

## **A long and winding road...**

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**Shabbat Matot-Mas'ey - July 17, 2020**

As I've gotten older I've become more obsessive about wanting to share places that were important to me with my children. I want to show them where I went to school, where I lived, places where my siblings and I had adventures and mishaps, where their father and I got married, where I took them when they were little, and on and on and on.

I hope that by sharing these places with them they'll not only know more about me, but also about the people and the places where they come from, and why I try to pass on the values and the teachings that I do.

In this week's Torah portion, Parashat Mas'ey, we come to the final stop of the Israelite's 40 year journey through the wilderness before they enter the land of Israel. This final torah portion from the Book of Numbers begins by saying: "These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by the Eternal. Their marches, by starting points, were as follows: (Num. 33:1-2)."

The torah then goes on for another 47 verses to name all of their 42 stops over 40 years. It names every place they set out from and where they encamped, including a few brief highlights of what happened in at some of the places. And then it shifts our focus from looking at what has already happened to what lays just ahead of them, the Land of Israel, and what they hoped would be their final destination on this long journey.

But why? Why do we need to know the name of where they camped out if nothing really important happened there? Does the generation Moses is addressing, the generation born in the wildness and who are about to enter the land of Israel really need to know that their parents set out from Dophkah and encamped at Alush, or set out from Jotbath and encamped at Abronah, any more than my kids really need to know what

library I went to as a kid, or what bus stop I waited at for my religious school car pool to pick me up?

I think this detailed recitation of the many stops our ancestors took along the way is to remind us that every part of a journey can be sacred, and that the journey never begins with us, it was started long before we were born, and will continue long after we are gone. And that what might seem like an insignificant, mundane or forgettable stop along the way also shaped who we are.

In Judaism, the ends almost never can justify the means, because there is never really an end, we are always in the middle, always in the wilderness, always remembering where we've been and looking towards where we want to go.

For a brief time in June, it felt like we were beginning to come nearer to the end of this pandemic. Countries around the world saw their numbers getting better. California had radically flattened the curve, and New Zealand had actually eradicated it from their country all together!

Slowly, we went from stage to stage, moving cautiously into getting haircuts or sitting at an outside café, or working in an office, and then as things started to get worse and worse, it felt like we were playing some hellish version of Shoots and Ladders, but in real time. And as I read this week's Torah portion, I realized that these 42 stops along the way that our ancestors took must have felt like to them what the journey we are on now feels like to us, endless.

Just like our ancestors, we don't have a lot of control about how long the journey will take, but we do have control over how we behave along the way, what we learn from the experience, and how we perceive of the journey itself.

When we look at the Torah, it's clear that our ancestors perceived of the Jewish journey as beginning in Egypt with the Exodus and ending with self-sovereignty in the Land of Israel. They could not have predicted that two more times our people would go into exile from Eretz Yisrael, and that the second time the journey would be longer, and seemingly

without end, lasting 2000 years and spanning the entire globe. Imagine how long it would take to record just your own family's stops along the way.

Perhaps this is why so many of us take comfort in Rabbi Alvin Fine's poem:

Birth is a beginning  
And death is a destination.  
And life is a journey:  
From childhood to maturity  
And youth to age;  
From innocence to knowing;  
From foolishness to discretion  
And then, perhaps, to wisdom;  
From weakness to strength  
Or strength to weakness-  
And, often, back again;  
From health to sickness  
And back, we pray, to health again;  
From offense to forgiveness,  
From loneliness to love,  
From joy to gratitude,  
From pain to compassion,  
And grief to understanding-  
From fear to faith;  
From defeat to defeat to defeat-  
Until, looking backward or ahead,  
We see that victory lies  
Not at some high place along the way,  
But in having made the journey, stage by stage,  
A sacred pilgrimage.  
Birth is a beginning  
And death a destination.  
And life is a journey,  
A sacred pilgrimage-  
To life everlasting.  
(Rabbi Alvin Fine)

This poem reminds us that it is what we do on the journey that makes life a sacred pilgrimage.

It was hard this week to see our State slide back into more stringent restrictions in response to the surge of infections of the Covid virus.

It was hard to have confirmation of what we already knew, that it is not safe to reopen our schools next month.

It was hard being reminded that we have no idea when this stage of the journey will end, and we will finally be ready to embark on the next stage.

But what would happen if we looked at this situation we are in now as not having a definitive start or end, but as a process, a journey, with something new to learn or understand or grow from at each stage?

For instance, we have been reminded that we do not experience being part of a K'hilla Kodesha, a sacred community, only in this place, but rather, wherever we choose to create it, on line, via Zoom, or phone calls, or dropping off someone's groceries, in those spaces we are creating sacred connections.

We've learned that the upside of celebrating a virtual Bar or Bat Mitzvah is that relatives who were too old or ill or far away to be able to celebrate with us in person can now actually participate in these celebrations, and for a lot expense.

We have been reminded how fragile and precious our lives and our health really are, and how much each of us has a role in protecting not only ourselves, but each other.

We have learned that it is important to slow down, to unplug from our devices and simply take time every day to go for a walk or a bike ride and breath fresh air and to see people in a 3-D setting.

And we have been reminded that we can not control what is happening in our lives, but we can control how we respond to it.

The author Jim Collins coined the term “The Stockdale Paradox” it is a concept that was inspired by Admiral Jim Stockdale, a US officer who was a POW during the Vietnam War. Not unlike Senator John McCain, Adm. Stockdale was repeatedly tortured by his captors and given no reason to believe that he would survive his hell on earth and see his family again.

And yet throughout his eight long years of captivity, he never lost his faith in the future. In his book “Good to Great,” Stockdale wrote: I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade.”

So what is the paradox? It is that while he had faith in the unknowable, it was the POWs who were most optimistic who did not survive. He wrote: “They were the ones who said, ‘We’re going to be out by Christmas.’ And Christmas would come, and Christmas would go. Then they’d say, ‘We’re going to be out by Easter.’ And Easter would come, and Easter would go. And then Thanksgiving, and then it would be Christmas again. And they died of a broken heart.”

Adm. Stockdale believed that because they were only optimistic and were blind to the reality of their situation their self-delusion made it more difficult for them to cope with what they were going through. But because he accepted the reality, the unknowing of how long it would last, but retained a faith that it would eventually end, he was able to survive.

Jim Collins, the one who coined the phrase the Stockdale paradox, observed that this mind-set can be seen not only in traumatic events, but also in business and in day to day life, that the difference between surviving and thriving can be found in the Stockdale Paradox, that “you must retain faith that you will prevail in the end, regardless of the difficulties, and at the same time you must confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be. (<https://ebizfacts.com/stockdale-paradox/>)

This idea of retaining faith that in the end we will prevail, or survive, is a concept that is inherent in Judaism. I often think of Judaism as being an optimistic religion designed for a pessimistic people.

There is a story written in the Avot d'Rabbi Natan, a collection of rabbinic stories that were written down between the 8th and 10th centuries, that really sums this idea up. It is taught that "if you have a sapling in your hand and people tell you that the Messiah has come, continue to plant the sapling, and then go and greet messiah" (Version B, chapter 31).

In other words don't stop planting for the future, even if someone has told you that the final days have come. We must always hold these two realities in our hands at all times, that the present is difficult, but the future will be better.

We should also never forget that we come from a people who for 2000 years never ceased to pray for a return to the land of Israel, for a time when there would be peace, and when there would be freedom and justice for all humanity. What an optimistic vision for a people who have known so much persecution.

Throughout 2000 years of exile we persisted in not merely existing but were also able to find reasons to celebrate and enjoy life and believe that things could be better, if not for us, then for our children and grandchildren.

And I would contend that, like Adm. Stockdale, it was not because we were blind or naive to the difficulties and dangers of being Jewish, but rather it was because we were fully aware of our reality and yet retained that belief that kol ye'hi beseder, that it will someday all be ok. It was because of this mindset that we were able to keep going and endure hardships that were much more brutal than what we are going through now, and yet still believe in a future that would be better than the present day.

Right now, things are not great. There is no end in the foreseeable future of things getting markedly better with the pandemic. And we do

need to be realistic about what we can and can not do, what is and is not safe, right now.

But we also need to retain a faith in the idea that this long and winding road we are on can also be a sacred pilgrimage, where we find meaning and experience growth at each step along the way. So that we too can someday look back at the journey, like Moses and the Israelites did, and understand that we as individuals and as a society found a way to become transformed for the better because of what we went through, and not in spite of it.

May it be the will of our Creator that this journey through illness and fear, separation and confusion soon come to a safe end. May the Holy One grant insight to those who are working on a cure, safety to those who heal and care for the ill, protection for those who are deemed essential workers, patience for those who long for the embrace of our friends and loved ones, a sense of calm for those who care for their children or parents, and wisdom to those who govern. And may all of us find meaning and positive transformation from this long and winding road.

Ken yehi ratzon – may this be God’s will. Amen.

[https://youtu.be/fR4HjTH\\_fTM](https://youtu.be/fR4HjTH_fTM)