

Parshat Massei

The Travels of Bnei Yisrael

Parashat Massei opens with a summary list of the travels of Bnei Yisrael, from Egypt to the Borders of Israel. Sometimes, when we read through our parsha, and other parshiot that contain extensive listings, we wonder to ourselves what the Torah really wants to achieve by its long, seemingly endless summary of rather technical information.

Now the fact of the matter is that the Torah seems to quite enjoy listing things! Throughout the Torah, list feature prominently. A random sample will open with the genealogies of Bereshit ch.5 and 11-12, the list of Esav's army generals (Bereshit 36), the details of the plans for the Mishkan (Shemot 25-40), the census of Bnei Yisrael (twice!) and the twelve-fold repetition of the gifts of the Princes of the Tribes to the Mishkan (Bamidbar 7.) And there are many more. We might come to the conclusion that the Torah is unconcerned with the tedium of repetitive lists, that listing, and repetition are simply a literary technique that is one of the hallmarks of the Torah.

This approach would appear to be adopted by Robert Alter, one of the groundbreaking academics of the Biblical literary approach, who determined the phenomenon of repetition as central to Biblical narrative (Art of Biblical Narrative pg.88-113.) What is this technique of repetition? Sometimes, we are dealing with lists. At other times, a story will be repeated in multiple versions. In other instances, we will simply hear an instruction by God, and then the way in which the instruction is performed.

Robert Alter suggests that this technique reflects "a mentality alien to our own and a radically different approach to ordering experience from the one's familiar to us. In the more leisurely, simpler life-rhythms of the ancient Near East, so it would seem, every instruction, every prediction, every reported action had to be repeated word for word in an inexorable literalism as it was obeyed, fulfilled, or reported to another party. Perhaps, some have impressionistically conjectured, there is an "Oriental" sense of the intrinsic pleasingness of repetition in the underlying aesthetic of the Bible."

Regarding the repetition of the gifts of the Princes of the Tribes in Bamidbar 7, Alter even suggests that "one can imagine members of the tribe waiting to hear the individual items on their own ancestors' archetypal offering to the Lord – though the entire passage surely presupposes a certain delight ... in the very mechanism of patient repetition."

Now, I don't know what you will make of this approach, Alter is assuming that the Torah preserves an ancient literary style in which people relished repetition. I don't know whether this has been substantiated by any outside evidence. However if this is true, then we need not probe deeper into the detailed listings of the journeys of the Israelites in the Wilderness. After all, there is nothing to say! This is simply the literary style of the Torah. Nothing deeper, no messages beneath the surface.

Now there might be some truth to Robert Alter's approach, but our mepharshim all searched for a deeper truth behind the details, and the listings. Our sages, infused with a belief that Torah was a book that sought to teach a way of life, to transmit God's wisdom always saw the words of Torah, whether encased in a gripping story or conversely, a tedious barrage of information, as harbouring a truth that had to be unveiled and deciphered. Our parsha is no exception.

We shall look at a number of approaches.

RASHI

"Why were all this journeys recorded? To draw attention to God's¹ kindness. Despite the fact that God had decreed that they wander through the wilderness, do not say that they were in a constant state of movement and travel from place to place throughout the forty years and that they had no rest. After all, there are only forty-two journeys in the list, four of which were in the first year prior to the decree (of the Spies) ... and another eight journeys, after Aharon's death ... took place in the fortieth year. In a period of thirty-eight years, they travelled only 20 times! This from **Rabbi Moshe (Hadarshan)**

.... **Rabbi Tanchuma** read the following message from the parsha. It may be compared to a King who had a sick son. He took him from one place to the next in search of a suitable cure. When they were on their way home, his father began to recount all their travels. He said: We slept here, here we were cold, here your head hurt you ... etc."

It is interesting that **Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan** wants to minimize the number of journeys travelled by Bnei Yisrael, each leg of the trek through the wilderness involved tremendous hardship and considerable effort. The aim of this account is to understand just how little they travelled.

In contrast, **Rabbi Tanchuma's** approach celebrates each leg of the journey. For Rabbi Tanchuma, this list is a celebration a nostalgic recollection. Let us remember Rabbi Tanchuma's comments. We are dealing with a father who is travelling with his ailing child apparently in search of a cure for the son's illness. If father and son are travelling home, then the child has recovered. The danger is past.

Let us transpose this onto Bnei Yisrael. In what way were Bnei Yisrael sick? Does this relate to the sin of the Spies which they were required to purge and cleanse? Or alternatively, it might allude to a lack of readiness on the part of the nation, a "sickness" that the nation emerged with from Egypt that restricted their immediate entry into the Land of Israel. Whichever way, according to Rabbi Tanchuma, the Wilderness represent a process of healing, a cure for the ailments of Am Yisrael. At the end of it all, when the danger is behind us and the future looks bright, Am Yisrael can leaf through the album of their travels, reminiscing about the good times and bad. But, from the perspective of their good health, nothing appears quite as threatening; from this vantage point, they remember the Midbar with a smile. It is all good memories. And Parshat Massei represents the intimacy of father and son, of God and Israel, as they return from their ordeal, stronger and closer than before.

¹ Rashi here uses God's title of "Makom" a familiar annotation of Hashem. I cannot help but feel that there is some irony here, as we talk of the turbulence of travel, in drawing attention to God's aspect of "place."

For Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan, the Wilderness is harsh, uncomfortable and unwelcoming. It is a punishment. The details and deliberate listing functions as a defence of God! It proposes how gentle and forgiving God was in that he did wish us to be marching around the desert in a constant state of movement for forty years. Rather, God applied the punishment mercifully, fulfilling the decree of the Midbar but not having Am Yisrael suffer too greatly.

SEPHORNO

The Seforno offers the most positive approach:

"God wished to write the travels of Israel to inform us of their great merit in following God " to the wilderness, a land that was not sown,² in such a way that would make them befitting to enter the Land (of Israel.)"

In other words, the Seforno totally ignores the sin of the Spies, the rebellions and waywardness of Bnei Yisrael in the Midbar. For Seforno, it is all a labour of love, As Yirmiyahu remembers "the love of your youth," Bnei Yisrael is depicted as passionately committed to the Almighty to the point at which they are prepared to enter a wasteland simply to follow their beloved. The detailed travel itinerary demonstrates the extent of Israel's dedication and commitment to God. Maybe the Seforno adopts this perspective because the list ignores all the sins and punishment of the Midbar. I imagine that Seforno see this list not as a thorough review, a comprehensive account. Rather, there is a different agenda, an ideology that underpins the particular events chosen and the way that they are written.

IN SUMMARY

We have three radically differing perceptions as to what this list says about Bnei Yisrael and the wilderness years. What was the wilderness about?

Rabbi Moshe Hadarshan: Harsh Punishment
Rabbi Tanchuma : A process of healing and repair.
Seforno : A communion of love between God and Israel

DESTINATION OR PROCESS?

But maybe we can add a final note here. I think that frequently, we perceive travel as a means to an end. We travel so that we might reach our destination. The journey is a nuisance, but a necessary inconvenience if we are to traverse distances. In modern times, we are delighted that we can travel faster – our cars, high speed trains, air travel and the like - allowing us to cover enormous distances in minimal time. And even then, we all feel the strain of the journey. It is tedious, and uncomfortable to travel for hours on end, and at times unpleasant and even gruelling.

But there are times when "travel" becomes an end in itself. Some people will take a year off after college to "travel." We might have a vacation touring a particular part of the world. In that situation, travel is a positive experience to be savoured and absorbed, to enrich and enlighten the traveller with new sights, sounds, people, experiences. And in that way, the individual will expand his horizons, he will grow and learn, developing new insights into the world, and the arena of human experience.

Is Parshat Massei the first type of travel or the second? Are we simply interested in traversing the expanse of wilderness that stretches between Egypt and Israel, or is the travel itself an enriching period of growth, a time for learning, for change, a period in which development can take place, outside of society, outside civilisation, as a national group learn and discover their true legacy, their identity.

I would suggest that the Torah's pedantic and deliberate listing of each place, each journey, each encampment, every destination, is there to tell us that it was the very journey that was important. The Midbar was not solely a means of "getting from A to B." A Mekhilta that we have quoted once in another context puts it in the following way:

"God did not bring the people to Israel on the direct route. Instead he took them through the desert. God said ' If I bring them to the Land of Israel now, everyone will immediately involve themselves with their field or vineyard and they will pay no attention to Torah! Instead, I will take them through the wilderness. **They will eat the Manna and drink water from the miraculous Well and the Torah will become absorbed within their body.**"

Am Yisrael were very much "in process" at this delicate stage of their infancy, and the Wilderness afforded them the opportunity of growth and development, spiritually, culturally, civilly, in order to enter the Land of Israel in a more mature state.

One passuk stands out in my mind that would seem to focus upon the "process" involved in the forty year Wilderness experience. It is passuk 2 in our parsha.

"Moshe recorded their starting points for their journeys, by the word of God, and these are their journeys according to their starting points."

The passuk begins by saying that the main thing is the starting point, but then seems to suggest that the central issue is the journey itself. I would suggest that indeed, a journey, in the spiritual sense, will always begin from a certain point; however, we have to move on, move upwards from that point, ascending, growing, through the journey.

Our "starting point" for our next journey will then be a very different one.

May we always be moving onwards and upwards.
Shabbat Shalom.

² Paraphrasing Yirmiyahu 2:2 – last week's haftara.