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Navigating Life's Journeys

Parashat Masei summarizes the Jewish nation's journey from Egypt to the border of the Land of Israel, listing the places that the Jewish people camped throughout its forty years of wandering in the desert. The Baal Shem Tov, the founder of *Chassidut*, once said: "All of these forty-two journeys happen to every person from the day he is born until he returns to his world, because from the day of birth and his emergence from his mother's womb it is a kind of exodus from Egypt, from which he journeys from place to place until arriving at the supernal land of the living."¹ The forty-two stops along the Israelites' way represent the highs and

lows, setbacks and successes, disappointment and delight, that each of us encounters on the long road of life.

This psychological reading is rooted in an earlier approach best exemplified by Rab-



Piaseczno Rebbe zt"l

beinu Bachya in his multi-layered Torah commentary. On the *peshat* (literal-contextual) level, the list of pit stops and pitfalls is intended to corroborate the earlier account of the trek through the wilderness, preempting future skeptics and scoffers. On the *derash* (homiletical) level, the list shows God's abiding love for His people. Rabbeinu Bachya

cited a midrashic parable of a king who takes his ailing son far away to obtain medical treatment, and who fondly recalls episodes that took place at various junctures on their shared journey. On yet another plane, this itinerary provides the mile markers for the future, ultimate redemption, whose stages will parallel the Exodus from Egypt.²

Part of what makes the Chassidic approach captivating is its psychological and spiritual insights that have practical application. The teachings of the *Sefat Emet* offer us three such insights:

1. *Netivot Shalom, Bemidbar*, 176, quoting *Degel Machaneh Efrayim*.

2. Rabbeinu Bachya on Numbers 33:1.

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(1) One way of looking at a journey is as movement towards a destination. The *Sefat Emet* reminds us that it is by definition also movement away from a point of origin. The Jewish people were putting more and more distance between themselves and Egypt. In a sense, the significance of the various waypoints is that they mark the continuation of the Jewish people's progress and egress from Egypt. The key word here is *motza'ehem* (Numbers 33:2), a difficult word that can be translated as "their goings-out." As we journey through life, we must constantly be going out from Egypt like the Children of Israel. We must gravitate towards what is holy and good and eschew what is profane and evil.

שֵׁשׁ מְקוֹמוֹת שָׁאִין לָהֶם קִיּוֹם, רַק עַל יְדֵי שְׁמִתְרִחָק הָאָדָם מֵהֶם, כָּכָל עֲנִיֵי עוֹלָם הָזֶה, שֶׁבִּטּוֹלָם זֶה קִיּוֹמָם. וְנִקְרָא 'מִסְעוֹת', שֶׁהַמִּסָּע מְשֻׁם הוּא הַמַּעֲלָה.

"There are places that only exist by distancing oneself from them, as with all worldly affairs, for they exist only negatively via rejection. They are called *masa'ot* (journeys), for the journey (*masa*) from there is upwards."

(2) The log of travels with its dozens of stops—some of greatly unequal duration—reflect, much as the Baal Shem Tov said, the shifting fortunes of life. The constant refrain of "they traveled and they camped" represents the fits and starts of life. Sometimes, the route can be circuitous and seem as if it is leading to a dead end or a place of great peril, but we must push on.

וְנִכְתְּבוּ כָּל הַמִּסְעוֹת לְהוֹדִיעַ לָעָם ה' כִּי כָּל עוֹבֵד ה' לֹא יָפֵל לְבוֹ עָלָיו מִכָּל הַנְּפִילוֹת שֵׁשׁ לוֹ, כִּי כָּךְ הוּא הַמְּדָה לְהִיּוֹת עוֹלָה וְיוֹרֵד.

"All of the journeys are written to teach

God's people that no servant of God should be discouraged from all of his failures, because that is the way it is, to rise and fall.

(3) The opening Midrash on *Parashat Masei* says that all the waystations were recorded so that the Jewish people know that it was only by miracle that they kept their forward momentum. In the desert, the Jews never had to flee from their enemies, as is the natural course of a weak nation traveling with women, children, and all their possessions.³ In the same way, the rebbe says, we should look at the path of our life and see God's "footsteps" accompanying ours, and draw strength knowing that the same is true going forward."⁴

וּבְכָל עֵת שֶׁנִּסְגַּר הַדֶּרֶךְ בְּפָנֵי אִישׁ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַכֹּל הוּא רַק כְּדֵי שֶׁיִּסְתַּכֵּל הָאָדָם כָּלְפִי מַעֲלָה לְשַׁעֲבֵד אֶת הַלֵּב לְאִבּוֹ שֶׁבְּשִׁמְסֵם.

"Whenever a Jew feels as if the path is blocked, it is only so that he look up and commit his heart to his Father in Heaven."

This seems well and good for the regular

3. *Numbers Rabbah*, 23:1.

4. Ibid., Masei 5661, s.v. במדרש גדולי עולם. The rebbe further wrote that this is why we read this *parashah* during *Bein ha-Metzarim*, the three weeks leading up to Tisha be-Av. During these trying times, when we reflect on the terrible detour our entire nation has taken from its glorious destiny, we need to remember how God saved us when there was no way out.

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ups and downs of life, but what of life journeys that include forced turnoffs onto paths of immense suffering that threaten to loosen our grip on the steering wheel of faith?

The Piasetzner Rebbe, Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, was distinctly qualified to answer this question. As rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, every Shabbat he shared words of Torah that helped his fellow Jews cope with life under the impossible conditions of the ghetto that tested even the most faithful.

Commentators have long noticed the reversal of terms within a single verse: “Moshe wrote the goings-out (מוֹצָאֵיהֶם) of their journeys by the mouth of the Lord, and these are the journeys of their goings-out (מִסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצָאֵיהֶם)” (Numbers 33:2). The rebbe explained that Moshe was writing after the fact, when he could reflect and record how the arduous treks helped to bring forth (לְהוֹצִיא) the kingdom of Heaven, that is, the divinely intended purpose of the routes taken. In the middle of the wandering, however, the meaning of the travels and travails was inscrutable, so the order is reversed. The hardship of the road is immediate; the expression of God’s plan lies over the horizon of present comprehension.

The rebbe wrote the same about the

suffering in his day. He unshakably believed that even within the darkness a great light was gradually being revealed, even if it could not be seen yet. He compared it to the excruciating pain of a woman in labor, whose pain becomes more intense as the final moment of birth and release approaches. We can only imagine the rebbe, surrounded by his Chassidim in the horrifying conditions of the ghetto, instilling and cultivating hope: “Moshe will lead us once again in the days of Mashiach and teach us why all this torment and pain was necessary.”

The Piasetzner ended by saying that in the messianic era especially, there will be no more anguish or “journeys” that are not followed by the immediate and evident revelation as the workings of God’s designs. He then quoted the four words of the kaddish—*yitgadal ve-yitkadash shemeh rabbah*—which both gave voice to the ongoing destruction and loss, and declared his faith in God’s providential plan.⁵

We can now understand why Chassidic rebbes throughout the generations have referred to the passage of the forty-two journeys in *Masei* as one of the Torah’s loftiest.⁶ As we travel through the year and make our weekly stop at *Masei*, we are reminded to make the most of our own life’s journey and turn even the hardships into a revelation of God’s light. ■

5. *Esh Kodesh*, 5701, *Masei*, 107–108.

6. *Netivot Shalom, Bemidbar*, 176.

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