

PARASHAT MAS'EI



צִפּוֹן הַמַּסְעוֹת

The Code of Israel's Travels

Israel's 40 years of wandering in the desert was divided into 42 journeys. The beginning of Parashat Mas'ei lists all the stops they made, carefully noting the names of their encampments and the places from which they left for the next stop.

When reading the Torah, we are accustomed to carefully-measured formulations, in which each word is meticulously chosen and can be understood in many ways. This is why the list of every single journey and encampment of Bnei Yisrael in the desert raises such puzzling questions: What value and what message do we learn from the dry listing of place names? What are we to learn from verses such as *“And they left Yam Suf and camped in Midbar Sin; and they left Midbar Sin and camped in Dofkah”* (Bamidbar 33,11-12) and the like?

True, occasionally the long list of 42 encampments is interrupted by a breath of fresh air in the form of a short account of something that happened in one of the places – but the Torah then immediately reverts to the dry inventory of locations, as if it were a laundry list or supermarket bill!

Is there not some hidden message in this list?

Rashi addresses this question and writes that the message is one of G-d's compassion for Bnei Yisrael: During the course of 40 years of wandering in the desert, only 42 times did they have to pick themselves up and start traveling. Much of the time they were able to remain in the same place, without the bother of picking up and packing and travelling.

The Rambam explains differently. He says that the precise notation of every single station along the way comes to prove to future generations the veracity of the entire story. The more detailed and precise is the documentation of the entire nation's travels in the desert, the more trustworthy and accurate it is for all generations.

Historical documentation is, in fact, very important in G-d's eyes, as we see from His command that a jar of Manna be placed for safekeeping in the Holy Ark (Sh'mot 16,33). This was done so that everyone could later see, with their own eyes, the food that the People of Israel ate in the wilderness.

But if this was the only explanation for this listing of places, why does the Torah take the time to write out some of the events that happened in some of the locations? And on the other hand, if it is already writing out some of these incidents, why does it skip over some of the most important things that happened? For instance, in Refidim, the Torah states:

וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִפְדִּים וְלֹא הָיָה שָׁם מַיִם לָעָם לְשִׁתּוֹת.

*They camped in Refidim,
and there was no water for the people to drink.* (Bamidbar 33,14)

The Torah takes the time to tell us that in Refidim there was a water shortage – while omitting the dramatic war with Amalek that happened there!

Similarly, regarding the next stop, the Torah states that they camped in the Sinai Desert, but does not even mention in passing what happened there: The very Giving of the Torah, without which there would be no basis for our becoming G-d's Nation! What are the criteria that govern what is mentioned?

■ The Settlers' Princes

In addition to the list of encampments, Parashat Mas'ei also includes another list: the names of the princes, or presidents, of the Twelve Tribes. These men are to be the tribal representatives for the allocation of the Promised Land to the nation. This list is introduced as follows: *A prince*

from each tribe you shall take to inherit the land. And these are the names of the men: (Bamidbar 34,18-19)

A list of names? This also appears to be unnecessary for future generations. But if we look at it carefully, we will find it different than expected in two ways. For one thing, the order of the tribes: Fourth-born Yehuda is placed first, as is often the case, followed by Shimon, Yaakov's second son. But why is Binyamin – the youngest of Yaakov's sons and the last of the tribes – listed near the top, in position number three?

In addition, we note that the first three men are listed with no title, while the rest of them are preceded by the title "prince," *nasi*. Why are the tribes of Yehuda, Shimon and Binyamin different than the others, in that their representatives are not listed as their princes?

Let us note several interesting facts about these three. The Tribe of Shimon never received its own distinct portion in the Land of Israel, but was rather annexed to, and lived among, the Tribe of Judah. Judah is the tribe of King David, and Binyamin is the tribe of King Saul; they were anointed by Divine command to be the first kings over the Nation of Israel. Even in later years, after the split of the Jewish State into two, Judah and Binyamin remained the basis for the Davidic dynasty. Yet their leaders did not receive the title "prince" in the above list!

Moreover, the leaders of the other tribes, which ended up not in the Kingdom of Judah but in that of Israel – ruled by kings who did not descend from the Davidic dynasty – *are* called "princes" in the Torah's account! What is the Torah trying to tell us?

Most of the kings from the House of David were loyal to G-d's law, while the vast majority of the kings of Israel (the Ten Tribes) *"did evil in the eyes of the L-rd."* We may cautiously say, therefore, that the kings of the House of David loyally represented the true kingdom, the Kingdom of Heaven; they did not see themselves as the ultimate authorities, and their leaders did not need the title "prince."

The kings of the Ten Tribes, however, saw themselves as the highest authority, removing the yoke of G-d's kingship from themselves. The leaders of the tribes that later became Israel saw themselves even now, during the 40 years in the desert, as "presidents and princes" – and this is alluded to by the attachment of these titles to their names.

This teaches us, once again, that when we encounter a seemingly dry list in the Torah, we must search for those of its elements that are *different*. When we discover what lies behind this difference, the secret of the entire list will be revealed. The source for this key lies in the Talmud, which teaches: “Whenever a Torah passage is repeated, it is repeated only because of a new point contained therein” (Sotah 3b). A superficial understanding of this concept tells us that an entire passage may be written merely to teach us one new point.

However, a deeper look tells us that the seemingly redundant words and verses have been placed there quite purposely – so that we can search among them for that which is different, and thus find the message that G-d wishes to transmit to us. Why does the Torah not transmit this message more directly? We can rest assured that it most certainly has its reasons...

■ The Water and the Desert

In the list of Bnei Yisrael’s 42 travels, we find that the Torah gives extra details about four of them – and that three of them have to do with water. These three locations involve a lack of water or the sudden appearance of water. If we want to understand the significance of the entire list of 42 encampments, then, the key appears to be “water.”

The first of these three places is Marah:

... וַיֵּלְכוּ דֶרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבַּר אֶתֶם וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמַרָּה.

*They traveled three days in the Eitam Desert,
and camped in Marah.* (Bamidbar 33,8)

Marah, as we know from Parashat B'Shalach (Sh'mot 15,23), is where they found only bitter water after three days of walking without finding fresh water. It was here in Marah that they experienced the miracle of having undrinkable water turn into sweet water.

The second location about which something is told is Eilim:

... וּבְאֵילִם שְׁתֵּי עֶשְׂרֵה עֵינֹת מַיִם וְשִׁבְעִים תְּמָרִים וַיַּחֲנוּ שָׁם.

*They came to Eilim, and in Eilim there were twelve springs
of water and seventy date palm trees,
and they camped there.* (verse 9)

These numbers are most remarkable, in that they correspond exactly to the Children of Israel: the 12 tribes of Israel and the 70 descendants of

Yaakov who went down to Egypt many years before. The fact that they reached a place that had precisely 12 springs of water and precisely 70 palm trees, is no smaller wonder than that of the sweetening of the water in Marah.

Nor is it less wondrous than the miracle of turning a dry rock into a source of fresh water in Refidim, which is the third location involving water of which the Torah tells us, as we saw above: *They camped in Refidim, and there was no water for the people to drink* (verse 14). Here, in Refidim, is where Moshe hit the rock for the first time, producing water for the people. This source of water accompanied Israel for the next nearly 40 years.

In short, we see that the subject of “water” characterizes the three locations that are different than the others in this list. Each time, whether in Marah, Eilim, or Refidim, the water’s appearance was accompanied by a miracle. But it is still not clear *why* water is emphasized so strongly in this list. Why is it given preference over other fundamentally important topics that could have been mentioned, such as the Giving of the Torah?

■ The Death of Aharon HaCohen

As stated, there are four places on this list about which something extra is told, and it is the fourth one where we will find the answers to our questions. Regarding the 34th encampment, the Torah states:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִקַּדֵּשׁ וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּהַר הַהָר...
וַיַּעַל אַהֲרֹן הַכֹּהֵן אֶל הַר הַהָר עַל פִּי ה' וַיָּמָת שָׁם...
They left Kadesh and camped in Hor HaHar...
Aharon HaCohen went up to Hor HaHar,
by Hashem's word, and died there... (verses 37-38)

The death of Aharon, just like the deaths of his brother Moshe Rabbeinu and his sister Miriam the Prophetess, closed the book on the Divinely-led leadership of the generation that left Egypt. The deaths of all three of them were connected to water. Miriam’s passing marked the end of the water flow from the boulder that Moshe had hit, and it was this very strike that decreed an end to the lives of Moshe and Aharon.

When we discuss water, we see that aside from being a critical substance of life in the dry and rocky desert, it is, more than anything else, the common denominator of these three great sibling prophets.

The generation of the desert lived a miraculous existence. They were fortunate to receive intensive, non-stop care by Hashem, redeeming them from bent-over slavery to truly free nationhood, and granting them the tools to conquer their homeland. Just as a child receives very careful handling, preparing him for independence and married life, the Israelites received similar treatment during their birth as a nation.

The generation that entered the Land of Israel marked an important milestone: the end of the miracles that their parents had experienced in the desert, including the Manna, the quail (Bamidbar 11,31-32), the Clouds of Glory, the rock flowing with water, and much more. For the new generation, there were no more miracles. They had to build and plant with their own hands, and fight and conquer the Land of their Forefathers piece by piece. The disappearance of Moshe, Aharon and Miriam – associated with the miraculous water – was the ultimate expression of the end of the wondrous, prophetic period of the Generation of the Desert.

The list of encampments reveals within it a coded message of “water,” the common denominator of the three great sibling leaders. It thus lights a memorial candle for Moshe Rabbeinu, Aharon HaCohen, and Miriam the Prophetess, and denotes the beginning of a new period in Jewish history.

But there is even more to the message coded within this list of journeys.

■ The Numbered Journeys

Let us delve further deeper into the four journeys that stand out in this list. Marah (#5 on the list), Eilim (#6), and Refidim (#11) were all singled out as having to do with a miraculous appearance of water. If we add up these numbers, we get $5 + 6 + 11 = 22$, which symbolizes “encampment,” as we will see.

In addition, the 34th journey was to Hor Hahar, about which the Torah also tells us something extra, namely, the death of Aharon and the end of his life “journey.” Where else do we see these numbers, and what do they tell us?

Let us return to the extraordinary, short passage in Parashat Behaalot'cha known as *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron*. These were the words that Moshe prayed every time Israel would either embark on or end another of their journeys. At the beginning of each journey, when the Holy Ark began to travel, Moshe would say:

קוּמָה ה' וַיִּפְּצוּ אֹיְבֵיךָ וַיִּנָּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיךָ מִפְּנֵיךָ.

*Arise, O G-d, and have Your enemies disperse,
and let those who cause hatred to You run away.* (Bamidbar 10,35)

And at the end of each journey, i.e., when the Holy Ark rested, Moshe prayed this:

שׁוּבָה ה' רַבּוֹת אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

*Rest Your presence, O Lord,
[amid] the myriads of thousands of Israel.* (verse 36)

Counting the letters of these prayers, we find that the first one, standing for *journeys*, numbers exactly 34 letters, and the second one – recited before every *encampment* – numbers 22! This, then, is the code of the journeys in Parashat Mas'ei, in which stations 5, 6, 11 (total: 22) and 34 are highlighted, emphasizing the Divine precision of Israel's journeys and encampments.

עַל פִּי ה' יִחַנּוּ וְעַל פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ אֶת מִשְׁמֶרֶת ה' שְׁמְרוּ עַל פִּי ה' בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה.

*By G-d's word they encamped,
and by G-d's word they would travel;
they kept Hashem's charge, by the word of G-d, via Moshe.* (9,23)

■ Israel's Travels: Clarifying Israel's Essence

The travels and encampments of the Israelites played a very central role in clarifying, fundamentally and deeply, the essence of the Nation of Israel and its destiny.

Every stop served two functions. One was to serve as a stage in Israel's detachment from the land of Egypt and the slavery and idol-worship for which it stood. The second function of each desert stop was to climb another rung on the ladder of building the uniqueness of the nation, and to advance another step in its preparation to enter the Promised Land. At each stop, they did two things: They “left Egypt,” and they proceeded to “build the Land of Israel.”

The Torah describes these two functions in one verse, which seems to say the same thing in two opposite ways:

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמִסְעֵיהֶם עַל פִּי ה'
וְאֵלֶּה מִסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם.

*Moshe recorded their departures for their journeys,
according to G-d,
and these are their journeys for their departures.* (33,2)

The order is changed within just a few words! The verse first mentions their *departures for their journeys*, signifying that the departure is for the purpose of the journey, which in turn is for the purpose of G-d's word – and it concludes with their *journeys for their departures*, describing the purpose of the journey as “departing.”

Clearly, the explanation for this reversal is that both functions of each stop are being described. Israel's preparations for conquering the Land and for strengthening its spirit are symbolized by the beginning of the verse: the departure is for the sake of the journey, and the journey is aimed at meeting the objective as set by Hashem. On the other hand, the second function, that of helping the nation distance itself from Egypt, both mentally and physically, is expressed by the end of the verse indicating that the journeys were for the purpose of “departing” Egypt and its practices.

The essence of this sad story is Moshe's unfulfilled longing for the Holy Land into which he will never enter. For he was the one who wrote down each step of the desert trek, emphasizing that each of the 42 journeys was another step towards entering Eretz Yisrael: ***“And Moshe wrote their departures for their journeys.”*** And just when he reaches the last stage, he learns of the harsh decree that he will not enter the beloved Land. Hashem comforts him, however, by emphasizing his decisive role in extricating the Nation of Israel from the negativity of Egypt: ***“...these are their journeys for their departures.”***

In sum: Two central points have accompanied us the entire route, symbolized by the mention of each location twice: the wondrous departure from Egypt and its evil, and the drive towards the Promised Land and the great mission Israel is to fulfill there.

■ Pesach and Sukkot

It is fascinating to see that these two points are symbolized by the holidays of Pesach and Sukkot.¹

Pesach highlights the midnight hour when the Pesach sacrifice was brought, the eldest sons of the Egyptians died, and permission was granted for the Jews to leave the country. Pesach emphasizes the concept of “leaving Egypt” and its culture:

1. What of Shavuot and Sh'mini Atzeret? Shavuot is “attached” to Pesach, via the counting of the Omer, etc., and Sh'mini Atzeret/Simchat Torah “belongs” to Sukkot.

אֶת חַג הַמִּצּוֹת תִּשְׁמֹר שִׁבְעַת יָמִים תֹּאכַל מַצּוֹת ...
 לְמוֹעֵד חֹדֶשׁ הָאָבִיב כִּי בּוֹ יֵצְאָתָּ מִמִּצְרָיִם וְלֹא יֵרָאוּ פָנֶי רִיקָם ...

*Keep the Holiday of Matzot, seven days you shall eat matzot...
 at the appointed time of the spring month,
 for it was then that you left Egypt...* (Sh'mot 23,15)

Sukkot, on the other hand, symbolizes both the departure from Egypt (from Raamses to a place called Sukkkot), and the arrival in the Land of Israel. The Holy Land is symbolized by the *s'chach* (sukkah covering), the residue of the wheat stalks and grapevines that remained in the fields after the harvest. As is written,

וְחַג הַקְּצִיר בְּכוֹרֵי מַעֲשֵׂיךָ אֲשֶׁר תִּזְרַע בַּשָּׂדֶה
 וְחַג הָאָסֹף בְּצִאת הַשָּׁנָה בְּאָסֹף אֶת מַעֲשֵׂיךָ מִן הַשָּׂדֶה.

*The feast of the harvest of your first fruits
 that you have planted in the field,
 and the feast of the ingathering at the end of the year,
 when you gather in [the fruits of] your labors
 from the field.* (verse 16)

In other words: The arousal and awakening to receive the Divine inspiration progresses and advances in tandem with the detachment from the yoke of slavery and man's physical urges. As the verse in Tehillim states: *Turn away from evil and do good* (Psalms 37,27) – two mutually-dependent processes.

