

“Hallowed Ground”

Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei 5778

Rabbi Adam J. Raskin, Congregation Har Shalom

This past Thursday I was driving up Route 15, on my way to visit Har Shalom kids who are campers and counselors at Camp Airy and Camp Louise. It's such a beautiful, picturesque drive into the Catoctin Mountains—and along the way I saw this road sign that I hadn't noticed on previous drives along this particular highway. In the state of Maryland, a road sign with a brown background indicates either a recreational area or a scenic point of interest. This particular sign read in big white letters: “Hallowed Ground.” Now having just come back from Israel where virtually everything is *hallowed ground*, I thought perhaps I was driving near some area of archaeological significance, maybe Native American burial grounds or prehistoric ceremonial sites. Hallowed, at least in my rabbinic mind, means holy, or consecrated, sacred...and so I was curious to know what exactly made that landscape so revered. Turns out that the Hallowed Ground region is a 180-mile long, 75-mile wide area that stretches from Monticello to Gettysburg. Contained in this area are nine presidential homes and residences, thousands of historical towns and battlefields from the French & Indian, Revolutionary, and Civil Wars; the locations where the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, the Monroe Doctrine, the Emancipation Proclamation, the Gettysburg Address, and the Marshall Plan were all composed; it is not surprisingly referred to as “The Cradle of Democracy.” A non-profit, four-state partnership is devoted to maintaining awareness of these historical sites and promoting travel and education in this region of the country...because all of these sites and landscapes are profoundly significant to American history and national identity.

Could that be why our Torah also painstakingly details the 42 *masa'ot*, 42 separate journeys and encampments that our ancestors made in their trek toward the Promised Land? Is this Torah portion our own map through “hallowed ground,” with markers of formative Jewish experiences, battles, revelations, triumphs, and tragedies that birthed the nation of Israel? The great Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch in his 18th Century German Torah commentary wrote: “What footprints in the sands of time could these places still have for the immediate and distant future,

and how much future generations be invited to trace and visit these places of God's miraculous guidance and care?"^[1] I don't know about you, but I love retracing the footsteps of my ancestors...whether in *Eretz Yisrael*, here in America, or wherever else our journeys have taken us. I will never, in my entire life forget a walking tour I took with my father-in-law through the neighborhoods and streets of his childhood in Montreal. I will always cherish the stories he told me along the way of where he used to play with his friends, go to Hebrew School, eat smoked meat sandwiches, and help his parents in their beauty shop. Our present means so much more when we understand our past...and no one treasures the past more than the Jewish people. Rashi makes an interesting point about the history of the Jewish people's encampments that is recorded at the very beginning of Parashat Mas'ei. He wanted to be sure to correct the impression that the Jewish people were constantly on the run, never putting-down roots, never living in one place for very long. Rashi presents an extended mathematical equation in his commentary, subtracting time here and there, and calculating how long our ancestors stayed in each of these places that the Torah names. Through his analysis, he claims that *b'nai Yisrael* spent an average of about a year and a half in each place. He calls this a *chesed*, an act of divine kindness; because even though the desert journey was in fact a punishment for the sins of the Jewish people, God still allowed the Jewish people to settle-down and not continuously be on the move without respite. The Jewish people actually had some semblance of normalcy, even during this extended time in the desert.

It seems to me that this is reflective of large swaths of Jewish history. The Jewish people have moved, either voluntarily or more often against their will from one country and continent to another; sometimes they were fleeing persecution, other times they were told that they could only live in certain places but not others; in the ghetto but not the city, in the Pale of Settlement but not in the core metropolitan areas of the European continent; as refugees in some places, but only until a quota was met in others. But just as Rashi suggests regarding our biblical ancestors, what I find so remarkable about the movements of the Jewish people around the world is the fact that we did settle down, we did build communities, cultures, significant institutions of Jewish life in almost every waystation of our wandering.

Some of you have asked me about what exactly I was studying when I was learning in yeshiva a few weeks ago. The topic we delved into was the intersection between *minhag* and *halacha*. In other words, what is the authority, the force of custom compared to commandments? Are we as obligated by *minhagim*, deeply rooted Jewish customs as we are by the *mitzvot*? It was a fascinating topic to explore. In fact, I often find that people feel more obligated by customs than commandments! God-forbid that an Ashkenazi Jew name a child for a living relative (never mind that Sephardic Jews do precisely that!). This principle does not exist anywhere in the Torah, the Talmud, or any halakhic literature--It is completely based on custom. But if you violate that custom you could bring down the wrath of your mother, or worse, your mother-in-law! There are so many *minhagim*, from covering our eyes for *Sh'ma* to eating hardboiled eggs and lentils at a meal following a funeral, tossing bread crumbs in a river for *Tashlich*, not eating *kitniyot* on Passover...The chanting of Kol Nidrei is a minhag! There are even holidays that are observed by dint of custom by some Jews but not others. Like Mimouna, an exuberant Sephardic celebration that is linked to the yarzeit of the Rambam's father, who was a scholar in Morocco, and contains wonderful symbolic foods and festivities. Most Ashkenazic Jews have never heard of this festival. When we were driving recently in Northern Israel there was a huge permanent orange sign near the ascent to Mount Meron: it advised drivers that parking is prohibited on the highway during Lag Ba'Omer when thousands of Jews flock to the western Galilee celebrate Lag B'Omer at the tomb of the kabbalistic master Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai. This is no little bonfire with roasted marshmallows...this is a huge chassidische bash! But most Jews who are not of kabbalistic inclinations know nothing of it. There are so many more examples of how customs took root across the landscape of Jewish civilization: holidays, foods, rituals, songs, garb, prayers. When I took Ezra to the Kotel, the Western Wall, we wanted to grab *siddurim* to take with us to davven. There is a large bookshelf off to the left as you approach on the men's side of the plaza. Ezra was astonished by how many choices there were! Ashkenazic, Sephardic, Yemenite, Mizrachi, *siddurim*...each on their own shelves with brass colored plaques indicating the flavor of the siddur! In each of the lands of our dispersion, the Jewish people were incredibly creative, resourceful, and adaptive to local cultures. And through each of those chapters, like the waystations in this morning's parasha, Jewish life was

more and more enriched, nuanced, and textured as a result. *Galut*, or *galus*, is often thought to be a bad word or a negative connotation. Exile, dispersion...don't really sound all that positive. But when you think about how that dispersion made our people all the more expansive and diverse, I don't think it's possible to view the *galut* as an entirely negative experience. When we recall the Eastern European Jewish experience, our minds immediately gravitate to the Shoah, the Holocaust. But we tend to forget the towering Jewish civilization of pre-War Europe; the yeshivot, the academies, the literature and philosophy, the art and music. And let's face it, we are in the *galut* here and now, in the United States, in the 21st Century! We don't live in *Eretz Yisrael*. We are not totally self-determining in this country. On some level, we exist here due to the grace and benevolence of this great democracy. And look at how much American Jewry has contributed irrevocably to the palate of the Jewish experience!

In the midrash, "the wilderness" is personified and given a voice: Said Rabbi Berachia...the wilderness said, "I am wilderness, and I am beloved! For all the good things in the world are hidden in me, as it is said, "I will plant cedars and acacias in the wilderness." (Is. 41:19) God gave them to me in trust, and when God asks them of me, I will return the trust in full...^[2]

Let us never forget that though we have wandered in some pretty treacherous wildernesses, the Jewish people have also been blessed with tremendous goodness along the way. Let us rejoice in our present, be hopeful about our future, and always cherish the past, which made us who we are and who we will become.

[1] Hirsch Commentary on the Torah, Numbers 23:1

[2] Shir Ha'Shirim Rabbah 2:2