

דבר אחר | A Different Perspective



The Journey or the Destination?

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Life's like a road that you travel on	Through all the cities and all these towns
When there's one day here and the next day gone . . .	It's in my blood and it's all around . . . I love you now like I loved you then
Life is a highway	This is the road and these are the hands
I want to ride it all night long	From Mozambique to those Memphis nights
If you're going my way	The Khyber Pass to Vancouver's lights
I want to drive it all night long	

—Tom Cochrane, *Life Is a Highway* (1991)

Is life about the journey, as suggested by the title of Tom Cochrane's song, or the destination? Because of the Torah's promise of a "land flowing with milk and honey," one might think that, for the Torah, it is all about the destination, as the Israelites flee Egypt, a place of slavery, for Canaan, the Promised Land.

However, in this week's parashah, every single stop on the journey between Egypt and Canaan is listed. All 42 encampments are named, and some are even described, a remarkable reminder that the journey itself is essential. Just as the Israelites prepare to enter the Land, they take a moment to recount each step of their journey. With that recollection, they can enter the Land with all that they have experienced, ready to appreciate their new beginning.

"There's one day here and the next day gone," the lyrics say. This is very much the case for the Israelites on each of their many stops in the desert. So too, life is not about the destination. Ultimately, we want to enjoy the journey "all night long." As Tom Cochrane sang, "It's in my blood, and it's all around." In other words, the journey becomes part of us. So too, in our parashah, it is not just about reaching Canaan; the journey becomes part of the Israelites, makes them unique, and defines them as a people.



Mattot-Masei 5776

מטות-מסעי תשע"ו



A Summer of Discontent

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The violent and disturbing events of this summer have given me new appreciation for the book of Numbers, and particularly for its conclusion. After chapter upon chapter of intrigue, rebellion, orgy, and mayhem, attention shifts in parashat Masei, the second part of this week's double parashah, to a series of routine arrangements and details, elaborated at times in rhythmic repetition.

The events recounted are not exciting to read. They do not sustain our interest like the stories of the 12 spies or Bilaam's talking donkey. But the content of these chapters would surely have been welcome to Israelites exhausted from the trials of their wilderness wandering, just as I wish that the *New York Times* could report things like successful completions of journeys, smoothly functioning legal systems, and agreement upon national borders—the stuff of the final chapters of Bemidbar. Enough excitement for one summer, or one book. Routine, and the hope it engenders, seem quite appealing.

Following the template of the opening of Masei, let us review some of what we have read—and experienced—in the past few weeks.

There was, first of all, a populist rebellion, led—as such revolts generally are—by a privileged member of the class that wields power, in this case Moses's first cousin, Korah. There are good reasons for the dissatisfaction that he channels and feeds. Reacting to the people's lack of faith in God's promises, God has sentenced the entire adult generation of Israelites to die in the wilderness, without ever setting foot in the Promised Land. The journey itself is exhausting them. They do not have enough food or water. Worse still, perhaps, the expectations aroused upon leaving Egypt have so far been disappointed.

"All the community are holy," Korah lectures Moses and Aaron, "all of them, for the Lord is in their midst. Why do you raise yourselves above the Lord's congregation?" (Num. 16:3). Moses has made himself the standard-bearer of bad tidings. His God is remote and undependable. The people had been led to expect more. They feel they deserve more. Korah becomes the voice and agent of their discontent.

The Rabbis, commenting on Korah's rebellion, often expressed great sympathy for Israel's plight—much as commentators on Donald Trump's success and that of the Brexit

campaign in the United Kingdom have noted the many reasons for popular dissatisfaction in 2016: the decline of the middle class; a surge of immigrants; and the seeming indifference of governing (and well-off) elites to the distress caused by these and other facts of contemporary life. Nothing the authorities do can overcome popular distrust.

God performs miracle after miracle, in validation of Moses's authority—to no avail. When the earth swallows up the rebels at God's command, "the whole Israelite community railed against Moses and Aaron, saying, 'You two have brought death upon the Lord's people!'" (17:6). When God causes the staff marked with Aaron's name to sprout, another sign that Aaron is divinely elected, "the Israelites said to Moses, 'Lo, we perish. We are lost, all of us are lost! . . . Alas we are doomed to perish'" (17:27). "The system is rigged," in other words; the leadership is "crooked"; a true man of the people is required to protect the people from its current government.

Moses gets two further lessons about the perils of leadership in the following portion, Hukat, which is full to overflowing with images, stories, and anxieties about death. The elaborate ritual requiring ashes from a red heifer is set forth as a way of purifying those who come into accidental or unavoidable contact with a corpse, or bone, or grave. The Israelites arrive at Kadesh, and Moses's sister, Miriam, dies there. Later in the parashah, "setting out from Kadesh, the Israelites arrived in a body at Mount Hor" (20:22), where Aaron dies. In between these two bitter losses for Moses, Israelite complaints about thirst lead God to instruct him and his brother to take "the rod" in the presence of the congregation and "order the rock to yield its water" (20:8). Instead, Moses strikes the rock, as he has done before in a similar crisis—and is told by God that, as punishment for failure to carry out God's orders precisely, neither he nor Aaron will set foot in the Promised Land.

Jewish commentators and Bible scholars have long disagreed on the reason for Moses's punishment (Aaron had fashioned the golden calf, a grievous offense). But three conclusions seem indisputable. Leadership Lesson #1: You can't be popular with those you lead. Lesson #2: God expects more of leaders than of anyone else. Lesson #3: Leaders will at times be at a loss to know what to do, even with the best of intentions. Whatever they do, it had better take the people forward, raise them higher, nourish hope. Even Moses falls short at times, and is held accountable by God. Contemporary leaders face judgments of history no less severe.

Consider, in this connection, the ambiguous and troubling narratives in parashat Balak. The Israelites, with God's help, have defeated the Canaanite king of Arad in battle and then vanquished the kings of the Amorites and Bashan. God has prevented the prophet Bilaam from cursing the Israelites at the behest of Balak, king of Moab, inducing Bilaam instead to bestow apparent praises such as "There is a people that dwells apart" (23:9) and "How fair are your tents, O Jacob, your dwellings, O Israel!" (24:5). We seem to have turned a corner. The Promised Land beckons.

The very next chapter, however, describes how Moab, having failed to secure a prophetic curse of Israel, seems to be winning the war for Israelite bodies and souls. "While Israel was staying at Shittim, the people profaned themselves by whoring with the Moabite women, who invited the people to the sacrifices for their god" (25:1–2). Moses prepares to kill the ringleaders of the rebellion—it seems like the golden calf all over again—when one Israelite brazenly brings a Midianite woman near, in the sight of Moses and the whole community gathered at the entrance to the holy Tent of Meeting. Aaron's grandson Pinehas grabs a spear and runs the offenders through with it. "Then the plague against the Israelites was checked. Those who died of the plague numbered twenty-four thousand" (25:8–9).

The Rabbis are not happy with Pinehas. They work hard in the Midrash to show that he had not taken the law into his own hands, but had enforced an existing statute designed to govern emergencies like this one. Jewish leaders have learned from painful experience the dangers of mob violence—and the dangers of arbitrary, unchecked power. God grants Pinehas a "pact of friendship" or "covenant of peace" (25:12)—perhaps because, as bad as his act was, the alternative of continued mob rule, orgy, and victory of the forces of desire personified by Korah would have been worse.

It should be clear by this point in the book of Numbers, and the summer of 2016, why a review of the wilderness itinerary, national boundaries, and cities of refuge comes as welcome relief. The very last verse of Numbers echoes the very first; the tales of conflict that occupied the bulk of the book have given way by its conclusion to rules and regulations. Indeed, writes Biblical scholar Adriane Leveen (my wife), the final thing we learn from Numbers is that "Israel is entering the land with the most important possession of all, the knowledge that the community will be governed by law and legal stipulation, [and] that such rulings are subject to legal review and revision" (*Memory and Tradition in the Book of Numbers*, 180).

The Torah imagines law based on God's word, therefore both wise and just. It pictures rulers who want to serve God above all and who, even if flawed, are free of corruption. It warns that, if the people's fears are not assuaged and their basic needs are not met, there will come a point when they will conclude they have little to gain from life under the current set of rules and little to lose from overturning the prevailing order. The book of Numbers does not let these people have the last word. Turn the page, roll the scroll one column further, and we come to the book of Deuteronomy, the "words that Moses addressed to all Israel on the other side of the Jordan" (Deut. 1:1). Note: the *far* side, across the river, meaning that the narrator addresses readers on the *near* side, *inside* the Promised Land. There is redemption in this world, the Torah assures us. You can reach the Promised Land, and if not you, your children. There is a way. Choose goodness, choose blessing, choose life, and with God's help, fulfillment might be yours.

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