through the Three Weeks and beyond, I suggest that we learn from Moshe's example and strive to remain calm, that we work to avoid the anger and the nastiness that come with stress, frustration, and defensiveness. We are the Jewish people: God chose us because Avraham argued with God; God stuck with us because Moshe argued with God; and God loves when we argue with each other in interpreting God's Torah and God's will as expressed in our tradition. But let us not lose our tempers; let us show love to each other rather than bile and fury. Let's make these three weeks a period of calm, of brotherhood and sisterhood for the Jewish people. We can and should openly express our ideas, but let us do so in a way that unites us, that brings us closer together, and that makes us smile and feel good.

As we head toward Tisha B'av, let us keep our cool. Let us transform our passion into sweetness and generosity. Let us show Hashem that we have learned the lesson of Moshe: With anger come mistakes; with calm and joy come Torah and the continued rebuilding of the Jewish people, and of a world that needs us.

FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

On Parashat Matot-Masei

Rabbi Dov Linzer

After forty years of wandering through the wilderness, the Children of Israel arrive at the Plains of Moab. The Promised Land is so close they can almost taste it, and most of Parashat Masei is devoted to what awaits them on the other side of the Jordan. Yet with all this looking forward, Masei opens with a significant look backward: "These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth out of the land of Egypt," followed by forty-eight verses listing the places they travelled to in the wilderness (Bamidbar, 33:1–49). What is the point? Why look back now?

To begin answering these questions, let's consider for a moment what it would mean if the list of stops was not included. The message would have been clear: All those years wandering in the desert were a black hole; they had no value. It was a period of wandering without direction or destination, of marking time until the older generation died out. All those years could have been covered by a single verse that read: "Thirty-eight years later…"

To some degree this is the case; had there been events of any broad significance during those intervening years they would certainly have been recorded for posterity. But that does not mean that these years were meaningless. There were certainly moments of profound significance for the individuals involved: growing up, falling in love, getting married, the birth of a son or daughter, watching one's children grow up, dealing with hardship and struggle, growing intellectually and spirituality, and celebrating successes and grappling with failures. The people would have no doubt invested these events with due weight at the time of their occurrence, but now that they are ready to enter the land of Canaan, how will they think of the past decades? Will they be a big blur? Will the people feel that the time was wasted and best forgotten? Or will they pause to remember and reflect on those years, to identify the important moments, seeing them as milestones, markers of important stages in their personal journeys?

This is what Moshe is reminding them to do. He reminds them to step back, remember what occurred, and recall where they have been, for naming those places turns events into milestones and wandering into a journey. This is true in our lives as well. Many of us have vivid memories of the early years of our lives: stories from when we were growing up, getting married, getting our first job, having our first child. And then, somewhere around our early thirties, things start to blur; the decades fly by. If we were to tell our story, it would sound much like the story of the Exodus: profound, transformative moments at the beginning and then "thirty-eight years later…"

The Torah is telling us that there is a way to change this narrative. If we take the time to mark our milestones, the blur will come into focus. We can shape the narrative of our lives. We can determine if we will see our life as a wandering or as a journey. We may not always be able to articulate exactly what value there was in arriving at certain stops along the way, but this was true for the Israelites as well. The Torah simply names most of the places, giving no indication of their significance. This is partly because their import was personal rather than national, and as such, it differed from person to person. But it is also because their significance may not have been fully understood or easily articulated, yet they were significant.

In reflecting, we may feel that sometimes we were moving backward, not forward. So it was with the Israelites. Some of their stops took them backward, towards Egypt, yet they were stops in the journey nonetheless. By naming these stops we make a statement. We assert that they do have meaning, even if we do not understand what that meaning is. By naming them, we assert that our going back was part of our path of eventually going forward. By naming them, we make them part of our story, part of our journey. When does this naming take place? When these events are occurring, or only after, when we step back and look at the trajectory of our lives?

In our *parasha*, the latter seems to be the case. The verse tells us that "Moshe wrote their goings out according to their journeys by the commandment of God," indicating that this writing down occurred only at the end of the forty years in the wilderness (33:2). Orah Hayyim, however, disagrees and sees this verse as saying that the journeys were written

down as they occurred. There is no question that we are better off if we are able to take note of the special moments in our lives when they happen. Writing in a diary or putting pictures in an album and supplying a caption—for the younger generation, read: blogging or uploading a photo from your iPhone to your Facebook timeline—are ways to save those moments for the future, but these activities also assign weight and significance to them in the present. These are ways to tell our story as we are living it.

But we are not always able to do this. When life seems purposeless, we might ask ourselves: Why bother noting these moments at all? If our personal or professional life is in shambles, if we are in physical or mental pain, or if we are just wandering purposelessly or aimlessly, we will not see ourselves on a journey; we will see ourselves as lost. This, perhaps, was also the experience of the Children of Israel. For thirty-eight years they wandered from place to place with no clear destination and with no ability to direct their own movements. God told them when to move, and God told them when to stay. They were powerless, at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

At such times in our lives, it may still be possible to gain some control, if not by changing our circumstances then at least by changing how we frame, relate to, and react to these circumstances. If we can “write down our journeys” at these moments we will have accomplished a great deal. But sometimes this is an unrealistic expectation. Sometimes we might have to suffer through this period of wandering. At these times what we can do is persevere, persevere so that when we come out on the other side, when our thirty-eight years in the wilderness finally comes to an end, we can at least reflect and assess. At this juncture it will be critical to name those way stations, asserting that there was value and meaning to the places we have been, that they are part of how we got to where we are even if a full understanding of their purpose and necessity still eludes us.

This connects to another ambiguity in the text. The verse states that Moshe wrote down their journeys according to the word of God. What was according to the word of God, their journeys or the writing down? Ibn Ezra says the former; Ramban says the latter. This is often the very ambiguity that we struggle with. Sometimes we can embrace the belief that our current journey is directed by God. In those moments we will be able to mark our journey as we are living it. At other times, however, this belief will be very distant from us, and we will only be able to feel connected to a larger system of meaning when we have emerged on the other side and are able to look back and reflect.

If we can at least record our milestones at the end of the journey, then we will have come a long way. Our hardships and struggles will become life lessons and periods of growth, and we will have made these periods into our own personal Torah. As Sefat Emet comments, it is in the writing down of these events that we declare them to be of lasting value, that we transform all of these dangerous, difficult journeys into an integral part of God’s Torah.

GUEST D'VAR TORAH

Parashat Matot-Masei: Remembering the Journey

Gabe Kretzmer-Seed (YCT '17)

The idea of collective memory is at the center of the Jewish calendar. We identify with the experiences of our ancestors at each holiday and throughout the year. Similarly, from Elul through Yom Kippur we focus on how we want God to remember us, as individuals and as part of *Klal Yisrael*. We are currently in a period in which we focus on some of the sadder parts of Jewish memory: the Three Weeks, or *Bein Hametzarim*, "Between the Straits." From the 17th of Tammuz to Tisha B'av, we recall a number of calamities, including the decree that the generation of Israelites that left Egypt would die in the desert, the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem in 70 CE, the destruction of both Temples, and the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492.

The second of this week's *parashot*, Masei, begins with a list of forty-two places *Bnei Yisrael* camped during their forty years in the desert. Rashi asks an important question about collective memory: Having endured many years of wandering, the Israelites are on the brink of entering the land of Israel. Why would Moshe remind them of memories that are probably quite painful rather than focusing on the future settling of the land? He offers two answers, both of which are extremely relevant during the Three Weeks.

Rashi's first explanation comes in the name of the early eleventh-century Provençal Rosh Yeshiva, Moshe Hadarshan, who suggests that the listing of the forty-two places actually points to a relative lack of movement during the Israelite's wandering. Fourteen of the encampments occurred within the first year of leaving Egypt, and eight occurred in the year before they entered the land of Israel. Moshe Hadarshan points out that this list, which could remind the people of their hardships, could just as easily recall God's provision of food, water, and clothing throughout their journey, reminding us of the importance of balance in the way we draw on our memories.

Next, Rashi quotes a parable—attributed to the seventh- to eighth-century Midrash Tanchuma—of a king who took his son to a faraway land, seeking treatment for his illness. The king recalls their journey, listing the places they slept safely and those where his son was in pain. Similarly, God asked Moshe to recall the journeys of Bnei Yisrael, including the places where they were at odds with God. This Midrash teaches us the importance of including times of pain and destruction with those of joy and stability when we recall our experiences.

Returning to the Three Weeks, we are about to enter the intense mourning period of the Nine Days, which begins with Rosh Chodesh Av. This period is known for the Ashkenazi custom of refraining from eating meat and drinking wine—except on Shabbat (and the Sefardi custom of refraining from eating meat or drinking wine the week of Tisha b'Av). These restrictions are a sign of mourning for the loss and destruction of the Temple, but the restriction of meat and wine in particular is not an accident. It is meant to recall the joyous sacrifices of the Temple, which were eaten by the *Kohanim* and the people along with wine. Thus, these restrictions simultaneously mark loss and remind us of the joy and closeness to God the Temple represented.

It can be difficult to imagine the destruction of the Temple and the final loss of Jewish sovereignty that took place nearly two millennia ago, to make ourselves part of the collective memory. Balancing our focus on the depth of destruction with a recollection of the sheer positive force that the Temple had in the religious and communal life of our people may help us do so. As we read of the journeys of Bnei Yisrael and approach the intense mourning of Tisha B'av, may we sensitively hold together our memories of loss and joy, and through this, may we move toward growth and redemption.