

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת מסעי

אלה מסעי בני ישראל אשר יצאו מארץ מצרים לצבאתם ביד משה ואהרן
“These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt according to their legions, under the hand of Moshe and Aharon” (33:1)

Why is it necessary for the Torah to document everywhere that the Jews traveled in the wilderness? R' Nissan Alpert writes that we see from here how important it is to look back and learn from experience and from the mistakes that one has made. Those who do not learn lessons from their own past are doomed to repeat it. The nations of the world cover up their mistakes when they write their history books because they want them to be forgotten. The Torah reviews all the mistakes that the Jewish people made as a lesson for future generations. In fact, the Targum Yonasan says that all the stops in the desert were named for what happened in those locations, both good and bad, as an everlasting reminder of all the experiences that the Jewish people went through in their formative years.

Furthermore, the Torah wants to stress that the Jews spent their years of training in Torah sojourning in the wilderness, a place where they were able to keep to themselves and get accustomed to their new way of life far away from any other influences. This serves as an example for how to train children in Torah. Just as Hashem kept the Jewish nation in the wilderness for forty years, we should protect our children from influences antithetical to Torah and limit their exposure to cultures that have values which contradict those of Torah. We should allow them to strengthen their commitment to Torah in their youth without being confronted by contradictory ideas.

Another lesson from this list, writes R' Alpert, is that when we live in exile, we should recognize that we are on the road, on our way to reach Eretz Yisrael. Where we are now is not our place and in nothing more than a way-station in the long journey of our exile. Even if we do stay in one place for a long time, it is only temporary, just like the Jews in the desert sometimes stayed in one place for a long time. We should keep in mind that our exile is only transient and is leading us on the road to an eventual return to Eretz Yisrael.

ויכתב משה את מוצאיהם למסעיהם על פי ה' ואלה מסעיהם למוצאיהם
“Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the bidding of Hashem, and these were their journeys according to their goings forth” (33:2)

Why does the posuk tell us that Moshe transcribed this list "at the bidding of Hashem"? The Tzror HaMor writes that Parshas Masei is the conclusion of the main portion of the Torah, as Sefer Devarim is really nothing more than a repetition of what is previously written (see Tosfos on Gittin 2a). It is important to stress at this point that the Torah is solely from Hashem. Even though this information about the Bnei Yisrael's journeys is already known, it was written down again here because Hashem said to do so

since there are lessons behind the story of their travels. This reminds us that everything in the Torah, from mitzvos to stories to seeming repetitions, comes from Hashem. The Torah concludes with this message just as Neviim ends with this message, in the words of Malachi, the last prophet (Malachi 4:22). His last words are "Remember the Torah of My servant Moshe that I commanded him." Again, at the end of the era of prophecy, we are reminded that the Torah and everything contained in it comes from Hashem alone.

This may also be why the travels in the wilderness are recorded at this point. The documentation of their journey gives us confidence in the ultimate redemption, something that is important to mention at the end of the Torah. The Jews may have wandered for many years but they eventually made it to their homeland and arrived at their goal. We, too, will eventually arrive at our goal with the arrival of Moshiach, as Malachi reminds us with his final words (ibid v. 23), "Behold, I am sending to you Eliyahu HaNavi."

ויסעו מרפידם ויחנו במדבר סיני

“They journeyed from Refidim and encamped in the Wilderness of Sinai” (33:15)

When listing the places where the Jews camped in the wilderness, the Torah pauses to mention significant events that occurred along the way. Why doesn't the posuk mention that the Torah was given in Midbar Sinai? R' Moshe Feinstein answers that the Torah has to be new in our eyes every day. The Torah is not a historical event that happened once and is now in the past. It is by no means an "old testament." Rather, it continues to renew itself every day. Similarly, the Torah never mentions the date of the giving of the Torah. Shavuot, the holiday of the giving of the Torah, does not have a set date. A person should view the Torah as if it has been given anew every single day and treat it in the same way that one treats a gift that a person has just received. This is the attitude one should take in his Torah learning and in his performance of mitzvos. As Chazal tell us, "Every day, they should be like new in your eyes."

ויעל אהרן הכהן אל הר ההר על פי ה' וימת שם בשנת הארבעים לצאת בני ישראל מארץ מצרים בחדש החמישי באחד לחדש

“Then Aharon the Kohen went up to Mount Hor by the mouth of Hashem and died there, in the fortieth year after the Children of Israel went forth from the land of Egypt, in the fifth month on the first of the month” (33:38)

Why is the date of Aharon's death recorded? When Miriam and Moshe died, the Torah does not tell us what day it was?! The Netziv writes that the Torah is teaching us that the month of Av is a month that has a propensity for tragedy. More specifically, it is a month during which Satan has the ability to create problems for the Bais HaMikdash. Aharon was the Kohen Gadol and the most prominent figure in the Mishkan. Therefore, he died in the month of Av. That is also why both Batei Mikdash were destroyed in the month of Av.

דבר אל בני ישראל ואמרת אליהם כי אתם עברים את הירדן אל ארץ כנען
“Speak to the Children of Israel and say to them: When you cross the Yarden to the

Land of Canaan” (33:51)

Rashi asks: Why is the mandate to destroy the inhabitants of Eretz Canaan mentioned here again? He answers that this time it is mentioned in connection with crossing the Yarden. Hashem told them that when they crossed the Yarden, it had to be for the purpose of destroying the nations that inhabited the land. If they would not enter the land with this purpose in mind, the waters would drown them.

R' Moshe Feinstein notes that it would not have sufficed to get to work upon their arrival in the land. They had to have this mindset already while going there. He continues that this Rashi teaches us the importance of preparation for a mitzvah and how integral it is to the actual performance of the mitzvah. The Bnei Yisrael had to have proper intent when they were on their way. If not, the whole purpose of their entry to the land would have been frustrated.

Why does the Torah emphasize the importance of preparing for mitzvos in connection with this commandment? This was a command to kill people without mercy. Mitzvos that involve killing someone cannot be done with any motive other than for the sake of fulfilling the will of Hashem. The principle of "shelo lishma" is not applicable, even if one accomplished the bottom line. Critics of religion often say that Hashem is vengeful and commands his people to engage in violence and war. The truth of the matter is that the Torah frowns upon violence and cruelty. The only permissibility of these actions is in specific situations where Hashem commands it for a special reason. Even then, one cannot fulfill the word of Hashem for ulterior motives. To do so would be sinful. Specifically here when dealing with a mitzvah involving death and violence, it is extremely important to prepare for the mitzvah in advance by focusing on why one is doing it. It is here that the Torah chooses to impart the lesson regarding preparing for mitzvos.

We see this idea in Sefer Melachim. Baasha wiped out every member of the house of Yaravam (15:29), just as Hashem had promised would happen (14:10). However, Baasha was wicked in his own right and Hashem decreed that he and all his descendants would also be killed. One of the reasons Hashem gives for this punishment is because he killed the family of Yaravam (16:7). If he was carrying out the will of Hashem, why was he punished? He did not kill the house of Yaravam in order to fulfill the wish of Hashem. He did so in order so that he could become king. This made him nothing more than a murderer and for this he was deserving of punishment.

In Parshas Lech Lecha (15:14), the Ramban tries to understand why those who carry out Hashem's punishments against Bnei Yisrael, such as Mitzrayim, Bavel and Ashur, are punished themselves. One of the answers he gives is that if one receives a command of Hashem and fulfills it perfectly but does so for selfish reasons, he deserves to be punished.

ואת הערים אשר תתנו ללוים את שש ערי המקלט אשר תתנו לנס שמה הרצח ועליהם תתנו ארבעים ושתים עיר

“The cities that you shall give to the Levites: the six cities of refuge that you shall provide for a killer to flee there, and in addition to them you shall give forty-two cities” (35:6)

The sefer Ohev Yisrael sees an important lesson contained in this posuk. There were six cities of refuge provided for Jews who made a big mistake so that they could repent and shape themselves up. Every Jew should recognize that we all make mistakes in life but we can overcome our previous errors and return to Hashem. The key to doing this is to turn to Hashem for help and believing that we can change. The way to do this is to accept Hashem's sovereignty over the world and His omnipotence. The six words of Shema correspond to the six cities of refuge and the forty-two words of Ve'ahavta correspond to the additional forty-two Levite cities that also afforded protection to accidental murderers. Saying the Shema and believing it with every fiber in one's being serves the same purpose as the cities of refuge did in the days of old.

ולא תחניפו את הארץ אשר אתם בה כי הדם הוא יחניף את הארץ ולא יכפר לדם אשר שפך בה כי אם בדם שפכו

“You shall not bring guilt upon the land in which you are, for the blood will bring guilt upon the land; the land will not have atonement for the blood that was spilled in it, except through the blood of the one who spilled it” (35:33)

The Sifrei comments that this posuk is a warning to refrain from unnecessary flattery. The Chofetz Chaim writes that flattery is a common stumbling block in our times. A common example of this is when one encourages his friend when he sins, even if all he does is nod his head wordlessly. Even when one merely does not protest the wrongdoing, his silence may be interpreted as support and agreement. One must be very careful to avoid this at all times.

A gemara on Sotah 41 illustrates how terrible flattery is the ramifications that it has. The mishna tells the story of King Agrippa who was reading from Sefer Devarim at hakhel, when the Jewish king would read aloud from the Torah to the entire nation. When he reached the posuk that says, "You shall not place upon yourself and gentile," he began crying because this posuk taught that he was invalidated from being the king. The Sages saw this and comforted him by saying, "Do not worry, Agrippa. You are our brother." The gemara comments that at that moment destruction was decreed against the Jewish nation because they flattered Agrippa. The gemara further says that from the time that flattery became prevalent in the world, no man can claim to have better deeds than his fellow. Rashi explains that since even the righteous people see others sin and do not protest, the sinners have taken their lack of protest as acquiescence and have learned from their ways. Because of flattery, today everyone is considered to be a sinner and nobody can claim to be better than his fellow.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

Shiur given by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Written by Michael Gutmann

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