

Matot-Masei, 5780 – Rabbi Dr. Zev Wiener

To the untrained eye, Parashat Masei's catalogue of the Jewish people's wilderness travels appears technical and bland. Our Sages, however, find deep meaning in this delineation. Rashi suggests that these passages demonstrate the great love of Hashem for His people. Seforno adopts the opposite vantage point, reading these verses as an attestation of the great faith of the Jewish people in following Hashem. Tzror HaMor, however, (see Magen Avraham OC 428) cites a mystical tradition that the 42 stops on the journey correspond to the sacred 42 letter name of Hashem. It is for this reason, writes the Magen Avraham, that the Baal Keriah may not interrupt these 42 stops with an Aliyah-break, as the sacred name may not be interrupted.

The implications of Tzror HaMor's tradition are fascinating. While up close, the disjointed stops on our ancestors' journey appear unconnected and without any unifying coherence, when viewed holistically, each one of the stops plays an indispensable role in expressing something greater than the individual parts -- the sacred name of Hashem. Regardless of whether any particular stop brought the Jewish people closer to or farther from their desired destination of the Land of Israel, the שלמות, or wholeness, of the Divine name would be deficient without that stop. It is therefore Halachically prohibited to interrupt between the reading of any of the stops.

As this was true for the journey of the Jews in the desert, it is also true for the journey of each of our souls through the wilderness of this world. Each phase of the journey that we take in this life -- even when we feel like we are on a detour, stalled, or backtracking -- is ultimately Divinely inspired, and plays a critical role in living a life of שלמות, in which we spell out Hashem's name, so to speak, through living His presence into this world.

When we look back on our lives in a fragmented fashion, we may notice that there were periods when we felt on track towards living a G-dly life, and periods when we felt that we were terribly off track, whether due to our own mistakes or circumstances beyond our control.

I recall someone who had gone through a debilitating period of anxiety sharing that now that he was feeling better, he hoped to get back to his life, put it behind him, and forget it ever happened. While this impulse is certainly understandable and even appropriate on some level, I believe it ultimately does him a disservice. As painful as the experience was, it, too, was an essential stop on his life's journey that

can contribute to שלמות. Entirely expunging these memories deprives him of the opportunity to become wiser, more compassionate to others who are struggling, and more grateful for times when he does feel well. Like our ancestors in the wilderness, we are encouraged by the Torah to see all the stops of our own personal journey, whether good or bad, as holistically forming a Divine signature, enabling us to live in a way that expresses something about His greatness that even the loftiest of angels are incapable of doing.

In truth, I've yet to meet a person whose life's journey is without any wrong turns. To live in this world means to experience happy times and unhappy times, and to make decisions we are proud of and decisions we regret. Whether we choose to edit out the detours of our journey, or to integrate them as part of a Divine script that can form and build us, can make all the difference in the world.