

Parshat Masei

Journeys vs. Encampments

The name of the Torah portion is entitled, “Journeys,” describing the Jewish people’s travels through the desert on their way to Israel. Yet, it seems that the name “Encampments” would be a more fitting title, being that they were seemingly the primary goal. This Sicha analyzes the idea of journeying and reveals its meaning for each of our lives today.

This week’s *parsha* tells of the journeys that the Israelites took in the desert on their way to the Land of Israel. The verse states:

Text 1

These are the journeys of the children of Israel who left the land of Egypt in their legions, under the charge of Moshe and Aharon.

Bamidbar 33:1

The Torah portion goes on to enumerate the forty-two travels and stops that the Israelites made throughout the course of their voyage to the land of Israel.

The formulation of the above verse however, is curious for the following reason:

The Torah does not only proceed to mention the *travels* of the Israelites, but the locations of where they *encamped* as well. If so, it is not understood why the Torah chose to state “these are the *journeys*” instead of saying “these are the *encampments*.”

Text 2

The children of Israel journeyed from Ramses and camped in Succos. They journeyed from Succos and camped in Eisam, at the edge of the

desert. They journeyed from Eisam and camped in Pi hachiros, which faces Baal tzephon; and they camped in front of Migdol. They journeyed from Penei hachiros and crossed in the midst of the sea to the desert. They walked for three days in the desert of Eisam and camped in Marah...

Bamidbar 33:5-8

It seems then, from the focus on all the places that the Israelites rested that the Torah’s primary intent is to tell us of the *encampments* of the Israelites and not the travels in between them.

If so, the opening verse of the *parsha* is not understood: Instead of the verse expressing, “These are the *journeys* of the children of Israel” it should have stated, “These are the *encampments* of the children of Israel,” which expresses the verses true intent.

Why instead does the verse stress the *travels*, when its main objective is to enumerate the places that they camped?

What further exacerbates the question is that during the *majority* of the forty years that the Israelites were in the desert, they were not in a state of travel but were rather encamped in various locations. If so, when telling the story of the Israelites’ sojourn in the desert, it would

seem more significant to stress the places at which they camped, not their travels.

Travels and camps

This question can possibly be answered based on an explanation of Rashi on a different verse.

When the Torah concludes its account of the erection of the *Mishkan* (Tabernacle), G-d's sanctuary in the desert, it states the following¹: "For the cloud of the Lord was upon the *Mishkan* by day, and there was fire within it at night, before the eyes of the entire house of Israel in all their journeys."

Rashi comments there:

Text 3

On every journey (װױװ) that they were traveling, the cloud would rest in that place where they encamped. The place of their encampment is also called a journey (װױװ). Likewise, "And he went to his stations (װױװװװ)" [i.e., to the stops along his journey], and likewise, "These are the journeys (װױװ)".³ Since from the place of their encampment they resumed their journeys, they are all called "journeys."

Rashi, *Shemos* 40:38

Rashi explains that although the verse might use the word journey it includes the encampments as well.

According to Rashi's insight regarding the encampments also being termed "journeys," one can explain that it is immaterial that the title ascribed to *Parshat* Masei is "journeys". For, the intent of the word is to express both the journeys and the encampments. Therefore although in

truth enumerating the encampments was the objective of the Torah, it uses the word journeys to express it.

Yet, Rashi's explanation begs for further elucidation: Rashi explains that the reason that encampments are called journeys is because "from the place of their encampment they resumed their journeys."

This reasoning though seems to be flawed: What is the reasoning for this that "The place of their *encampment* is also called a *journey*," since "from the place of their encampment they resumed their journeys?"

Seemingly it should be vice versa; because the *encampment* is the ultimate purpose of the previous traveling, the *traveling* should be included in the word *encampment* and not the other way around! Instead of saying that the word journeys includes the encampments it should have stated that the word encampments includes the journeys that preceded it.

Furthermore, it appears that Rashi's explanation does not adequately answer the question regarding the Torah's choice of title here. Being that the main objective of the verse is to explain the *encampments*, why use the word "journey," which *happens* to *also* include the encampments, instead of using the word "encampments," which is *directly* expressive of the intent of the verse from the onset?

The purpose of the journey

The reason for the Torah's use of the term "travels" instead of "encampments" can be understood based on an appreciation of the Israelites' travels in general.

¹ Shemos 40:38.

² Bereishit 13:3.

³ Bamidbar 33:1.

The ultimate intent of the travels was not the *individual* encampments, but the ultimate arrival to the Land of Israel.

It is for this reason that “the place of their encampment is also called a journey,” as the encampments were not an end in and of themselves, but were merely a break before they continued their trip. Rashi articulates this idea in his words, “from the place of their encampment they resumed their journeys,”— i.e., with the intent on arriving in the Land of Israel.

The verse therefore does not focus on the place that they camped, as their encampments were only a break in their ultimate goal to reach the Land of Israel.

Journey and Journeys

Nonetheless, this explanation is not completely sound.

Were the verse to have stated, “This is the *journey* of the children of Israel” in the singular, it would be possible to explain that the individual stops were inconsequential, as they were merely breaks in the overall voyage to reach the Land of Israel. However, that is not what the verse states.

The verse relates, “These are the *journeys* of the children of Israel” in the plural form, insinuating that the individual journeys were significant as well.

Rashi as well expresses that the individual journeys were important, in his explanation as to why the Torah decided to at great lengths to mention each stage of the journey:

Text 4

R. Tanchuma expounds it in another way. It is analogous to a king whose son became sick, so he took him to a faraway place to have him

healed. On the way back, the father began citing all the stages of their journey, saying to him, “This is where we sat, here we were cold, here you had a headache etc.

Rashi, Bamidbar 33:1

The Torah expresses the particular journeys to articulate the various happenings that happened to the Israelites throughout their time in the desert.

The differentiating element between one journey and the next is not the traveling but the encampments where the various parts of the Israelites story played out.

If so, that the Torah is indeed interested in the particulars of the story and not merely the outcome that it led them to the Land of Israel, it still remains to be understood why the verse states, “These are the journeys” instead of saying, “These are the encampments,” as using the word “encampments” would more clearly express the Torah’s intent.

Spiritual journeys

The Baal Shem Tov explains that the travelings which are expressed in this week’s *parsha* are not only an expression of the journeys that the Israelites took thousands of years ago in the desert but are also communicative of the various journeys that every individual makes throughout his life.

Text 5

All the forty-two travels exist within every individual, from the time that he is born until his passing. This means, that a person’s birth and the time that he exits his mother’s womb is akin to the exodus from Egypt, as is known. He then travels from journey to journey until he reaches

the land of supernal life... Kivros hataavah is the level of *chochma* (supernal wisdom), “for there they buried the people who craved⁴.” An individual who reaches the level of *chochma*, [merits that] all his cravings are nullified from him because of his tremendous attachment to the Almighty. This sheds light on the other journeys as well, in that they are all levels in holiness and high levels.

Degel Machaneh Ephraim, Masei

Although many of the travels seemed to be negative, in truth they are all steps in coming closer to G-dliness. All the travels, even the ones by which the Israelites sinned, were in and of themselves ultimately holy levels where the Jewish people were expected to reach another step in their closeness to G-dliness.

So too the travels that are expressed in the week’s *parsha* in the life of every Jew are communicative of the various stages that he is to take in reaching his ultimate completion.

Accordingly, the question is only strengthened:

Each of the encampments hints to different levels of service of G-d that a Jew must attain throughout his life, each one higher than the next.

This being the case, it is all the more so difficult to understand why the verse states “These are the journeys,” instead of saying “these are the encampments,” as the encampments are expresses the various levels of holiness that one is to strive to achieve.

⁴ Bamidbar 11:34.

⁵ The Mishna Keilim 1:7 states that there are 10 levels of holiness that all are relative to one another.

Walking and standing

The proper course of development is such that throughout a person’s life they should always be “journeying” and traveling from one level to the next.

In Chassidic thought this is expressed in the difference of “standing” (*omed*) vs. “going” (*mehalech*).

The spiritual definition of “standing” is that the person is overall stagnant and does not change their mode of service of G-d. This means to say, that even when the individual is growing, there is no *radical* shift in themselves and the changes are all relative to the level that he was previously at. Because the changes that occur are all in the range of where he is holding, it is considered as if he did not truly move or change at all.

The true definition of “going,” however, is when the progression and advancement is in a way that is a *complete* shift from where he formally was at. True “going” is expressive of a radical change in the individual where he reaches an entirely different level than he was previously on.

A practical example of this is seen from the model of a student. Although there are various levels of students, they are all comparable in that they are in a stage of learning and not teaching. A true progression is when the student ceases to be a student and becomes a *rav*, teacher and judge in his own right⁵. It is then that he makes a radical shift in his entire modus operandi and transforms himself into an entirely different type of individual.

It is for this reason that the verse stresses the journeys instead of the stops.

However the level of the Garden of Eden is on a totally different level entirely.

By expressing the journeys and not the encampments it stresses that a Jew should never be complacent at the level that he is holding but he should rather continuously travel from one level to the next. The manner which he is to go from one level to the other is that level that he reaches should be on an entirely different sphere than the level he previously was at.

Therefore, although the encampments are indeed important, it is vital to know that one should never be satisfied with where they are and instead they should focus on the next journey that is to come.

Going deeper

When a person travels from one level to the next there are essentially two steps—*leaving* the level that they were previously at and *arriving* at the level higher.

This is the difference between the words “going” and “journeying.” Going expresses that the individual is going to a certain destination and connotes arrival. Journeying however is not only expressive of the traveling but communicates leaving the previous level as well.

This is expressed in the language used concerning Yosef and his brothers:

Text 6

And the man said, "They have traveled (*nassu*) away from here, for I overheard them say, 'Let us go to Dosan.' "So Yosef went after his brothers, and he found them in Dothan.

Bereishit 37:17

The expression “*hisia*” which is related to the word *masei* which means journeys expresses in Hebrew the idea of removing one’s self from one thing to another⁶.

It is this that is expressed the word *masei*—journeys—the total removal from one level to reach a level which is in an entirely different paradigm.

The journeys of Israel

It is for this reason that the verse states “These are the journeys of the children of Israel” in the plural as opposed to the singular.

This can be understood through a similar question that the Alter Rebbe asks on the *parsha*:

Text 7

We must understand why the verse states “These are the journeys” in plural and then states “who left the land of Egypt.” Seemingly the journey out of Egypt was only the first journey from Ramses to Succos?

Likutei Torah, Masei 88c

He answers that until the Israelites reached the land of Israel they were still in *Mitzrayim* (Egypt) and limitation.

So, while in one sense they were still not free until they reached the land of Israel, in another sense, each journey removed them another degree further from Egypt. This is why the verse states that “These are the *journeys*” out of “the land of Egypt,” as each particular journey

⁶ This is expressed in the laws of *tefillin*, Shulchan Aruch, Orach Chaim, 260:28 that although there is a law that one may not remove their mind from their

tefillin it is only considered removing their mind when they are involved in frivolity which is a complete removal from the intention of *tefillin*.

brought them another degree further out of their limitations of Egypt.

It is for this very reason that the verse expresses the *journeys* that Israelites took and not the encampments where they rested.

By doing so, the Torah expresses that no matter what level one reaches in their G-dly service, one cannot remain stagnant and complacent in what they have achieved. Instead, they should focus on journeying to the next level and the next until they reach the land of Israel.

The exile

The period of the Israelites' sojourn in the desert is expressive of the time that the Jewish people are in exile amongst the nations of the world. The exile is likened to a desert, as opposed to the Land of Israel where they truly belong.

The various encampments are expressive of the numerous stages of exile.

While the verse expresses the various types of exile that a person might find himself in⁷, instead of focusing on the encampments in exile, the verse stresses the *travels* towards Israel and the positive that is in the exile.

The explanation of this is as follows:

The intent of the Jewish people going down into exile is the *elevation* that will come as a result of the exile, which will be an elevation that will be appreciated all the more due to the intense darkness of exile.

Accordingly it is understood, that the darkness of exile is all in order to appreciate the times of *Moshiach*. Instead of focusing on the negative,

the Torah expresses that each stage of the exile is another step in the overall journey to arrive in the Land of Israel and the city of Yericho⁸.

The same is true with every Jew. Though there are times when he may falter and go against G-d's will, he should not fall into despair and be stuck in his "encampment." On the contrary, he should use the darkness as an impetus for the light that it is to follow and use the "encampment" as a drive for the journey that will be forthcoming.

The three weeks

This is the connection between the *parsha* and the period of the three weeks surrounding the time of the destruction of the Temple and the exile of the Jewish people.

When a person finds himself in these three weeks commemorative of the terrible exile, he should not be filled with despair from the morbid situation of the exile, but he should instead keep in mind that the entire purpose of the exile is the redemption that will ensue.

It is therefore specifically in these days that he should add in light and Torah study with increased vitality and energy.

Through this he will bring light into the time of the three weeks and *transform* these days into days of joy with the coming of *Moshiach*!

(Based on Likutei Sichos 23, Masei 1, reworked by Rabbi Dovid Markel. To see other projects and to partner in our work, see: www.Neirot.com.)

⁷ See Tanchuma, Masei 3 that the various travels are expressive of all the travels, including those places where we angered G-d, so to speak.

⁸ The city Yericho, which shares the same etymology as the word *rei'ach*, meaning scent, is expressive of

Moshiach, who will be an individual that will rule the Jewish people through his scent. This indicates that he will be able to sense who is innocent and who is guilty from merely through "smelling" the individuals. Talmud, Sanhedrin 93b.

