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## Parshat Mattot-Mase'i: Journeys Redeemed and Unredeemed

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This week's double portion of Mattot-Masei brings the book of Bemidbar to a close. On the precipice of entry into the land of Canaan, with the experience of itinerant wanderings about to end, Moshe pauses to consider the journey.

1 These are the journeys of the children of Israel who left the land of Egypt in their legions, under the charge of Moses and Aaron. 2 Moses recorded their starting places according to their journeys by the command [lit. the mouth] of the Lord, and these are their journeys according to their starting places. (Numbers 33:1–2)

א אלה מסעי בני ישראל אשר יצאו  
מארץ מצרים לצבאתם ביד משה  
ואהרן: ב ויכתב משה את מוצאייהם  
למסעיהם על פי ה' ואלה מסעיהם  
למוצאייהם: (במדבר לג:א-ב)

One by one the stages of the forty-year path are then listed in parshat Masei.

The question that arises is: Why? Why this litany of places? Why recapitulate these arduous meanderings?

Rashi offers one initial response:

Why were these journeys recorded? To inform us of the kind deeds of the Omnipresent, for although He issued a decree to move them around [from place to place] and make them wander in the desert, you should not say that they were moving about and wandering from station to station for all forty years, and they had no rest... [Rather,] you will find that throughout the thirty-eight years they made only twenty journeys. I found this in the commentary of R. Moshe HaDarshan (the preacher). (Rashi, Num. 33:1)

למה נכתבו המסעות הללו? להודיע  
הסדיו של מקום, שאף על פי שגזר  
עליהם לטלטלם ולהניעם במדבר, לא  
תאמר שהיו נעים ומטלטלים ממסע  
למסע כל ארבעים שנה ולא היתה להם  
מנוחה... נמצא שכל שמונה ושלשים  
שנה לא נסעו אלא עשרים מסעות, זה  
מיסודו של רבי משה הדרשן. (רש"י,  
במדבר לג:א)

Through mathematical calculations, Rashi, in the name of R. Moshe HaDarshan, reasons that the Israelites really moved around a mere 20 times in 40 years, giving them plenty of time to rest in between stops. The list of places in our parsha testifies to this great mercy on the part of God to allow the people some recuperation along the way.

Why share it with them now? As the Israelites come to the near end of their decades-travelled road, perhaps this overview of their journey grants them perspective and an opportunity for gratitude. Exhausted though they might be from all of the ordeals, it could have been so very much worse. God was actually watching the whole time, limiting their pain rather than elongating it. In other words, at the end of a challenging journey, best to look back to appreciate how, on balance, it was not so bad after all.

The Esh Kodesh, R. Kalonymus Kalman Shapira (of the Warsaw Ghetto), offers a compelling corrective to this interpretation by way of a close reading of Numbers 33:2. He notes, in the name of his brother-in-law, the Beit Aharon, that the wording of that verse is rather confusing. It uses two phrases repeatedly, but reverses the order, first referencing "מוצאייהם למסעיהם" ("their starting places according to their journeys"), and then ending with "מסעיהם למוצאייהם" ("their journeys according to their starting places").

He explains this reversal thus:

All of the tribulations [in the desert] were birth pangs revealing the divine light. And so it is written, "their starting places according to their journeys by the command [lit. mouth] of the Lord"...This, though, is the difference. "Moses recorded": When Moses was recording the events after the journeys and tribulations were over, everyone could see that their journeys were aimed at bringing out the "mouth" of God. However, while the journeys were happening, they felt only the pain. So the text says "their journeys according to their starting places." (Esh Kodesh, Masei 1941)

כל הצרות אלו מיני חבלים היו לגלות אור... ה' [לכן] "מוצאייהם למסעיהם על-פי ה'..." רק זה החילוק "ויכתב משה", בשעה שכתב אחרי המסעות והצרות כבר ראו "מוצאייהם למסעיהם על-פי ה'" שהוא להוציא את "פי" ה' על ידי המסעות, ואלא "מסעיהם למוצאייהם", אבל בשעה שהיו המסעות והצרות היו המסעות מקודם ואח"כ המוצאות, כי בשעת המסעות, הרגישו רק הצרות. (אש קודש, מסעי תש"א)

The two phrases in the verse capture two different experiences of the same path, two different vantage points by which to assess the journey undertaken. In hindsight, Moshe tells the people, with the perspective of time, know that you have travelled "על-פי ה'"--at the mouth of God, for the sake of God's word. All pain can be redeemed through this ultimate awareness. All aches had an aim. Having (almost) arrived at the destination, one can now be released of the ravages of the route. "מוצאייהם למסעיהם על-פי ה'"--The challenges of the departure points can now fade in the light of the redemptive arrival. Name them so that you can let them go.

Yet our verse does not end with this halcyon vision of troubles erased. The Esh Kodesh explains that Moshe retained, together with his charge for redemption, room for all the unredeemed parts of the journey. All of the challenges, all of the uncertainties, all of the complaints: they too are part of the "record." "ואלה מסעיהם למוצאייהם"--"These are their journeys according to their starting points"--those points of origin so full of doubt and fear. Even so far down the road, Moshe acknowledges that life lived forward does not come with the gift of its own interpretation. We must make space for the messiness, for the disorder, for the unredeemed and unredeemable parts of the journeys that we all take. The stages are enumerated to be aired and honored and not to be forgotten.

At the end of this book of wanderings, Moshe here offers both perspective on ultimate ends that might serve to lighten loads carried and permission to continue to live with the heaviness of them all. Even, or maybe especially, when redemption comes.



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