



Parshas Matos / Masei

For the week ending 2 Av 5758
24-25 July 1998

Overview

Matos

Moshe teaches the rules and restrictions governing oaths and vows — especially the role of a husband or father in either upholding or annulling a vow. *Bnei Yisrael* war against *Midian*. They kill the five Midianite kings, all the males, and *Bilaam*. Moshe is upset that women were taken captive, because they were catalysts for the immoral behavior of the Jewish People. He rebukes the officers. The spoils of war are counted and apportioned. The commanding officers report to Moshe that there was not one casualty among *Bnei Yisrael*. They bring an offering which is taken by Moshe and Elazar and placed in the *Ohel Mo'ed* (Tent of Meeting). The Tribes of Gad and Reuven, who own large quantities of livestock, petition Moshe to remain east of the Jordan and not enter the Land of Israel. They explain that the land east of the Jordan is quite suitable grazing land for their livestock. Moshe's initial response is that this request will discourage the rest of *Bnei Yisrael*, and that it is akin to the sin of the spies. They assure Moshe that they will first help conquer Israel, and only then will they go back to their homes on the eastern side of the Jordan River. Moshe grants their request on condition that they uphold their part of the deal.

Masei

The Torah names all 42 encampments of *Bnei Yisrael* on their 40-year journey from the Exodus to the crossing of the Jordan river into *Eretz Yisrael*. Hashem commands *Bnei Yisrael* to drive out the Canaanites from *Eretz Yisrael* and to demolish every vestige of their idolatry. *Bnei Yisrael* are warned that if they fail to rid the land completely of the Canaanites, those who remain will be "pins in their eyes and thorns in their sides." The boundaries of the Land of Israel are defined, and the tribes are commanded to set aside 48 cities for the *levi'im*, who do not receive a regular portion in the division of the Land. Cities of refuge are to be established: Someone who murders unintentionally may flee there. The daughters of Tzafchad marry members of their tribe so that their inheritance will stay in their own tribe. Thus ends the Book of Bamidbar/Numbers, the fourth of the Books of The Torah.

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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

info@ohr.org.il

38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

1-212-213-3100

fax: 1-212-213-8717

RZCorlin@aol.com or estern@Aol.com

613 Clark Avenue West, Thornhill, Ontario L4J 5V3, Canada

1-905-886-5730

fax: 1-905-886-6065

Somayach@MSN.com

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Written and Compiled by Rabbi Yaakov Asher Sinclair

General Editor: Rabbi Moshe Newman

Production Design: Eli Ballon

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Insights

JOURNEY

“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel” (33:1)

Can you remember what you did on a certain Tuesday, five years ago? How about a particular day last year? How about last month?

When our lives follow a routine, it becomes very difficult to separate one day from the next. The past seems to spread back behind us like an almost endless gray carpet. Here and there, however, landmarks protrude above the humdrum scenery. A marriage, a birth, a death, a golden wedding. The same is true when we travel. We remember clearly the five minutes we spent at Niagara Falls as though it were yesterday, although it happened ten years ago. We still smell the rain of a tropical rainstorm on Fiji, the fumes of a childhood traffic-jam on the way to Bognor Regis. Travel makes time significant and memorable.

We talk of life being a journey. The essence of life is to journey, to move, to develop. When Hashem appeared to Avraham and told him that he would be the progenitor of a holy nation, it was with the command: *“Go to yourself.”* The essential journey is to the self, to develop the internal landscape of the soul. In order for Avraham to fulfill his potential and be the Father of the Jewish People, he had to go, to journey. Maybe it was for this reason that Hashem didn't tell him his destination. For the destination was not the essence of the journey, rather the journey itself.

In this week's Parsha, the Torah lists the 42 encampments of the Jewish People on their journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel. Every time they move camp the Torah repeats the phrase *“They journeyed from...”* Why was it necessary to repeat this phrase with every encampment? Obviously, if they camped in different place they must have journeyed from the previous place.

The Jewish People's journey through the desert was a spiritual rite of passage between the decadence of Egypt and the land flowing with the milk and honey of holiness. It's easier to take the Jew out of Egypt than Egypt out of the Jew. It took 41 separate spiritual journeys to impact on the collective spiritual psyche of the Jewish People and ready them to enter the Promised Land.

SELF-MADE MAN

“A thousand from a tribe, a thousand from a tribe” (31:4)

“People don't know what it is to work these days. When I was a kid I used to get up every morning at 4:30, rain or shine. I'm a self-made man, all right.”

More elusive than the Loch Ness Monster or the Yeti is a species called the Self-Made Man. Reports of his existence are very frequent, but to date he has never been positively identified. All the thousands of reported sightings have turned out to be mistaken wishful thinking.

Let's take a look at a typical reported sighting:

Morris is one of the biggest corporate stock whizzes on Wall Street. He is president of Huge and Wealthy International Inc., a top Fortune 500 company. Morris gets up every morning at 4:30 and works non-stop until late at night.

But did Morris give himself this strength, this drive, or does it come from somewhere else?

The bankruptcy courts are littered with financial whizzes who had no way of knowing that the bottom would drop out of their market, despite all the genius of their planning. And even those who make it to the top like Morris, can, in a few seconds, succumb to a heart attack, and the president of Huge and Wealthy International Inc. can suddenly become a statistic in a study on heart disease.

When we're successful, it's all too easy to pat ourselves on the back and congratulate ourselves on how clever we are. In order to keep a true perspective as to where our success really comes from, we need constant reminders.

In this week's Parsha, the Torah tells us that for every thousand soldiers that went out to fight for the Jewish People, another thousand stayed behind and prayed for them. For each soldier at the front, there was another “soldier” responsible to pray for his counterpart.

You might think that this was to give those at the front added protection. The real reason, however, was that those who were fighting shouldn't be under any illusion as to where their success came from. Not by the strength and the might of their own hand were they victorious in battle; rather their success — like all success — came from Hashem, the maker of the “Self-Made” Man.

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I'M NOT ME

"If a man takes a vow to Hashem or swears an oath to establish a prohibition on himself." (30:3)

Teshuva (return) is a miracle. How can someone who has transgressed, eradicate what has been? For *teshuva* doesn't just gain forgiveness for our errors, it rewrites history. It removes all scars of sin.

How can this be? After all, what was done was done. It happened. How can *teshuva* re-weave the very fabric of reality?

Imagine the following: It's Shabbos. A Jew turns on a light. One scenario. But three possible realities:

Reality number one: Man to second man "Don't turn the light on! It's Shabbos! You're transgressing a capital offense! Don't touch that switch!" Second man to first man. "I know it's Shabbos. I know it's a capital offense and I'm still going to do it. Watch me!" Click.

Second reality: "Wow! I can't believe I just did that! I turned the light on. I completely forgot it was Shabbos!"

Third reality: "And the next thing I knew, I fell back and my arm hit the light switch and the light went on!"

Shabbos. A Jew turns on a light. One scenario. Three different realities.

When we do *teshuva*, we are saying it wasn't really us who did the transgression. That person may have the same eyes, nose and hair as me. He may be my doppelgänger. He may even answer to my name. But that's not me! I'm a different person. I did *teshuva*.

In this week's Parsha, the Torah teaches us about the binding nature of a *neder*, a vow. A *neder* is binding. It gives a person the ability to do something that heretofore only G-d could do: To create a new halachic status, a new reality.

If a *neder* alters the reality of the world, then how can there exist the ability to nullify a *neder*? That's like re-weaving the world? The answer is that if a person had known certain information at the time of making the *neder*, he would never have accepted the vow upon himself. He is saying: "The person who made that *neder* is not really me."

LONG NIGHT'S JOURNEY INTO DAY

"These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt ... at the hand of Moshe and Aharon." (33:1)

Nothing that the hand of man creates can endure for eternity. Statues crumble; poetry is forgotten. Nothing lasts forever.

For this reason, the redemption from Egypt was not final, for it came "at the hand of Moshe and Aharon." For all their lofty spiritual height, they were no more than flesh and blood.

It was inevitable, therefore, that the Jewish People would be subject to other exiles, since their Exodus from Egypt was mortal and this-worldly, and thus incomplete.

"These are the journeys of the Children of Israel" — these are the journeys of exile that the Children of Israel will undergo throughout the long night of history because "they went forth from the land of Egypt ... at the hand of Moshe and Aharon." In the future, however, when Hashem redeems His people, there will be no human imperfection in the redemption, and thus it will be complete and eternal.

Sources:

Journey - The Malbim, heard from Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky

Self-Made Man - based on Rabbi Chatzkel Levenstein heard from Rabbi Yehoshua Bertram

I'm Not Me - heard from Rabbi Dovid Orlofsky

Long Night's Journey into Day - Kesones Ohr in Mayana shel Torah

Haftorah:

Yirmiyahu 2:4-28 & 3:4

MUDDY WATERS

"For my people have perpetrated two evils: Me have they forsaken, the source of living waters; to dig themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water." (2:13)

In this, the second Haftorah of the "three (haftorahs) of affliction," the prophet speaks out, not only against Israel's disloyalty to Hashem who saved them from slavery, but also against the disloyalty to the Torah which has been exchanged for the empty vanities of foreign culture. Our Sages teach us that Hashem lamented: "If they had forsaken only Me, but had kept the Torah, its spiritual light would have influenced them to return to the path of righteousness." However the Jewish People, seduced by the superficial glitter of the foreign ideologies, abandon the Torah, their only lifeline, and imbibe the brackish water of false ideas which constantly change and contradict themselves. From this, only tragedy and exile can ensue

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LOVE OF THE LAND

Selections from classical Torah sources which express the special relationship between the People of Israel and Eretz Yisrael

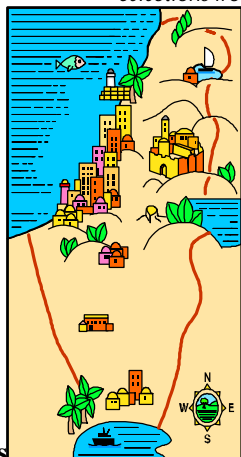
THE OTHER JERUSALEM

“A built up Jerusalem, like a city joined together” (Tehillim 122:3).

This description of Jerusalem led Rabbi Yochanan to conclude that there is a Jerusalem above just as there is a Jerusalem below. “Joined together,” explains Rashi, implies that the devastated Jerusalem visible to us will eventually be built up like another city which is its twin. This suggests that there is another Jerusalem — and where can it be located, if not in Heaven!

Rashba (Rabbi Shlomo Ben Aderes, 13th century Spanish commentator) adds that not only Jerusalem and the *Beis Hamikdash* are physical representations of lofty spiritual concepts, but all of *Eretz Yisrael* as well. This is why it is called “The Land of life” and why there are *mitzvos* which can be fulfilled only in this land where one has a full sense of having a G-d.

Mesechta Ta’anis 5a



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22 Shimon Hatzadik Street, POB 18103, Jerusalem Israel

☎ 972-2-581-0315

fax: 972-2-581-2890

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38 East 29th Street 8th floor, New York, NY 10016, USA

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