



## THE PERSON IN THE PARSHA

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# "The Kiss of Hope"

Would you ever imagine that our holy Sages had a lot to say about a kiss? Would we not assume that kisses would be judged unworthy of their consideration?

But such is not the case. They had much to say about kisses.

The significance of the kiss was brought home to me recently when I came across a street sign advertising a film. It read, "Is not a kiss the very signature of love?" Indeed it is, so much so that the kiss plays a role in the spiritual realm. Thus, the *Song of Songs*, the biblical book which is traditionally interpreted as a description of the passionate love affair between God and His people, begins with the phrase, "Let Him give me of the kisses of His mouth."

The Midrash (*Genesis Rabbah* 70:12) distinguishes between three significant types of kisses. One is the "kiss of greatness," which is

exemplified by the prophet Samuel's kissing Saul when he anointed him king. Another is the "kiss of special occasions"—Aaron's kissing Moses upon their reunion. The third kiss is the "kiss of separation," the kiss given at the moment we take leave from one another. It is the "kiss of departure".

This third kiss comes with mixed feelings. On the one hand, we are bidding farewell to a beloved friend and are saddened to say goodbye. On the other hand, we are leaving for a reason—to encounter a new friend or a new opportunity. This is a tearful kiss, but it is also a kiss of anticipation, a kiss of hope, a kiss which signifies the beginning of a new journey.

In the second of this week's two Torah portions, *Matot* and *Masei* (*Numbers* 30:2-36:13), we read of no less than fifty such journeys. The Torah describes the long and arduous procession of the people of Israel as they left Egypt and marched toward the Promised Land. They stopped at fifty stations along the way.

We can assume that after they settled into one station, they had some reluctance to leave a familiar place, a place of shelter, and to plunge ahead into the unknown. But we can also imagine the joyous emotions they experienced, knowing that they were taking another step toward their desired destination.

This is the way of all journeys. Moreover, it is the very essence of life itself. We settle into one place, to one role, to one stage of life. It becomes familiar to us, and we feel comfortable there. Moving on to a new place, a new role, a new stage of life, feels threatening. Often we are tempted to remain in that place,

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to continue to live in the status quo. We don't want to kiss this familiar station goodbye.

On the other hand, we often find this old place tiring, boring. We no longer feel the challenges we felt when we first came to this station, to this point in our lives. We relish the opportunity to move on, in spite of the uncertainty that lies ahead. We look forward to the novelty of a new place, a new role, a new stage of life.

There is a contemporary poet whose works I admire. Here is how he puts it:

I envy those  
who live in two places  
New York, say, and London...  
There is always the anticipation  
of the change, the chance that what is wrong  
is the result of where you are. I have  
always loved both the freshness of  
arriving and the relief of leaving. With  
two homes every move would be a  
homecoming.  
I am not even considering the weather, hot  
Or cold, dry or wet: I am talking about hope.  
(Gerald Locklin, *Where We Are*).

It is no secret that many of us find the first fifty or so verses of *Parshat Masei* repetitive and dry. "These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt...Their marches, by starting points, were as follows: They set out from Rameses... And encamped at Succoth. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham...They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi Hahiroth, which faces Baal Zephon, and they encamped before Migdol...They set out from the hills of Abarim and encamped at the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho..."

Of what possible interest can this long list of stations in the wilderness be to the average reader? What can he possibly learn from

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these verses?

Commentators throughout the ages have struggled with these very questions and have offered various approaches to answering them. I would like to advance an original approach, a metaphorical one. We suggest that just as the Israelites embarked upon a journey when they left Egypt, so do we all embark upon a journey the moment we are born. This journey entails many stations along the way before it is completed. Each station is necessary for the individual's development, but no one station can be permanent.

Psychologists discuss the concept of "developmental tasks." Each stage of life has its developmental task. The infant must learn to crawl, but his failure to move on from the crawling stage to the walking stage is a symptom of pathology. The two- or three-year-old who has mastered the human need to become attached to his parents must soon proceed

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to the next stage and learn to separate from them.

While all this is true at the physical level, it is also true of intellectual development. The ten-year-old who is still reading the books he read when he was five has a stunted intellect. But so does the fifty-year-old who has not transcended the literary interests he had when he was twenty.

The need to progress from station to station is especially true when it comes to spirituality. It has been said, correctly, that children are naturally spiritual. But childlike spirituality cannot slake the spiritual thirst of the adolescent. And the adult whose spirituality has not progressed beyond adolescence is a spiritual cripple. The inner resources that serve the adolescent well are of no help in coping with the challenges of adulthood.

And so it goes from stage to stage until the end of life.

Rabbi Judah ben Tema put it this way: “Five years old is the age to begin studying Scripture; ten for Mishnah; thirteen for the obligation of the commandments; fifteen for the study of Talmud; eighteen for marriage; twenty for seeking a livelihood; thirty for full strength; forty for understanding; fifty for giving counsel; sixty for old age; seventy for ripe old age; eighty for exceptional strength; and ninety for a bent back; at one hundred, one is as if he were dead and had left and gone from the world.” (*Avot* 5:25)

Fifty stations were necessary for the Israelites to reach the Promised Land. At least as many are required of all of us if we are to reach our God-given potential as mature human beings. As we journey from station to station in our lives, we need to learn to kiss the kiss of departure, which is also the kiss of hope. ■

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