

## In This Issue

- **Appel's Parsha Page** by *Yehuda Appel*
- **Language of Tomorrow** by *Chief Rabbi Warren Goldstein*
- **The New Old Path** by *Rabbi Dr. Benji Levy*
- **Straight Talk** by *Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt*



## The Wandering Jew

Any botanist will tell you that the "Wandering Jew" is a unique species of plant which - when given minimal sustenance - will nevertheless spread and grow. Similarly, if you cut out its roots and plant it in other soil, it will regenerate itself and start anew.

This plant's nomenclature is, of course, a comment on the Jewish People's ability to adapt to varied environments and conditions. "Wandering" is what Jewish history has been all about. The Patriarchs and Matriarchs were nomads. The Jewish nation itself was forged in Egypt and while wandering through the Sinai desert - the only nation ever to establish its identity while wandering outside its homeland. And for the past 2000 years we have been wandering the world.

Next week's parsha, Masay, details the Jewish wanderings through the Sinai desert. No less than 42 locations are listed as encampments throughout the 40 years in the wilderness.

The wanderings have, however, been the subject of some misunderstanding: They are often portrayed as a "shlep" from one place to another. In fact, the commentators raise several fascinating issues regarding these wanderings. First of all, why does the Torah bother to mention the names of all 42 encampments? Furthermore, why does the Torah alternately describe the travels as "going forth to journey" and "journeying to go forth?"

The commentators explain that the number 42 alludes to the mystical 42-letter name of God. This indicates that the Jewish People acquired a greater spiritual awareness as they traveled through the desert. The Chasam Sofer, a great 19th century sage, offers some examples: At Kivrot Hataiva (literally "burial of desire"), they learned to confront their desires. At Chatzerot (literally "courtyards"), they understood the concept that "this world is a courtyard to the next world." Thus, the entire desert experience was a journey of growth, incorporating new elements of insight into the collective Jewish consciousness.

Rabbi Shimshon Rafael Hirsch suggests that the Torah's differing description of the wanderings - "journeying to go forth" versus "going forth to journey" - reflects different attitudes among the Jews of that time. To some, the purpose of "going forth" was "to journey" - to a goal of new growth. For others, the purpose of the "journey" was to simply "go forth" - to relieve the challenge of their present condition.

The Sfas Emes, a great 19<sup>th</sup> century Chassidic

master, explains that each of these 42 places offered a unique challenge to the Jewish People. In each place, the Jews were to accomplish a specific tikkun, a "spiritual repair." Just as the Israelites' leaving Egypt had eternal significance, so too the Jewish People met challenges at their 42 encampments!

The Sfas Emes explains that we all have various stations -good and bad - as we travel through the "journey of life." Each has its unique purpose and challenge. And each can help us achieve the repairs we must accomplish on our souls.

As we embark on the various journeys that create the tapestry of our lives, it is important to remain focused on the exciting goals we are moving towards. In that way, with God's help, we will find the strength and courage to stand up to the myriad of challenges life may present.



## How Do We Find Joy in the Process?

A waiter remembers every detail of an order but forgets those details as soon as the plates hit the table. Inspired by this thought experiment, German psychologist Bluma Wulfovna Zeigarnik conducted a series of laboratory tests to demonstrate that people have a better recollection of the puzzles they are prevented from finishing than those they have completed.

Evidently, our brains are wired to be preoccupied with the details of incomplete tasks. We have a deep-seated need to see things to the end. The human condition is to not be satisfied, to not let our minds rest, until we do what we set out do to.

The problem is, very often we don't. Very often, for whatever reason, we simply aren't able to reach the finish line.

One of our great sages of the twentieth century, Rav Eliyahu Dessler, writes, "We are born in the middle of things and we die in the middle of things." Friends - life is messy. Full of loose ends, false starts, unfulfilled objectives. The question is, what should our attitude be to this unsatisfying state of affairs?

In this week's Torah portion, Masei, God gives Moshe the mitzvah of designating the cities of refuge - safe spaces for those who have inadvertently taken a life to escape to, to seek refuge from avenging parties and for atonement. There were six cities of refuge to be established - three east of the Jordan River and three west of the Jordan River. The eastern territory had already been conquered by this stage, and to get things started, Moshe was tasked with establishing these first three cities. He did this with great enthusiasm, knowing that he would never get to establish the three western cities, because God had decreed that he would not cross the Jordan River and lead the Jewish people into the land of Israel. That mission was left to his successor, Joshua.

Analysing the verse, Rashi comments that the six cities were a single bloc, and that none of the cities would be operational until all six were established. This means that the three eastern cities that Moshe set up did not become

operational until Joshua conquered the western side of the Jordan River and established the other three. In other words, not only did Moshe not have the chance to complete the task, he never got to see *any* of the fruits of his efforts realised. The Talmud (Makot 10a) says this was a mark of Moshe's greatness - that his passion for fulfilling God's will was such that he threw himself into the task of establishing these cities even though he knew he would never complete it.

The obvious lesson here is that we need to savour each moment, each accomplishment, each step along our life's journey. On the one hand, it's good to be goal-oriented and to keep an eye on the destination. On the other hand, we cannot be consumed with our goals to the point where we are unable to savour the small moments and the small victories. Because these small moments and small victories are an important part of our lives.

Every moment of life is precious. We learn this from *pikuach nefesh* - the principle that virtually all of the Torah's laws are suspended in order to save a life. Even if it's to prolong that life for a few moments. Life is nothing but the sum of small moments. Each moment is sacred because life is sacred.

Torah learning provides a good illustration of the importance of small moments and small victories. The Mishna teaches that the mitzvah of learning Torah has no fixed limit. The Vilna Gaon has a novel reading of the Mishna. He says that this teaching applies at both ends of the spectrum - there is no upper limit on the amount of Torah one can learn, but there is also no minimum amount; each word of Torah we learn is a distinct mitzvah with eternal value.

Kindness is another example. We have a Torah mandate to make this world a kinder, gentler place. But the mitzvah of *chesed* is fulfilled through incremental actions and gestures - a kind word, a small gesture, a brief embrace. *Tzedakah* is another example - a mitzvah performed one coin at a time. And prayer. It is made up of many individual words. Each of which has its own meaning and opportunity for devotion and connection to God.

We see this principle articulated most explicitly in the Mishna in Pirkei Avot: "It is not on you to complete the work, but nor are you free to desist from it." (Pirkei Avot 2:16). Though the Mishnah is referring specifically to the mitzvah of Torah learning, which being God's infinite wisdom, by definition can never fully be comprehended or "completed", it applies no less to every mitzvah we perform, and all of the objectives we pursue over the course of our lives. "We are born in the middle of things and we die in the middle of things."

This could also be the message at the beginning of our Torah portion, Masei, which chronicles the journey of the Jewish people in the desert in painstaking detail. Each leg, each stopover of the 40-year journey is mentioned by name. Why is that? If anything there's good reason not to dwell on the drawn-out journey, which only became necessary because of the sin of the spies. But perhaps the verse does so to underline that each step of a journey is important, each moment is significant, each mitzvah is a milestone. We should not look at life as one unit. We should savour each of its components.

The arc of Moshe's life embodies this idea. He was appointed with the mandate to lead the Jewish people out of Egypt, bring them to

Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, and then to lead them into the land of Israel. Due to events in the desert, Moshe's mandate to lead the people into Israel was transferred to Joshua. And so in a certain fundamental sense his mission was incomplete. The fairy tale ending would have been Moshe triumphantly leading the people into the land of Israel. But the Torah is a book of truth. It's a description of life as it is. And in real life "We are born in the middle of things, and we die in the middle of things." There are no neat beginnings and endings, no neat resolutions. God is the master of the universe and it is not in our hands to complete our arcs and wrap up our lives in a neat little bow. All we can do is focus on and appreciate each moment; take each task and each mitzvah one at a time; ensure we win life's small victories.

All we can do is live with complete faith that Hashem will give us the time we need on this earth to do what we need to do - what we were born to do - even if it feels messy and unsatisfactory, even if it feels that things are incomplete.

The key is to live with humility and appreciation - the humility that comes with understanding that we don't control everything, and the appreciation that comes with savouring each moment and each small victory. And we need to encourage that attitude in our children. To encourage them in each milestone accomplished, each mitzvah performed, each moment of grace and kindness, no matter how seemingly small.

As Jews, we believe in a Final Redemption - an era of the Messiah, in which the world is perfected, peace and closeness to God reign on

earth, and human history is brought to a glorious close. We all long for such a time. And yet there is only one generation that will merit to witness this closure. We hope and pray that we *are* that generation - that the redemption happens today - and yet we carry on with our lives with the peace of mind that every good deed we do, every step we take in the right direction, every small difference we make in improving the world we live in is part of the unfolding of human history and leading inexorably towards the time we all long for.

It's about the small steps on the journey of life.



## Running Away from Who We're Not

We are almost at the finish line. We can see it. We can feel it. Just a tiny bit further. But we are tired. Maybe we should just stop right here and get comfortable instead.

The Jewish people endured 210 years of slavery followed by 40 years of wandering through the desert – all for the greater purpose of finally getting to the Land of Israel which was promised to Abraham. We are now standing with the finish line in sight, about to receive our final instructions for this climactic moment of conquering the land. Out of the blue, the tribes of Reuben and Gad approach Moses. Strangely and unexpectedly, instead of sharing in the palpable excitement of the moment, they declare



that they would like to settle down in the land just *outside* of Israel.

They explain that on a practical level the land outside of Israel is better suited for pasture which would benefit their business as shepherds. While this explanation seems logical and teaches us the importance of priorities, how is it possible that on an emotional and ideological level, the tribes of Gad and Reuben are not swept up at the nation's excitement at the imminent entry into their homeland after so many years of wandering? This is the land promised to them, and their ancestors, by God, as a land flowing with milk and honey (*Ex. 3:8*) – and they're choosing to not take part? Surely there must be more to this choice than simple economics?

Reuben and Gad both happen to be firstborns. Firstborns were expected to be leaders of their families, and as such, have a privileged status. However, for both Reuben and Gad, adopting the responsibilities of leadership does not come naturally. Gad is the firstborn of Zilpah (Leah's handmaid) but he is not actually given firstborn status since he is not born to one of the Matriarchs. Reuben, in contrast, is given firstborn status but eventually loses it.

Reuben's leadership strategy is not one of teamwork. He tends to take complete control of certain situations without leaving opportunity for others to join him in the task. The most obvious example of this is his plan to save Joseph from the brothers' plot to kill him (*Gen. 37:18-22*). Instead of trying to convince his brothers not to kill Joseph, Reuben suggests that they throw him in a pit to die, planning to return alone later in order to take him out. Perhaps if he had encouraged the brothers not to commit

fratricide, he may have succeeded and Joseph would not have been sold into slavery from that pit.

Reuben is a classic example of a leader without followers and without a strategy.

We each have ideas of what we are supposed to do with our lives and who we are supposed to be. Sometimes our vision is shaped by external forces, pressure to enter the profession that our family expects, for example, or to perform like our siblings. And sometimes our ideas are formed by our own internal beliefs and dreams.

What happens, though, when we try to be something that we actually are not?

Reuben happens to be a firstborn, and as such his leadership status is somewhat imposed on him. He does not choose to become a leader, and the skill does not come naturally to him. He therefore continues to inadvertently make bad leadership choices. When he finally realizes that his approach to leadership is not working, he doesn't try to improve his technique, or to look for his own unique style. Rather, he runs away and invites his fellow rejected firstborn, Gad, to join him in a separate geographical location, where together they can be leaders without followers. Such a decision, however, means that they must separate themselves from everyone else. Reuben simply cannot face the public humiliation of failing to fulfill what he sees as the role of the firstborn.

Eventually, the firstborn rights are transferred to the tribe of Levi. The Torah describes how the tribe of Levi does not receive rights to a specific segment of land but rather is dispersed among all of Israel (*49:7*). This reflects the nature of a true leader – someone who leads from within,

from among the people; someone who inspires others and to grows with them. Levites may not be the literal firstborn children, but they naturally embrace the leadership role.

*Parashat Matot* reminds us that at times we may have misconceptions about who we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to do. Some traits do not come naturally to us. Some are even opposite to our basic natural inclinations. In those instances, we must attempt to focus on our more natural strengths and talents, rather than to artificially hold onto traits that will hold us back from reaching our true destiny.



## Doing Good and Being Good

When the Jewish people are given the command to attack the Midianites, no mention is made of the Moabites who were their partners in crime. Just to remind you, these two lovely nations firstly tried to have the Jewish people cursed. Once that was unsuccessful, they sent young women to seduce the Jewish men into unseemly behavior and idol worship. If both nations were in it together, however, why does God command Moses to attack only the Midianites? And, along similar lines, why does my spellchecker like the word Moabite, but not Midianite. Why do both God and Microsoft favor the Moabites over the Midianites?

Rashi, the great Medieval commentator, answers that there was a fundamental difference between the two nations: While the Moabites attacked out of fear that the Jewish people were a military threat, the land of Midian was not in the path of the Jewish travels. The Midianites became involved purely out of hatred. What Moab did, albeit wrong, was understandable. What Midian did was simply evil.

In Judaism, motivation is everything. Kill a man because you hate him and there is little worse. Kill a man because he is about to kill someone else – you are credited with saving a life.

If you give charity because you care deeply, you are a good man. If you give charity because you want the honor of doing so, then the harm can often outweigh the good that you have done. If you give charity because you want to control and manipulate the person to whom you give, then you are evil. The action is exactly the same, but the motivation makes all the difference.

Of course, by doing a good action, we accustom ourselves to doing good. Likewise, nine times out of ten, good motivation will bring good action, and bad motivation will bring bad action. But that is not always the case.

This point is very important when carried over to our self-image. Often we try to be good and fail. Not true. If you tried to be good, you succeeded – because you tried. If you didn't try to be good, you failed – even if you succeeded. In Judaism, it is the road to Heaven, not Hell, that is paved with good intentions – as long as that intention is pure, and a responsible effort is made