



BAMIDBAR

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The Power of Every Step: A New Take on Summer Travel

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**THE POWER OF EVERY STEP
A NEW TAKE ON SUMMER TRAVEL**

ABSTRACT

Do you ever feel like you are a wandering soul? Not really sure what brings you from one place to the next? Have you ever wondered why you live in a particular location – what circumstances brought you to your present place of residence, and what circumstances led your parents to the place you grew up in? Why your life trajectory is different from others?

The Jewish people have been wandering (and wondering why) for thousands of years. From the time Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, it seems that our history has been one long wandering journey. From the time Abraham undertook his first trek – in response to the command: “*Lech Lecha – Go for yourself...*” – everyone of his descendants, generation after generation, until this very day, has wandered from place to place, from city to city, from country to country, from one hemisphere to another.

The Torah is basically a story of wandering – reflecting the wanderings of the Jewish people throughout history. And where is the greatest emphasis on these wanderings? In this week’s Torah reading – Parshat Behaalotecha.

Augmented with inspirational and mystical stories, this sermon offers a revolutionary perspective into the deeper meaning of our life wanderings – one that reveals an extraordinary view of our own lives today, especially as we begin to make our summer travel plans.

1. Lost Soul

The 40 year wandering of the Jews in the wilderness is especially emphasized in this week’s Torah portion, and it contains powerful lessons for us in our wanderings and journeys.

But first, to lighten up the mood...

Why was Moses wandering through the desert for 40 years? Because men refuse to ask for directions!

Then there are the virtues of wandering:

“I dreamed a thousand new paths. . . I woke and walked my old one.”

– An old proverb

People who stay in their comfort zone and never travel end up dreaming about traveling. While those that make a move, may feel restless, but I submit that it’s better for a healthy soul to move out of comfort zones and dream about retirement, than to stay frozen in one place and dream about traveling.

Consider this:

A lost soul once arrived in a distant town, where he recognized no one. On Shabbat he went to the local Synagogue, only to hear the Rabbi chastise his congregation, trying to provoke them to improve their ways. He wanted to get across the point that we all will be called to task in heaven for our actions on this world. He warned, “Everyone in this community is eventually going to die. Therefore you must do teshuva before it is too late.”

As his point was taken, he noticed that everyone in the room became somber except the wandering stranger – the lost soul – who was grinning. The Rabbi wondered why this man wasn’t affected by his harsh words. He decided he should make the point stronger.

“My good townsfolk, you must remember that sooner than you think, you are going to die. At that time you will be called to judgment in the heavenly court. All your sins will be revealed and discussed. It can be a horrific experience. Repent now.” As the Rabbi looked around the room he saw people squirming uneasily and looking distressed. But, to the Rabbi’s chagrin, he saw that the man who had been grinning was now chuckling.

The Rabbi realized that he was now going to have to pull out all the stops. “Members of this noble community, you must realize that your lives on this earth are only temporary - as fleeting as the shadow of a passing bird. Soon will come the frightening Day of Judgment. You will be brought before the heavenly tribunal whose judges you cannot bribe or deceive. All your innermost secrets will be presented and scrutinized by the court. Your feeble excuses will not work there like they do here. The judgment will be exacting. Your only chance is to repent now before it is too late.” At this point, everyone in the audience was turning white and trembling with fear. Everyone appeared as though they were about to faint, excepting the one man who by now was laughing out loud.

The Rabbi couldn’t control himself and he asked the wandering soul why he was reacting this way. The man replied, “Because I am not a member of your community.”

2. Are You a Wandering Soul?

Do you ever feel like you are a wandering soul? Not really sure what brings you from one place to the next? Have you ever wondered why you live in a particular location – what circumstances brought you to your present place of residence, and what circumstances led your parents to the places you grew up in? Why your life trajectory is different from others?

The Jewish people have been wandering (and wondering why) for thousands of years. From the time Adam and Eve were expelled from Paradise, it seems that our history has been one long wandering journey. From the time Abraham undertook his first trek – in response to the command: “*Lech Lecha – Go for yourself...*” – every one of his descendants, generation after generation, until this very day, has wandered from place to place, from city to city, from country to country, from one hemisphere to another.

3. The Long Journey

Virtually the entire Torah (with a few moments of respite) is consumed with journeys and wanderings. Just in the Book of Genesis we have the travels of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Genesis concludes with Jacob and his family of some seventy souls traveling once again – descending from the Promised Land into Egypt.

In the Book of Exodus these wanderings only intensify. After 210 years in the severe Egyptian exile, one would think that their journeys would be over. But no! This is where forty years of wandering only begins.

The rest of the Torah (from the Book of Exodus until the final verse in Deuteronomy) takes place entirely in the wilderness and it ends with the Nation of Israel poised on the bank of the River Jordan. It is highly significant that the Torah does not record their entry into the Promised Land. It leaves the reader on the brink, but not yet there. (Of course what happens next is recorded in the books of the prophets and other writings.)

Thus the Torah is basically a story of wandering – foreshadowing the wanderings of the Jewish people throughout history.

4. Parshat Behaalotecha

And where is the greatest emphasis on these wanderings? In this week’s Torah reading – *Parshat Behaalotecha* – which contains some of the details of these journeys:

Whether it was for two days, a month, or a full year, no matter how long the cloud remained at rest over [the Tabernacle], the Israelites would remain in one place and not move on. Then, when [the cloud] rose,

they would continue on their travels. They thus camped at G-d's word and moved on at G-d's word, keeping their trust in G-d.¹

All their wanderings followed G-d's plan and were predicated on trust in G-d. But why did G-d cause them to wander – indeed, why did G-d cause all Jews to wander for so much of history?

5. Why Do We Wander?

The 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, the Baal Shem Tov, offers the following answer to this question:

Jews were dispersed all across the earth ... This is in order for them to refine and purify the polluted environment of the material world. The pure faith in the heart of every Jew, even if it may be asleep, refines the toxic atmosphere.

Remarkable words. Astounding implications.

Wherever you may wander – even if you are lost and have no idea what you are doing in this particular location, even if your faith may be asleep and you are completely distracted from anything sacred – the very fact that you are treading on this ground in some way refines the environment!

This transformation takes place even if you are not aware of it, so imagine how much greater is your impact when you are aware and when you actually strive to make an impact.

And this is something that Jews have done – over and over again. Many writers, historians, thinkers and scholars have noticed this Jewish impact and wondered about it.

6. Jewish Impact²

For example, the Dutch-American sociologist, Ernest van den Haag, pondered the question in his well-known treatise, entitled *The Jewish Mystique*:

Asked to make a list of men who have most dominated the thinking of the modern world, many educated people would name Freud, Einstein, Marx and Darwin. Of these four, only Darwin was not Jewish. In a world where Jews are only a tiny percentage of the population, what is the secret of the disproportionate impact the Jews have had in the history of Western culture?³

¹ *Numbers* 8:22-23.

² This section adapted from *Destiny* by Rabbi Ken Spiro, chapter 5.

³ *The Jewish Mystique* by Ernest Van den Haag, p. 13.

A Jewish joke goes, “Of the four most impactful thinkers, three were Jewish and one was wrong,” but, of course, by now Karl Marx – the originator of communist ideology – has been proven wrong as well, and it is questionable just how right Sigmund Freud was [when he said that at the bottom of every subconscious problem lies a sexual conflict]. At least Albert Einstein is still holding up.

But, at the root of this statement is a truism that wherever they go, Jews make a difference. It seems they can’t help it. And it does not seem to matter if they are religious and see it as their mission to disseminate the spiritual/moral teachings of the Torah, or if they are secular and see their mission as making the world better, however they understand the meaning of “better.”

How can the tiny Jewish people have had such a huge impact? And especially since, for a large part of their existence, they have been economically marginalized, shunned, persecuted and, having no land to call their own, forced to wander from country to country. That kind of unstable life demolishes people; their energies must of necessity go toward mere survival, not toward creativity, innovation and improving the world. Yet we see the opposite about the Jews, who have been the most productive in the most hostile environments.

The benchmark of excellence in the Western World is the Nobel Prize. This is how we acknowledge those who contributed in the most significant way to making our world a better place. And the most startling statistic is that, since the Nobel Prize originated in 1901, nearly a quarter of all the recipients have been Jewish when Jews represent only one-quarter of one percent of the world population.

Why are Jews so driven to make the world a better place wherever they may roam? Because this is their *raison d’être* – their reason for being – [the very meaning of being “a light unto the nations,” as the Prophet Isaiah put it.]⁴

7. Mystical Story (Optional)

A mystical story illustrates the profound implications of the wandering Jew.

The Baal Shem Tov once sent one of his disciples, the great scholar 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: “That fountain had 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 fountains in the world? Why should its waters be denied their elevation? Since G-d had created it, no one had ever made a blessing over its waters; they had never been used for holy purposes.”

⁴ *Isaiah* 60:19.

“That day,” said the Baal Shem Tov to Reb Chaim, “when you drank its water and used it to wash your hands for prayer, you elevated that fountain. This was all the working of Divine Providence. Every creature and creation has a time for its elevation and it is foreordained when it will occur and by whom. And that is true for each and every soul; it too has its time for elevation.”

8. G-d Leads our Footsteps

Whether we know it or not, whether we care or not, G-d leads our footsteps. Those who walk with awareness of G-d’s presence find that no matter how hard the challenges before them, their trust in G-d lightens their stride.⁵

Over the centuries of wandering it was this attitude that kept the Jews going with hope and trust that their journeys were led by G-d and that in some way they were refining every city they dwelled in. They also knew that these journeys were leading them to a better destination – and if not them, their children...

As our ancestors were expelled or ran from country to country – escaping persecutions, Crusades, Inquisitions, pogroms, massacres, and finally, the last journey that led us to the place we presently live – they always knew that they were being led by G-d’s hand, that G-d was with them and every step they took – in pain or in joy – was changing the very ground they were treading upon.

9. The Journey Today

But this is true not only for the past. We may think that in the present, in our free world, that we Jews have arrived and are no longer wandering.

Quite the contrary. Our reason for being has not changed – we are here in order to refine the environment around us. Every situation is presenting an opportunity – waiting for us to do something... waiting for some redemption...

10. Inspirational Story

Consider the story of Professor Allan Schwartzbaum⁶, a Fulbright scholar sent to Taiwan to teach industrial relations at several universities there.

⁵ *Proverbs* 20:24.

⁶ *The Bamboo Cradle* by Allan Schwartzbaum.

One early morning Professor Schwartzbaum found himself walking through the train station in Taipei on his way to his teaching assignment when ... a bright splash of color caught his eye. He looked more carefully and saw a small red parcel on a vacant bench ... and then he saw it move. His curiosity piqued, he decided to investigate.

Tiny dark eyes met his own. His briefcase fell from his hand as he reached for the baby. He picked her up gently and held her close.

Finding an abandoned baby in a rural Chinese train station would become a transformational life experience for Professor Schwartzbaum and his wife Barbara, up to then, a childless couple. The whole dramatic story is related in Professor Schwartzbaum's inspirational book, *The Bamboo Cradle*.

But even if Professor Schwartzbaum had not found his future daughter in the train station that day ... even if that discovery had not led to many other discoveries in his life (including his return to Torah observance) ... even if none of those things had happened ... just by walking through the Taipei train station, Professor Schwartzbaum would have been changing the spiritual quality of his environment simply by virtue of interacting with it.

11. Summer Travel Plans

This message is especially appropriate as we now enter the summer season and make our travel plans.

Always remember, your plans are your plans. Beyond your plans, G-d always has a deeper plan – an underlying, hidden script – which leads us to the places we will be traveling to, in order for us to transform these places. So wherever you go, always keep your eyes open for the unexpected and the spontaneous.

And remember, often, the greatest things in our lives come when we don't get in their way with our man-made plans...

Even if you are in a particular place 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 sparks are waiting there for you from the beginning of time – waiting and maybe even crying for you to arrive and finally redeem them ... which is the precise reason you were led to this place.

Remember: Every step you take in your life, regardless of your intentions and state of mind, refines the very spot you are standing on! Every step... without exception.

Always know that the place where you presently are – wherever that may be – has been waiting from the beginning of time for you to arrive there and do something special!

Imagine that: The place, the people, everyone – has been waiting for you to arrive...

So focus your attention, and take the initiative to shine light on your surroundings. Amen.

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