



The Collective Conversation

*Weekly Torah Essays from the
Young Israel of Scarsdale Community*



Sefer Bamidbar

Parshat Matot-Masei

Av 5781 / July 2021

Of Tribes and Tribulations – a Message for the 3 Weeks

By Michael Perl

We complete *Sefer Bamidbar* this week with a double *sedrah*, and I would like to present a message from each.

The last chapter of *Matot* tells the story of the 2½ tribes — *Reuben*, *Gad*, and half of *Menashe* — who settled on the East side of the Jordan in the land of *Gilad*. Their desire to remain *Gilad* angers *Moshe*; after all, why didn't they feel the need to settle in the land that *Hashem* gave to them? What's more, *Moshe* thought they wanted to avoid their duty to fight with *Bnei Yisrael* to conquer the land. They assuaged *Moshe's* anger by assuring him that they intended to fight and that they would return to their land only after the battle was won.

Moshe's had a curious reaction, he said to them, *If you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of the LORD and every shock-fighter among you crosses the Jordan ... you shall be clear before the LORD and before Israel; and this land shall be your holding under the LORD. (Bamidbar 32:20-22)*

Wouldn't it have been enough for *Hashem* and *Moshe* to know that these tribes were doing the right thing? Why did these tribes need to be *clear before the Lord and Israel*? The rabbis draw a fascinating lesson from *Moshe's* words -- they learn the concept of *marit ayin*: it is not enough to do the right thing; we must be conscious of how others view our actions. We're often told to disregard what others think and forge ahead, and sometimes that is good advice, but it cannot be the only way. At the opposite end, Virginia Wolf said, "The eyes of others, our prisons, their thoughts, our cages."

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Earlier in the chapter, when first approached, *Moshe* rebukes the tribes, saying, *Are your brothers to go into battle while you stay here?* From these words we learn the concept of *areivut*, responsibility to one another.

As if to underscore these *pesukim*, the 2½ tribes not only entered *Canaan* along with the other tribes and aided in its conquest, they also marched at the head of the army (וַאֲנִי הָיִינוּ בְּרִיְשֵׁית הַצֵּבָא) and bore the brunt of the battle.

Reviewing these concepts, I think about a significant strength of our community: We take responsibility for one another in times of crisis and also in times of joy. Our concern for our neighbors immediately around the *shul* and in the broader community is a shining example of being seen to do right.

Importantly these *pesukim* challenge us and provide a roadmap of how we should behave when our fellow Jews are beaten in the streets of midtown and when anti-Israel legislation is proposed. As a community, we need to support our brothers — loudly! — we shouldn't allow complacency to follow outrage. And we need to be seen to be doing the right thing — that is, demonstrating to the world through every available platform that we are united and that we care! Sunday's antisemitism rally is a start.

Parshat Masei opens with what appears to be a dry travelogue recounting the 40-year journey of *Bnei Yisrael* — and it's a long travelogue at that, 54 *pesukim*. This chapter looks very different from the rest of the *Torah*, and several *mefarshim* give reasons why the story is told in the way it is. *Rashi*, for example, explains that it is to show that there were few actual journeys — *Bnei Yisrael* were not wandering continuously. The *Rambam* notes that the *Torah's* presentation demonstrates that the entire nation witnessed miracles, not just individuals.

But, on at least three occasions, *Moshe* goes beyond providing us with a mere travelogue, and I thank Dr. Michael Kay, Head of School at The Leffell School, for pointing that out to me. The longest of these occasions describes the death of *Aaron* at *Mount Hor* (*Bamidbar* 33:38-39). Earlier, in verse 14, we learn about the events at *Rephidim* where there was no water, and *Moshe* was told to hit the rock. Finally, in verse 40, the King of *Arad* learns of the coming of *Bnei Yisrael*. It is striking that in all of these, there is no mention of miracles -- not *Matan Torah*, not the water at *Marah*, and not the *mannah*.

While this chapter may appear to be a dry travelogue, the limited descriptions and omission provide a rare and important window into *Moshe Rabbeinu's* feelings as an individual. His impending death and the recent death of his brother must have been top of mind. Perhaps the reference to hitting the rock at *Rephidim* hints that *Moshe* felt responsible for the timing of his and *Aaron's* death. Similarly, once *Aaron* died, the *ananei hakavod* — the clouds of glory — disappeared, and that enabled the Canaanite king to hear that *Bnei Yisrael* was coming and feel that it was safe to wage war.

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History reflects the mindset of the narrator, and in *Parsha Masei* we are privileged to gain insight into what *Moshe* may have been thinking and what was on his mind as he spoke to *Bnei Yisrael*.

May we be blessed to be and to have great world leaders of such caliber.

Michael and Gisela moved to Scarsdale in 2005 following journeys that began in Venezuela and Australia. They feel very fortunate that their 3 children, Alexandra, Julian, and Nathaniel, have grown up in such a wonderful community.

Want to write or dedicate a Parsha essay?

Please contact Steve Smith at stevenjsmith@yahoo.com

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