

Journeys
Parashat Matot-Masei
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The parasha for this week is Matot-Masei, which spans the last chapters of the book of Numbers, or Bemidbar. The book describes events in the desert, and ends with the Israelites “...on the steps of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.” The portion we read in this triennial cycle provides instructions on entering the land of Canaan, describes how the land will be allotted among the tribes, establishes sanctuary cities, and addresses inheritance by daughters.

In my comments today, however, I would like to focus on the journey that led the Israelites to the banks of the Jordan. This 40-year journey was described in the previous verses of the parasha; the verses in Bemidbar 33, which we read in last year’s triennial cycle. There, the Torah recalls each stage of the journey through in the desert in a stylized and a repetitive format; with each verse stating where they “set out from” and where they “encamped,” but never where they arrived. So, starting in verse 33:5 we read:

*“...the Israelites set out from Ramses and encamped at Succoth...
...they set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham...
...they set out from Etham and encamped before Migdol...”*

By verse 36

“...they set out from Ezion-geber and encamped in the wilderness of Zin, that is Kadesh”

Kadesh is significant, because that is where the spies were sent to reconnoiter the land of Israel. After that, we read:

“set out from Kadesh and encamped at Mount Hor...”

...until finally in verse 49

“they encamped by the Jordan In the steppes of Moab.”

What can we learn from recounting this journey?

Just a few moments ago, my daughter came before the Torah for an aliyah as she gets ready to undertake a different kind of journey, a journey that is going to take her to England where she is starting medical school. Many midrash on Matot-Masei recognize that the journey through the desert is not only a historical record, but also a metaphor for personal and spiritual journeys. The Bal Shem Tov described Moses’ spiritual journey in words that recall this parasha:

“And Moses said: ‘let me move from here.’ Even a completely righteous individual such as Moses is not to be content with his spiritual achievements; he, too, must constantly ascend from ‘here’ to ‘there’.”

Rebbe Nachman recognized that this journey from Egypt was a metaphor that applies to all of us, saying

“The exodus from Egypt occurs in every human being, in every era, in every year, and in every day.”

The association of physical journeys and personal journeys is not unique to midrash, but represents an entire genre of literature. It is a genre that encompasses the Hero myths of Odysseus, Aeneas, and Gilgamesh. It includes great American works such as Jack Kerouac’s “One the Road” and John Steinbeck’s “Travels with Charley,” as well as dozens of serious and satirical road movies. I’m sure we each have our favorite. John Steinbeck captured the essence of this genre when he wrote:

“A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. ... We find that after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us.”

One characteristic feature of this genre is that, like today’s parasha, these stories classically describe the experiences that occur over the course of the journey, but rarely focuses on the protagonists’ destination.

Are these stories of continual movement from place to place without reaching a destination the right metaphor for personal growth? Aren’t we supposed to grow up? Aren’t we supposed to arrive at some personal destination?

Developmental psychology implies we should. There is a long history of analysts carefully defining sequential stages of human growth and development. Erik Erickson’s influential theories of psychosocial development, for example, posit that we mature through distinct stages of infancy, early childhood, adolescence, early adulthood, adulthood, and old age.

While the developmental sequence makes sense, how many of you ever felt you had “arrived” at any of these stages? With a show of hands, how many of you remember arriving at Adolescence? At Early adulthood? At Adulthood? Or at Old Age?

In contrast, how many of you can relate to being on a lifetime journey during which you moved on from each of these stages towards the next higher stage, towards something more; towards another set of activities, relationships, and places. Most of us can probably relate to the metaphor of constantly encamping at different stages of my life and then moving on.

There is a problem with this view, however. If there is no personal destination, how do we avoid the existential nihilism of T.S. Eliot’s J. Alfred Prufrock. In Prufrock, the journey is described like this:

*“Let us go, through certain half-deserted streets,
The muttering retreats
Of restless nights in one-night cheap hotels
And sawdust restaurants with oyster-shells:
Streets that follow like a tedious argument
Of insidious intent”
...a journey that only ends when
“...human voices wake us, and we drown.”*

In a novel I wrote several years ago, one of the characters, who is high on drugs at the Passover Seder, launches into a tirade that presents a similarly nihilistic view of the Exodus as nothing but a bad drug trip. His tirade goes like this:

“...there was fire and smoke on the mountains and manna on the ground every morning and some dude who talked a good line about freedom, and then made up a bunch of stupid rules so that no one would actually be free. Who cares anyway? They didn’t end up free. They all died in the desert. That’s the way it ends, isn’t it? It was a bad trip, and they all died in the desert.”

We don’t believe that. That’s not why we are all here in shul this morning. That’s not why we read this parasha every year and why we seek insights and inspiration from the text describing the Exodus and journey through the desert.

But how can we reconcile a metaphor for personal growth that is a journey without a destination without lapsing into an existential nihilism?

In a classic existential text *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Albert Camus analogizes the human condition to that of the Greek hero Sisyphus, who is condemned to spend eternity rolling a boulder up a hill, only to have it roll back down by itself, at which point Sisyphus walks down the hill and starts pushing the boulder up again. This is perhaps the ultimate existentialist metaphor for the futility and absurdity of the human condition.

But that is not Camus’ conclusion. Instead, Camus reasons that there must be a reason that Sisyphus starts his laborious journey to the top of the hill again, even though he will never arrive at the top. Camus concludes:

“The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus to be happy.”

The journey of the people of Israel was certainly not an absurd endeavor. It is unlikely they imagined their journey to be futile. After all, they were the chosen people; they had been promised a land flowing with milk and honey; they were doing God’s will; they had seen signs and wonder leaving Mitzrayim, “the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to cause it to lead them on the way and at night in a pillar of fire to give them light.” Clearly they had hope, a destination, and a purpose.

Yet, despite all they had been promised, all they had seen, and all they had experienced, Israel’s progress through the desert was often uncertain. The promise of a land filled with milk and honey was not enough to keep the people of Israel focused on the destination and what they needed to do to reach their destination. There was constant tension, constant agitation, constant challenge.

We are taught that, of all the complications faced by the people in their journey, the one that they could not surmount was the sin of the spies. They could move beyond the golden calf, beyond Amalek, and beyond multitude of heresies, but could not move beyond the report by the spies who saw the struggle against fortified cities and giants as futile; who saw moving from each stage to the next as meaningless. It was for this sin, for this nihilism, that the individuals who had been brought out of Egypt were never allowed to enter the land of Israel.

The parasha's recounting of each stage of the Israel's journey through the desert teaches us that it was not the destination that moved the people forward. They did not measure the progress they had made each day or the distance still to travel in deciding whether to set out from each encampment or where to pitch camps they knew would be temporary. Rather, like Camus, we must imagine the people of Israel had their hearts filled by the struggle towards the heights, and we must imagine the people of Israel to be *happy* each time they set out from one location and camped at the next.

Walt Whitman describes these feelings in recounting his own personal journey in a wonderful poem *Song of Myself*. It is a long poem, which begins:

*"I know I have the best of time and space, and was never measured and never will be measured
I tramp a perpetual journey..."*

...later in the poem he writes:

And my spirit said No, we but level that lift to pass and continue beyond."

We can learn from today's Torah portion to embark on each stage of our journey with our hearts filled with the struggle to ascend the hills view the heavens, to be happy; knowing that whatever pleasure and knowledge we derive, whatever we achieve, and wherever we choose to camp, we will continue our journey beyond.

In closing, I would like to take the liberty of saying a few words to my daughter about her journey.

Johanna, we are extremely proud of you, not only for the person you are, but for the journey you are on. Sometimes we know you have felt like Sisyphus pushing a rock up the hill or the spies who saw fearful giants in their way. Nevertheless, you have set out on each new leg of your journey with our heart full; you have continued to set up camps in anticipation of moving on; and you have continued to climb the next hill reach for new heights knowing that, even after achieving these heights, you will continue beyond. You are on a wonderful journey, and as you set out on this next stage, we want you to know you have all of our admiration, all of our support, all of our prayers, and all of our love.

Shabbat shalom