

The Wandering Jews

This week's Torah portion is Mass'ei:

"Elleh mass'ei B'nai Yisrael -- These are the journeys of the children of Israel". It begins by recounting all the places where the Israelites encamped in their forty-year saga from Egypt to Israel. All 42 places, one by one. An average of about one move a year: Long enough to gain a modicum of stability in every place, but also long enough to feel the pain of uprooting from surroundings that had become familiar and akin to home. The length of stay was never known in advance: A few days here, a few months there, a few years yonder. We hear about:

- Yam Suf, where God split the sea
- Marah, where God provided water in spite of the people's grumblings
- Refidim, where they fought the Amalekites
- Sinai, where they received the Torah
- Mount Hor, where Aaron died
- and so on.

-Rashi tells us that God demonstrated kindness to the people in one way or another at every stop.

-The Sfat Emet, 19th-century Chassidic sage, tells us that in each of the 42 stops the Jewish people accomplished a specific *tikkun*, a "spiritual repair".

-Maimonides tells us that the 42 stops are recalled by name in the Torah so that future generations could not say, "The forty-year wandering was a myth and never took place."

-Other commentators tell us that each stop was an opportunity for new and necessary growth, that the best path between two points is not necessarily the straight line, and that the journey can be even more important than the destination.

The Israelites were looking forward to some stability in their destination, the Promised Land. Little did they know that what they had just experienced was merely a harbinger of things to come. Indeed, for most of our history, we were the "Wandering Jews", forced to roam the earth in the elusive search of a home. After 1,500 years of relative stability in the Land,

punctuated, to be sure, by wars, invasions, deportations, and subjugation by foreign nations, we began a long, 2,000-year diaspora, where "wandering" was the name of the game. This dispersion is foretold in the Torah. The Book of Deuteronomy says:

The Lord will scatter you among the nations, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the Lord will drive you. [Deut. 4:27]

Our history since the Romans expelled us from the Land of Israel was a depressing series of expulsions and resettlements, of perpetual uprooting, sometimes several times in a single lifetime. Antisemites, religious fanatics or mere plunderers would expel us from one place; then enlightened leaders, recognizing our value, and sometimes for a hefty fee, would invite us to some other place; then a new leader would come on the scene and expel us yet again. Jews have been banished or forced out from more places on earth than any other people. Most of the time it was a physical expulsion, and some of the time our tormentors made life so unbearable for us that we *had* to leave, abandoning all our possessions. Let us recount just a few of these expulsions:

- From Israel to Babylon in 597 BCE
- From Israel to the larger Roman Empire in 70 and 135 CE – the Diaspora
- From Alexandria, Egypt, in 415
- From Arabia in 635, as Islam appeared on the scene
- From many places in Germany: From Mainz in 1012, from Brandenburg in 1510, from Bavaria in 1593, from Frankfurt in 1614, from Vienna in 1670, among others
- From many places in Italy: From Bologna in 1172; from Trani in 1380, from a lot of communities in the 16th century
- From France in 1182, 1254, 1322, 1359, and 1394, where they played the game of expulsion and confiscation of all property, readmission for ransom many years later, and then expulsion and plunder yet again
- From England in 1290, where the ban was in force for 350 years
- From Spain in 1492, after my ancestors enjoyed a Golden Age there
- From Portugal in 1497
- From the Papal States in 1569
- From Recife, Brazil, in 1654
- From Norway in 1687, where the ban lasted 164 years
- From Europe in the 1940s, when most Holocaust survivors chose to live elsewhere
- From all Arab countries after the creation of the State of Israel in 1948
- From Russia at the time of the pogroms, or from its worthy successor the Soviet Union
- From Iran, when getting through the day became a challenge

The list is never-ending. Most of you are unusual Jews, in that you are still living in the land of your birth. I am not like you in that respect. I am an “ordinary” Jew. I was born and raised in Egypt, where my entire, large extended family lived, then I was forced out and now live in the United States. My extended family was literally scattered to the five continents:
-Looking *only* at my uncles and aunts, they went to France, Belgium, Brazil, Italy, and Venezuela.

-Some encountered even more antisemitism or had difficulty adapting, or wanted to rejoin family, and had to uproot themselves a second time. They went to Spain, Israel, and Belgium.

-Many of their children and grandchildren, my cousins, did not stay in the land of their birth. For various reasons, they emigrated to Israel, the US, Australia, Italy, Colombia, Mexico, Switzerland, France, and Costa Rica.

-Looking beyond my immediate family, I would not be surprised if I had relatives in every Western country.

-My father's native language was Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish. My mother's was Arabic. My native language is French. My children's native language is English. All of us have ties to many different cultures.

Is all this wandering good or bad? Certainly, while you are living it, it does not feel good. Constantly having to adapt to change, to new cultures, learning new languages and new ways of surviving, starting over from scratch again and again to provide for loved ones, all of this takes its toll. But looking back on it, as I am doing now, does any good come out of it? Yes. First and foremost, we survived. Fortunately for us, the world is not a single country, and each country has its own policies towards the Jews. Second, we are the world's roving ambassadors. We are the repositories of the collective wisdom of the entire world. We keep moving and learning new things. We take the best from the many cultures we come in contact with, blend it with our own homegrown Judaism, and offer the world new points of view, new approaches, new angles, new solutions to problems. We offer creative and imaginative ideas that result from the combined wisdom of the world. We separate the wheat from the chaff and take only the best, what is consistent with Judaism.

The Midrash says:

If a person tells you there is wisdom among the nations, believe him. If a person tells you there is Torah among the nations, do not believe him. [Lamentations Rabbah 2:13]

So we wander all over the globe, look for the wisdom, take it wherever we find it, blend it with our own Torah teaching, and produce something good and uniquely Jewish. This explains in part why we tend to excel wherever we go, and encourage others to excel as well. The Talmud says,

R. Eleazar also said: The Holy One, blessed be He, exiled the Jews among the nations only so that converts might join them. [Pesachim 87b]

Well, for most of the past 2000 years proselytizing would have cost us our lives, so the Talmud's observation must be interpreted figuratively, to mean that part of the Jewish mission is to spread the values of Judaism, the wisdom of Torah, and the seven Noahide laws, to the entire world, to fulfill the injunction we received through the prophet Isaiah to be "a light unto the nations" [Is. 42:6, 49:6], so that one day, in whatever sense one wishes to understand it, the prophecy of Zechariah will be fulfilled:

Vehayyah Hashem lemelech 'al kol haaretz; bayom hahu yihyeh Hashem echad ushmo echad.

And the Lord shall be king over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One, and his name One. [Zech. 14:9]

So we march through the world, much as a farmer marches through his field, throwing seeds left and right as he moves, confident that they will one day bring fruit.

Jewish mysticism has its own take on our wandering. It teaches that, at the time of Creation, a vessel holding divine holiness burst, and dispersed its contents throughout the world. Jews were then made to wander far and wide just so they could gather these "sparks of holiness" and make them available to all. [Arizal, quoted in Petech Anayim by Chida, Yoma 38] To bolster the point, the Hebrew word for exile is *golah* and the Hebrew word for redemption is *geulah*. So you just add the letter aleph to get from exile to redemption. Aleph represents the number one, which in turn represents God, the One. Thus, Jews went into exile to bring God to the world, thus bringing about the redemption and the coming of the Messiah.

In fact, Rabbenu B'chayyay, the 13th century Spanish mystic, says that there were sparks of holiness in the 42 places where the Israelites encamped in the desert, listed in our Torah portion, and that God made the Israelites go there just so they could gather them.

Will our wandering ever stop? When the State of Israel was created, only 5% of the Jewish people lived there. That fraction has steadily risen. Today, it is close to 40%. Most of the increase was due to necessity, not ideology. Necessity is the practical reason why we have a state. Today, for the first time since talmudic days, there are more Jews in Israel than in any other single country. (The US is a close second.) Their observance is even on the way up. As the poet T. S. Eliot once wrote,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. [T S Eliot, Little Gidding]

So wandering makes you appreciate your origins in the end.

-Will all Jews ever live in Israel? That depends more on the rest of the world than on us Jews. The better they treat us the fewer of us will make aliyah to Israel.

-And *should* all Jews live in Israel? That depends on religious ideology. Tradition says that the Messiah will bring about the ingathering of the exiles into their homeland, in Hebrew "*kibbutz galuyot*". So tradition is unmistakably clear: *All Jews should* live in Israel. But there are also practical considerations. With antisemitism on the rise, and showing no sign of disappearing, *should* all Jews live in one small place, in this age of weapons of mass destruction? Iranian leaders have said that Israel is a "one-nuclear-weapon" country. And, for the mystics, have all the sparks of holiness scattered throughout the world been gathered already?

-Only one thing is certain: Jews make themselves useful wherever they live.

The term "wandering Jew", to be sure, is a term of derision, a label stuck on our backs by antisemites. To them, we are the grievous sinners, condemned by the Almighty to wander the earth with the mark of Cain on our forehead, reviled and despised wherever we go, a testament to the wages of sin. It is time for us to claim that term of derision for our own, and

wear it as a badge of honor. For without the so-called "wandering Jew", humanity would be worse off.

A botanist with a sense of history gave the name "Wandering Jew" to a certain plant. Here is what the dedicated web site www.wanderingjewplant.net says about this plant:

This plant is unique. When given minimal sustenance it will spread out and grow. Cutting out its roots and planting it in other soil will make it regenerate itself and start to grow. It adapts easily to various environments and conditions. The plant is very pretty, doesn't require a lot of care, and is really hard to kill.
[www.wanderingjewplant.net]

As we conclude Bemidbar, the Book of Numbers, we say the phrase our Sages have taught us when we complete a book of the Torah:

Chazzak, chazzak, v'nit-chazzek
Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened.

May we continue to travel from strength to strength in our peregrinations throughout the world, and may we be continually strengthened by our enforced wandering, as God intended.

Shabbat shalom.