

Parashat Matot-Masei 5781, 2021:

The Journey

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Moshe ben Itta Golda, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, Reuven Shmuel ben Leah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

The beginning of Parashat Masei presents a puzzling array of places where our forebears traveled on their circuitous journey from Egypt to *Eretz Yisrael*. Rashi (1040-1105) famously asks the question that in all likelihood has been on the mind of every serious Torah student since time immemorial: “Why were these journeys written [in the Torah text]?” He suggests that the Torah provides us with this long and detailed list “to make known the loving acts of the Omnipresent One” (*l’hodiyah chasadov shel Makkom*). How is this the case? As Rashi states:

...that although He had decreed against them to make them move about and wander in the wilderness, you should not think that they wandered and moved about without cessation from one station to another station all the forty years, and that they had no rest, for you see that there are here only forty-two stages... [Rashi now presents an elaborate case to prove the following statement:] It follows that during the whole of the thirty-eight years they made only twenty journeys. This is excerpted from the work of R. Moses the Preacher. (Translation, Rev. M. Rosenbaum and Dr. A.M. Silberman, *Pentateuch with Targum Onkelos, Haphtaroth*, and Rashi’s Commentary, *Numbers* 33:1)

Rav Aharon Lichtenstein *zatzal* (1933-2015) summarizes Rashi’s gloss in these words:

“That is to say, the journeys were recorded in order to show the kindness of the Holy One blessed be He, for He did not force them to travel during the entire 40 years, but rather, only 20 times.” (Yeshivat Har Etzion, *Sichot Roshei HaYeshivah*, Parashat Masei, Erev Shabbat, 1990, summarized by Rabbi Tzvi Reiman, 1994, translation my own)

While Rashi focuses upon Hashem's kindness in limiting our nations' travels during their time in the Sinai Desert, the Rambam (1135-1204) has a very different perspective as to why the Torah spends 39 verses detailing every journey our ancestors undertook:

Of this kind [of narrative that appears superfluous] is the enumeration of the stations [of the Israelites in the wilderness]. At first sight it appears to be entirely useless; but in order to obviate such a notion Scripture says, "And Moses wrote their goings out according to their journeys by the commandment of the L-rd." (*Numbers* 33:2). It was indeed most necessary that these should be written. For miracles are only convincing to those who witnessed them; whilst coming generations, who know them only from the account given by others, may consider them as untrue. But miracles cannot continue and last for all generations; it is even inconceivable [that they should be permanent]. Now the greatest of the miracles described in the Law is the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years, with a daily supply of manna...All these miracles were wonderful, public, and witnessed by the people. But G-d knew that in the future people might doubt the correctness of the account of these miracles. in the same manner as they doubt the accuracy of other narratives; they might think that the Israelites stayed in the wilderness in a place not far from inhabited land, where it was possible for man to live [in the ordinary way] ... In order to remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of the account of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracle which enabled human beings to live in those places forty years. (*The Guide for the Perplexed*, III:50, translation, M. Friedlander, pp. 382-383, underlining my own)

According to the Rambam, the Torah provides us with a comprehensive listing of the travels of the *Dor HaMidbar* (Generation of the Desert) to underscore the authenticity of the multifaceted miracles of their survival in the incredibly hostile environment of the Sinai Desert, "so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracle which enabled human beings to live in those places forty years." Though, "all these miracles were wonderful, public, and witnessed by the people...G-d knew that in the future people might doubt the correctness of the account of these miracles. in the same manner as they doubt the accuracy of other narratives." The Torah's comprehensive account of these travels, therefore, comes to prove their extraordinary nature. Moreover, it illustrates the Almighty's role as He Who performs ongoing miracles for *b'nai Yisrael*.

In the *Modim* section of our *Shemoneh Esrei*, the *Anshei Keneset HaGadolah* (Men of the Great Assembly, circa 500 BCE) gave powerful voice to this concept of Hashem as He Who performs ongoing miracles for *b'nai Yisrael*:

We thankfully acknowledge that You are the L-rd our G-d and G-d of our fathers forever. You are the strength of our life, the shield of our salvation in every generation. We will give thanks to You and recount Your praise, evening, morning, and noon, for our lives which are committed into Your hand, for our souls which are entrusted to You, for Your miracles which are with us daily, and for Your continual wonders and beneficences. You are the Beneficent One, for Your mercies never cease; the Merciful One, for Your kindnesses never end; for we always place our hope in You. (Translation, https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/867674/jewish/Translation.htm)

With Hashem's help, and our fervent desire, may we ever acknowledge His immanent role in our existence, and recognize the daily wonders and miracles He performs for us on the journey we call "life." *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom and may Hashem in His infinite mercy remove the pandemic from *klal Yisrael* and all the nations of the world.

Past *drashot* may be found at my blog-website: <http://reparashathashavuah.org>

The email list, *b'chasdei Hashem*, has expanded to hundreds of people. I am always happy to add more members to the list. If you have family or friends you would like to have added, please do not hesitate to contact me via email <mailto:rdbe718@gmail.com>.

*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpvd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)