

42 Journeys...

Matos Maasei 5782/2022

There is an app called map my run, it is for those people who want to feel good about getting up at 5:00am on an icy winter morning, who don their tracksuit and gloves, lace up their running shoes, and head out the door. They look at the world around them, they see their car windows glossed over under the street light glow. They run down the block, nearly trip over a root that has buckled the concrete pathway, because the moment you leave the confines of your own house suddenly you are consumed by darkness. And then you run, you run, and run and run. All that time you are passing historical monuments and museums, you are passing the corridors of power, you go past manmade feats of engineering, and Godly feats of nature. Then after 45 minutes or an hour, you return home, having not turned back, because you went around a roundabout and just kept turning left, you stretch it out, hop in the shower, grab a coffee, and then you sit down on your phone and check out your run. You do this because, it was so dark, and so cold, you aren't sure of where you actually went to, or how long it took, or what you passed, or whether you actually even went for a run to anywhere significant, maybe you spent the time going round and round the roundabout.

But now sitting with your caffeine and your central ducted heating, you can look back at the journey, see the landmarks, see the length, see the calorie count, and finally after you have recovered from mild hypothermia, you can see the growth and development you have made.

This is how I imagine the Jewish people feeling when sitting down and reading this week's Parasha. The second Parasha Maasei, details all forty two journeys the Jewish people.¹

Moshe uploads all the journeys into the most ancient of apps, the Torah, and everything is settled. The Jewish people know where they came from, where they went, and where they arrived to.

The question is, what is the point. What is the point of needing to know where you went, how far you journeyed, what you did at certain places? Why does the Torah spend 49 verses explaining these journeys?

Our Sages give us three explanations. The first so that we realise the Jewish people were not just walking endlessly, while it was a punishment to engage in a nomadic lifestyle, the wandering itself was not a punishment². The second to look back at the journey and the various acts and miracles that occurred³. And the final explanation is because of the risk of future generations forgetting the happenings of the Jewish people⁴.

The question I pose, is whether these are satisfying, do these explanations give us the true sense of the importance of these journeys.

These three commentators seem to focus solely on the physical journeys themselves – yes they remark on the miraculous events, and the time taken, but they are still specific to the journeys. What is interesting for me, is the notion of the spiritual progression or journeying that occurs over the course of the physical wandering.

Leaving Egypt as slaves the Jewish people had to transform themselves from being a fractured people to being a nation. They had to adjust from being under the dominion of man, to being under

the divine rule of Hashem. They had to transition from a monotonous daily routine, to being subjected to the waxing and waning of the days and months through the annual cycle.

These were the people that had to go from the mundane and profane, to the spiritual and sacred in a matter of seven weeks, and through multiple stumbling's, tripping and falling down, they had to continue to journey on, side by side with the Almighty.

When one looks at this journey, when you see these places, when you see the miracles or the tragedies that occurred at each place, you see the humanity of the situation, the fact that these people were real people despite their elevated status, they made mistakes, they contained the frailties of humanity that all of us are prone to sharing with the wider world, when you look back at this journey you can see the growth and development of the people.

You see each step as a milestone, you see each making of camp as the strengthening of the nation, you see each rest stop as being the moment of divine communication, of spiritual ascent and possibly of real world downfall.

This isn't just a physical wandering, but a spiritual one.

For me as a modern orthodox Jew, this idea of wandering, of engaging with the world, of slipping up and falling down, of making mistakes, of addressing our frailties, of bonding with our neighbours, of admitting our flaws, of celebrating our achievements – this is the very essence of what it means to be part of this people.

We are not told to be cloistered up, stagnant, unwilling to evolve. We are also not meant to abandon the path completely. We are meant to be aware of our journey, with our eyes set forward on what is to come, on how to engage and connect with the world, but with the knowledge of the past, both the positive and negative of that journey.

This is what modern orthodoxy is, this is its goal, and I believe that this week's Parasha is here as a guide to that goal.

All citations can be found in **A New Page of Talmud**