

## The Whole Journey

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School has ended, and with it comes a familiar flood of feelings. As my own children close out another year, I feel grateful and a little sad, eager for the summer and already nostalgic for the days that just were. My family lives in Israel, where this year those feelings have been especially layered. Transitions press us up against the fullness of what has been, even as they pull us toward what is coming.

This is exactly where B'nei Yisrael finds themselves at the opening of Mattot-Masei. With forty years of wandering behind them and the land of Canaan visible across the Jordan, they stand at a great threshold. And it is at precisely this moment that the Torah pauses, looks backward, and does something unexpected:

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת-מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמַסְעֵיהֶם עַל-פִּי ה' וְאֵלֶּה  
מַסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם

*“Moses recorded the starting points of their various marches as directed by GOD. Their marches, by starting points, were as follows.” (Num. 33:2)*

What follows is a dense list of forty-two encampments, most appearing nowhere else in the Torah and attached to no narrative whatsoever. “There is nothing in the Torah that seems to be as superfluous as the recording of these marches,” writes the 15th-century Spanish commentator Rabbi Abraham Saba, capturing a discomfort that ripples through generations of interpreters.

To make sense of this itinerary, classical commentaries like Rashi, Maimonides, and Sforno search for a macro-theological purpose, reading it as proof of divine providence, kindness, or historical loyalty. Yet these

interpretations all share a collective vantage point. What none of them quite asks is what this exercise actually meant for the individual doing the writing.

The text emphasizes that Moses wrote it down, *al pi Hashem*, at God’s explicit instruction. This is an intimate act: Moses, sitting with the full weight of forty years, commanded to go back through every stop and departure, not to extract an overarching lesson, but simply to name them, one by one, from the very beginning.

This is a masterful pedagogical move on God’s part. John Dewey famously argued that “we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.” True reflection requires a willingness to sit with what happened before moving on to what comes next.

And Moses, in doing this, does not produce a highlight reel. Read the text closely and notice what actually interrupts the otherwise steady rhythm of *vayisu* and *vayahanu* (they set out and they encamped). The pattern only breaks for moments of vulnerability: the Egyptians burying their firstborn; Rephidim, where they ran out of water and failed in faith; the painful specificity of Aaron’s death; and the looming threat of the Canaanite king of Arad.

These are not glorious inclusions. Strikingly, Sinai gets the same flat line as a dozen forgotten stops. The list only slows down for grief, fear, doubt, and loss. Everything else, including revelation itself, gets folded into the steady rhythm of the march.

The natural human instinct, standing at a moment of arrival, is to curate and tell a clean story that moves seamlessly from struggle to triumph, quietly omitting the embarrassing or mundane stops. We do this instinctively at graduations and end-of-year celebrations, selecting for key moments and presenting a version of the journey edited for the occasion.

But Moses is commanded to preserve the whole journey. Furthermore, he does not get the chance to use his reflection to fuel future performance. Unlike in Dewey's model, where we look back in order to do better next time, there is no next chapter for Moses. He knows he will not cross the Jordan. Yet God commands the writing anyway, teaching us that honest reflection has value independent of utility. Bearing witness to the fullness of a journey is an act of integrity and a way of saying, before moving on: all of this was real. I was here for all of it.

This is what I find myself wanting to offer my own children at the end of this complicated, layered year, and what we are called to offer the students and children in our care more broadly. Not a curated version of who they were, but the honest acknowledgment that we saw them through the whole of it: the hard stops, the boring ones, the painful ones, and the glorious ones together, without ranking them or editing them into a tidier story than the one that actually happened. To do that is to tell them something a graduation speech rarely does: that they are seen and loved not only at their best, but across the full, complicated, bumpy length of the road.