

WEEKLY NEWSLETTER

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

In Memory of Our Heroes

By Rabbi Asher Lopatin



In memory of two American/Israeli heroes who have given their lives to protect our people: Max Steinberg and Sean Carmeli, may their memory be a blessing for us all.

This week, the *Jerusalem Post* reported on the loss of two “lone soldiers,” Max Steinberg and Sean Carmeli, may their memory be a blessing for us all. “Lone soldiers” refers to American Jews who have left their homes and families in this country to defend our people’s homeland and our collective destiny. I did not know Max or Sean, but I have infinite admiration for them. I feel the same for their parents, and I hope that, even amidst the devastation of losing a child, they know how proud the Jewish People is of them.

We can honor their memory through our own service or by supporting family members who are serving. Many of us have children or grandchildren currently fighting in the IDF. Rabbi Avi Weiss just went to Israel to be near his grandson, Gilad, who is fighting to keep us all safe. May Hashem protect them. My own children are too young to serve, and as a retired US Army Second Lieutenant (Chaplain Candidate), I'm too old to serve. However, one of YCT’s current students, Andrew Scheer, and a recent alumnus, Rabbi Daniel Millner (YCT ’14), are currently serving as chaplains in the United States military. Additionally, many students and graduates of YCT – some born and raised in Israel, others not – have served in the IDF. I have infinite admiration for them, and their experience and bravery are evident in their professional lives as rabbis. You can feel that they have character and backbone. But what can the rest of us do to sanctify the memory of those who have given their lives for Israel and the Jewish People, and how can we support those who are fighting now?

In the two weeks remaining before Tisha B'Av, let us

dedicate ourselves to infusing our days with conversation about, and prayer for, Israel. As we do so, let us ensure that our talk is unifying, that it serves to bring us together as Jews rather than separate us. We all have our passionate political views and theories, but as Rabbi Naftali Zvi Yehuda Berlin says in his introduction to *Bereshit*, the problem is not our strong ideas but our dismissal of other people’s ideas as heresy. This dismissal of others’ ideas is a force so strong that, according to the Netziv, it led to the destruction of the Temple.

Even though the need for solidarity through this difficult time may seem obvious, reports in the media and posts on Facebook or Twitter show that many people – as observant as they are – have not remembered the Netziv’s message. We need to obsess about Israel; we need to argue for Israel in our conversations and social media posts: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem...” But more importantly, we must find ways to unify our people as we do so. In our conversations and even our arguments, let’s always come together, agreeing that we all want peace for Israel, that we all want our people to be safe and secure, and that we all respect that the ongoing work of building the State of Israel is difficult and complex. It takes great strength to argue passionately for our views while showing our fellow Jews that we love them, and that we respect their love for Israel.

In honor of those who are risking their lives at this very moment, and in honor of those who have bravely – and sadly – given their lives to protect the Jewish People, let us commit to infusing our days with Israel talk and thought, and let us all come together in love and respect and awe for what it takes to renew the promise of restoring our people to *Eretz Yisrael*. May God bring us all home and bring peace to His Holy Land. May God continue to bless those who are making it happen, taking the ultimate risk with their precious, beautiful lives.

FROM THE ROSH HAYESHIVA

On Parashat Masei

As we read Parashat Masei, our hearts and prayers go out to our brothers and sisters in Israel, persevering through the daily challenges and travails that they face as they journey forward in the face of adversity.



After forty years of wandering through the wilderness, the Children of Israel arrive at the Plains of Moab. The Promised Land is so close that they can almost taste it, and most of the *parasha* is devoted to what awaits them when they cross the Jordan. Yet, with all this looking forward, our *parasha* 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 48 verses listing all the places they travelled to in the wilderness (Bamidbar 33:1-49). What’s the point of all of this, and why look back now?

To begin to answer these questions, let’s consider for a minute what it would have meant not to have included the list of stops. The message would have been clear: All those years wandering in the desert were a black hole. The intervening years were of no value. It was a period of wandering without direction or destination, just marking time until the previous generation died out. It would be like saying that all those years could be covered by a verse that read: “Thirty-eight years later...”

Now to some degree this is indeed the case. Had there been any events worth remembering for posterity during those intervening years they would have been recorded. But that does not mean that those 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, seeing one’s children grow up, dealing with hardship and struggle, growing intellectually and spirituality, celebrating successes, and grappling with failures.

The people would have no doubt invested these events with due weight and significance at the time of their occurrence. But now that they are ready to enter into the land of Canaan, how will they think of the past decades? Will they all be a big blur? Will the people feel that the time was all wasted, best forgotten? Or will they pause to remember

and reflect on those years, to identify the important moments, to see them as milestones, markers of important stages in their personal journeys?

This is what Moshe is reminding them to do. To step back, remember what occurred, to name those places 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. For many of us, we 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 become a 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.

Now we may not always be able to articulate exactly what value there was in arriving at certain way stations, but this is true of the Israelites’ journeys as well. The Torah just names most of the places, without identifying what was significant about them. This is partly because their import was personal, not national, and as such differed from person to person. But this is also because their significance may not have been understood or easily articulated. And yet they were significant nonetheless.

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. And 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

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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 are happening. Writing in a diary or taking pictures, putting them in an album, and affixing a caption to them – for the younger generation, read: blogging or uploading a photo from your iPhone to your Google timeline – are ways not only to be able to look back at those moments and remember them in the future, but also to 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 psychic 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 and to be able to assert 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, whereas 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. At 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 DVAR TORAH

On Parashat Masei

By Rabbi Benjamin Greenberg



It was a sunny day in Aix-en-Provence, a charming town in the South of France, near Marseille. There was a slight breeze and one could see the verdant French countryside in every direction. It was also the first time Fatima had ever met and spoken with a Jew. Fatima, a Parisian Muslim whose parents emigrated from Tunisia when she was a baby, had never before engaged in conversation with Jews, at least not that she could recall.

Fatima described what it was like never to be able to enter a Mosque in her city because she could not bear the hateful speech of the clerics, most of them first-generation immigrants. She said she prays only at home and utterly lacks the warmth of community. The pain in her voice was palpable and so, amidst the silence of people not knowing what to say, I simply said to her that I felt her alienation and pain, and that my heart went out to her.

Within a moment Fatima was crying. She was crying for the loss of fellowship and bonding that praying with a community provides. She was crying for the embarrassment of the extremist rhetoric preached by many who represent her religion. She was crying because there were no words to express her pain.

In that moment, we transcended bounds of linguistic,

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YESHIVAT CHOVEVEI TORAH RABBINICAL SCHOOL

national, and cultural differences. In that moment a child of Yitzchak and a child of Yishmael, both grandchildren of Avraham, discovered their common humanity.

This week's *parasha*, in the sixth *aliyah*, contains a mitzvah that can shed light on the human condition. The Torah states:

וְאֵת הָעָרִים, אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ לְלוֹזְמֵם--אֵת שֵׁשׁ-עָרֵי הַמְּקֻלָּט, אֲשֶׁר תִּתְּנוּ
לְגֵם שְׂמֵהּ הָרֵצָח

“Among the cities you shall give to the Levites, shall be six cities of refuge, which you shall provide [as places] to which a murderer can flee.”

The tribe of Levi is given cities throughout the Land of Israel to inhabit. Their cities rest in every part of the land and throughout the territory of every tribe. Amidst these priestly cities rest six cities specially designated as *arei miklat* – cities of refuge – to which people who inadvertently take another life can flee to escape the vengeance of the aggrieved family.

Why thrust this unfortunate reality amongst the holiness of the Levites? Why sully their cities with the bloodguilt of murder, albeit accidental and unintentional? I believe this mitzvah comes to teach us and model for us precisely the engagement of the ideal with the real; the great conversation between ideas and humanity.

In an ideal world people do not kill other people, even accidentally. In an ideal world grieving families mourn the loss of their relative but do not seek to exact vengeance on the person who mistakenly took their life. In an ideal world this person would not need to flee for refuge, to seek a safe haven.

Yet, we do not live in the ideal, we live in the real. Our task as Jews, as those committed to Torah and to God, is to strive to bring the ideal into the real, to make more perfect the imperfect. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik in his brilliant work, *Halakhic Man*, says it succinctly: “The essence of the Halakhah... consists in creating an ideal world and cognizing the relationship between that ideal world and our concrete environment in all its visible manifestations and underlying structure.”

And so the inadvertent murderer finds refuge amongst the great teachers, religious leaders, and guides of the Jewish

People. And so, too, moments like the one I shared with Fatima in the South of France need to transpire, and more need to occur. Building relationships of meaning and depth, person to person, one at a time, is the slow but very real work of healing the world and bridging the chasms that divide us.

The need is so very great, and the time must be now. In a meeting with an older woman, a representative of the Jewish community in Marseille, she made very clear the palpable fear and anxiety the community lives in constantly. It is not an overt fear of daily, open hostility but rather a covert, hidden, and unspeakable threat of *something* transpiring, something gravely horrible. We know from our own history that the answer to this sort of fear does not lie in retreating or building walls. To where would we retreat? Particularly today, no wall can be built high enough and no island is remote enough to separate person from person and community from community.

The solution, the only possible path, is dialogue and engagement. Martin Buber eloquently said, “Even as a melody is not composed of tones, nor a verse of words, nor a statute of lines – one must pull and tear to turn a unity into a multiplicity...” Our job, the work that lies ahead of us, is to uncover and lift up unity from multiplicity, the unity that girds all people and that is the foundation of all of humanity. We all stem from Adam and Chava, one man and one woman. Only through engagement will we rediscover humanity’s shared lineage and, by so doing, bring the real one step closer to the ideal. The need is great, and the time is now.

Rabbi Benjamin Greenberg is the Director of Programs at the Jewish Council on Urban Affairs in Chicago, Illinois.

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