



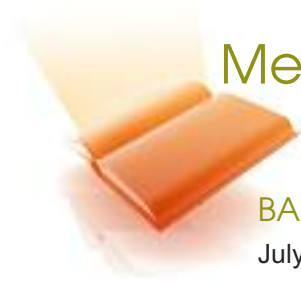
*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Matot-Massei

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

July 6, 2013
Matot-Massei

The Journeys Out of Egypt



Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

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ABSTRACT

Egyptian turmoil is in the news again – as it was 3325 years ago, when the Jews left Egypt.

It’s quite intriguing that as we conclude the fourth book of the Torah enumerating the 42 journeys the Jews took as they left Egypt, we hear this week’s news about the latest coup in tumultuous Egypt. It therefore seems appropriate to explore the mystery of our life’s journeys, both personal and collective, which can also shed light on current events.

Is life made up of fragments or is it a cohesive journey leading to a defined destination? How about history: Are we linked to past generations, or are we alone?

As we make our summer travel plans, what deeper forces are at work leading us from one place to the next? Why are we drawn to journey to certain places in the world? When we arrive at a certain spot why do we sometimes have the uncanny feeling that this place was awaiting for us to arrive?

This week’s Torah reading is all about journeys. Indeed, around 70% of the entire Torah is devoted to the 42 journeys of the Jewish people throughout the wilderness! Beginning with the Egyptian exodus (in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus), the remaining 39 – out of 53 – Torah chapters concern themselves with, take place in, or are a part of the 42 journeys that the Israelites made.

Clearly, all this traveling plays a central role in Torah and teaches us that journeys are a central theme in our personal lives as well.

Indeed, the 42 journeys recounted in the Torah mirror 42 journeys or phases that each person experiences throughout life as this sermon explains, in the process revealing the secret behind our conscious and unconscious travels.

THE JOURNEYS OUT OF EGYPT ARE WE HEADED SOMEWHERE?

1. Egypt in the News Again

I just saw a tweet of a joke going around Egypt today: Nasser, Sadat and Mubarak tried to get rid of the Muslim Brotherhood. Only President Mohamed Morsi succeeded.

Another joke that circulated during last year's electricity shortages In Egypt:

Upset at all the negativity about his Freedom and Justice Party, Morsi asked Egyptians: "What have you seen from the Muslim Brotherhood to hate them?" Egyptians respond: "Nothing - in the dark we can't see anything."

Egyptian turmoil is in the news again - as it was 3325 years ago, when the Jews left Egypt. This time around the Egyptian military, at the behest of the Egyptian public taking to the streets, have ousted President Morsi. We're back to square one, or worse.

It's quite intriguing that as we conclude the fourth book of the Torah enumerating the 42 journeys the Jews took as they left Egypt, we hear this week's news about the latest coup in tumultuous Egypt.

It therefore seems appropriate to explore the mystery of our life's journeys, both personal and collective, which can also shed light on current events.

2. What is Our Destination?

Is life made up of fragments or is it a cohesive journey leading to a defined destination?

How about history: Are we linked to past generations, or are we alone?

As we make our summer travel plans, what deeper forces are at work leading us from one place to the next? Why are we drawn to journey to certain places in the world? And, when we arrive at a certain spot, why do we sometimes have the uncanny feeling that this place was awaiting for us all the while?

3. A Tired Traveler (Humor)

A businessman had a tiring day on the road.

He checked into a hotel and, because he was concerned that the dining room might close soon, he left his luggage at the front desk and went immediately to eat.

After a leisurely dinner, he reclaimed his luggage and realized that he had forgotten his room number. So he went back to the desk and said to the clerk on duty: "My name is David Stein, could you please tell me what room I am in?"

"Certainly," said the clerk. "You're in the lobby."

The businessman grinned. "Very funny. Are you a rabbi, by any chance?"

Surprised, the clerk replied: "No, of course not. Why do you ask?"

"Because," said the man. "What you said is true but irrelevant."

And that brings us to today's topic, which is travelling.

4. Torah Journeys

Around 70% of the Torah is devoted to the 42 journeys of the Jewish people throughout the wilderness.

Beginning with the Egyptian exodus (in the third chapter of the Book of Exodus), the remaining 39 – out of 53 – Torah chapters concern themselves with, take place in, or are a part of the 42 journeys that the Israelites made. They started out in the city of Ramses in Egypt and traveled and traveled and traveled ... until they arrived at the east bank of the River Jordan. And even then, as the Torah closes the Five Books of Moses, their travels were not yet finished. One more journey – crossing the river into the Promised Land – still awaited them.

Clearly, all this traveling plays a central and fundamental role in Torah and teaches us that journeys are a central theme in our personal lives.

5. Mirrors

The Baal Shem tov teaches¹ that the 42 journeys recounted in the Torah – and enumerated in this week’s Torah reading – mirror 42 journeys or phases that each person experiences throughout life, as we shall see.

It’s interesting to note that though only the first of the 42 journeys was actually out of Egypt, all of the 42 journeys are called “(these are) the journeys of the children of Israel who left the land of Egypt,” because they are all considered to be an extension of the exodus from Egypt. Why? Because Egypt – *Mitzrayim* in Hebrew – is the archetype of constraints and limitations of material existence. (Indeed, *Mitzrayim* comes from the word *tzar* meaning narrow/confining.) And all of our journeys are about breaking the bonds that imprison us, freeing ourselves and transcending the constraints of this physical world which conceals the Divine. Every step we take toward subduing and sublimating the harsh “wilderness” of selfish existence is a step closer to the “Promised Land” – a life of harmony between body and soul.

¹ *Degel Machne Efraim Parshat Massei. Likkutei Sichos* volume 2 p. 615, volume 4 p. 1083, volume 23 p. 225.

So, mirroring the exodus out of Egypt, each of us begins our life's journey with birth – when we are liberated from the confines of the womb, a place where we had grown and developed until we could become an independent being with power to impact the world.

Some of the journeys that follow are pleasant, others very demanding. Some are smooth, some are rocky. Many may even be wrong turns and setbacks. We may make mistakes and wrong choices – just as the Jewish people did in some of their 42 journeys – but all that is part of our life's odyssey toward redemption.

6. Personal Junctures

In this week's Torah reading Moses identifies all the stops along the way, as he is commanded by God. And these stops help us identify our own personal junctures in our lives.²

By understanding the meaning of these 42 journeys we can demystify many of our unresolved or strange experiences – the times when we asked “Why did I have to go through such and such? And we can uncover the deeper patterns of own lives.

We can actually identify these 42 stages in our own life's voyage – 42 rites of passage – that encompass all the twists and turns, the ups and downs, dips and curves of our lives.

Above all, these 42 journeys allow us to align our lives to a higher rhythm, and actually create a strategy that rides the waves of our lives. It helps us learn the secret of knowing when to travel and when to rest, when to make a move, when to stay put.

For we must learn to synchronize our life journeys to the Divine coordinates that “lead the footsteps of man.”³

²For a psycho-spiritual application of all our 42 life journeys – go to: www.meaning-fulllife.com/spiritual/soul/42_Journeys.php.

³Psalms 37:23. Hayom Yom Tammuz 10.

7. The Weeping Spring

A powerful story of the weeping spring illustrates this point:

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, once sent his disciple – the great scholar and Rabbi of Lvov, Rabbi Chaim Rapoport – on a mission to a particular place.

During his stay there, Reb Chaim washed his hands, made a blessing and drank from the water of a nearby brook.

Later, the Baal Shem Tov told him:

“The spring that fed this brook has been weeping for five thousand, five hundred, and nineteen years, since the creation of the world. Why should it be less than all the other springs in the world? Why should its waters be denied elevation?”

“Since God had created this particular spring, no one had ever made a blessing over its waters, which had never been used for holy purposes. But the day that you drank this water and used it to wash your hands for prayer, you elevated that spring. This was all the working of Divine Providence.

“Every creature and creation has a time for its elevation, and it is fore-ordained when it will occur and by whom. And that is true for each and every soul; it too has its time for elevation.”

8. Centuries of Wandering

Over the centuries of wandering, it was this sense of purpose that kept the Jews going. It instilled them with hope and trust that their journeys were led by God, and that, in some way, they were refining every city they dwelled in – even when the residents wished them harm.

They also knew that these journeys were leading them to a better destination – and if not them, then their children.

Our parents and grandparents were expelled or ran from country to country – escaping persecutions, Crusades, Inquisitions, Pogroms, massacres – they were eventually led to this place where we presently live. And as they traveled and wandered, they always knew that they were being led by God’s hand. They always knew that God was with them and that every step they took – in pain or in joy – was changing the very ground they were treading upon.

As we wander through our lives – physically, spiritually, psychologically, emotionally – we must remember this. God is leading our footsteps. Wherever we may find ourselves – whether by design or accident, whether we wish to be there or not – our very presence refines the environment we are in.

Every situation is presenting an opportunity – waiting for us to do something, waiting for some redemption. And every step we take is leading us to a destination.

9. Secret Summer Travel Plans

This message is especially apropos when making travel plans for the summer season. Always remember, your plans are your plans. But, beyond your plans, God always has a deeper plan – an underlying, hidden script – which leads you to your vacation spot, in order that you transform this place.

So wherever you go, always keep your eyes open for the unexpected and the spontaneous. Often, the greatest things in life come when you don’t get in the way with your plans...

Wherever you are on business or vacation, find ways to introduce some warmth and light. When you meet a new person, say a kind word. Share some inspiring words of Torah. Look out for people and opportunities which can make a positive difference to you and to them.

You never know what has been waiting there for you from the beginning of time – waiting and maybe even crying for you to arrive and finally redeem it. And this is the precise reason you were led to this place.

10. Every Step You Take

Every step you take in your life, regardless of your intentions and state of mind, refines the very spot you are standing on – and leads you to the Promised Land!

Every step... without exception.

So, as you ponder this week's Torah reading, be reminded that no stage in life – and no segment of history – is an island unto itself.

This includes both personal and collective journeys. And obviously, also the upheavals in present day Egypt – ones that remind us of the upheavals thousands of years ago when we left and traveled out of Egypt. All our 42 journeys – which include all our journeys throughout history are a continuing extension out of the constraints of Egypt (*mitzrayim*).

Each phase is part of a longer journey, a series in an odyssey, leading to a destination – the Promised Land.

Simply knowing – truly knowing – that every life experience, even the harshest, is a step leading to a better place can help you get through the loneliest moments and infuse you with hope.

11. Child's Perspective (Humor)

Children seem to sense this much more than adults, because children have not yet begun to adopt the adults' linear approach of getting *there*. They can still enjoy *getting* there.

-“Where were you?” you might ask your kid when he comes home long after school has let out.

-“I was just walking home,” he says.

-“But we live five minutes away. How come it took you an hour?”

-“Well, we walked real slow because Sammy said, ‘Step on a crack, break your mother’s back,’ and then we watched the men on the construction site for a while, and then we counted how many people on the street wear glasses, and then we blindfolded each other and played Seeing Eye Dog. That’s all.”

The *Zohar*, the chief work of the Kabbalah, teaches that within us there is a child and there is also an old foolish king. The child makes the most of the journey, the foolish king thinks he has already arrived.⁴

12. The Historical Journey

History, too, is a journey – a continuum. Each generation is a link in a continuous chain that connects the beginning of time to our day and age.

Torah commentators explain that the opening words of this week’s Torah portion, *Eleh maasei bnei Yisrael*, “these are the journeys of the Children of Israel,” form an acronym which stands for the four major empires that have dominated history – the Roman, Median, Babylonian and Greek Empires.⁵

But we now stand at the conclusion of history’s many journeys. After all our travels and wanderings through the “wilderness,” after all our difficult work during our 42 journeys, where we refined the material “wilderness” and nurtured the arid and parched “desert,” we are now almost home.

We stand poised at the threshold of personal and global redemption, when all materialism will be seen as a means to spiritual growth. And we are ready to enter the Promised Land, this time – permanently.

⁴Endless Light by Rabbi David Aaron, Simon & Schuster, 1997, p. 59.

⁵This acronym is *aleph, mem, bet, yud* and stands for *Edom, Modai, Bavel, Yavan*, the four major exiles and empires that have dominated history (Yalkut Reuveni Massei from Rameh m’Pano, Maamar Chokur Din sec. 3 ch. 22. Chida – Nachal Kedumim).

The vital question we must each ask of ourselves is this: “Am I doing my part in my final leg of the journey to ensure that we reach the destination?”

The entire universe, all of history, our lives and the lives of others – all that and more hang in the balance.

Travel well. The best is yet to come. Amen.

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