

## Dvar Torah - Shabbat Morning Mattot Masei 5783

Shabbat Shalom! This morning, along with Jewish communities all around the world, we read the double portion of Mattot-Masei which concludes the book of BaMidbar. The book of Bamidbar tells the story of how our ancestors spent 40 years sojourning in the wilderness before entering the land of Israel, and it does so in a manner which can often be hard to follow. The majority of the book focuses on the first two years and the last two years of this 40 year period *and* it is not always clear how we should understand the sequence of events recounted. Now as we conclude the book, we find ourselves finally at the edge of the land of Israel, preparing to enter. In parashat Masei, Bamidbar concludes with a list of each of the places where the children of Israel traveled during this time in the wilderness.

Why? Why does this holy book wrap up its story with this recapitulation of locations in the wilderness? Ostensibly, we just read the book! We know the places where the children of Israel stopped along the way! So, why do we revisit our past in such elaborate detail?

You might think that the answer to this question is obvious. We Jews - we love to talk about the past. We are a people who has been repeating the same stories about our ancestors for thousands of years! We should

not be surprised to find that the book of Bamidbar retells part of our story. That is simply what we do.

Of course, this is all true. However, there is another layer here to my question. According to verse 33:2, Moshe wrote down all of the journeys and departures of the children of Israel “by the word of Hashem.” As the classical interpreter Ramban understands this verse, G-d *commands* Moses not only to retell this story of where the people have sojourned but to write it all down. Again, why? What is so crucial about this recounting of the past such that G-d instructed Moses to record it for posterity?

To speak personally for a moment, I understand this impulse to revisit the past in the midst of a current moment of transition. As I am beginning in the role of rabbi of this congregation, I find myself very curious about the history of this synagogue and the broader Binghamton community. Once I chose to accept this position, some of the first questions I found myself asking were about the history of the shul: “How has X or Y been done before and why? When was the shul founded and by whom? How has the congregation changed over time and what factors have influenced the way the shul has evolved?”

As we schmooze over kiddush next week or sit down to meet in my office or a coffee shop, don't be surprised if I ask you a similar set of

historical questions on a more personal level. “How did you first get connected to Temple Israel? What have been some of your favorite aspects of belonging to Temple Israel? Why do you continue to feel it is worthwhile and important to be a part of this community?” I believe this kind of retrospective question can help us to get our bearings as we plot a path forward together.

So, I can understand how Moses himself might have been drawn to write down his memory of where the people of Israel had traveled and camped over the past 40 years. I identify with an impulse to revisit the past. In fact, this week, in the evenings, I have been reading the history book of Temple Israel. It is a wide black book which was printed in 1968 as the congregation dedicated its first building in this location. There are some remarkable vignettes of the community’s past which are recounted. I was particularly moved by a short article about the Ladies Aid Society which operated from 1907 - 1950 and gave tzedakah to many needy families, especially new immigrants from the old country. The author details how women would band together to raise funds to buy chickens, eggs, and bread for the hungry and to offer a spare mattress to those who needed shelter.

The first several pages of the history book consist of an essay authored by Rabbi Hurwitz, of blessed memory, which, incidentally, can help us to begin to answer our question: why is it important to recount our history in detail in the midst of a moment of transition?

In addition to recording several interesting details about the earliest Jewish settlers in the area, Rabbi Hurwitz makes two claims about the value and purpose of recounting our history. In his introduction he justifies the project by writing “questions ought to be answered before what little is known of our past local history is forgotten.” In other words, the first purpose of recounting the past is to prevent it from being forgotten. Then, later in his essay, Rabbi Hurwitz expressed his hope and prayer that telling the history of Temple Israel will serve as “a living tribute to the faith, devotion, and determination of all who helped make the dream a reality.” In other words, he hoped that this retrospective history might also serve as inspiration for the current leadership of the congregation as they set about writing a new chapter of the temple’s history through faith, devotion, and determination.

Unsurprisingly, these words of Rabbi Hurwitz about the value of writing down Temple Israel’s history echo the words of the classical medieval commentators on our parasha who weigh in on the question of

why Moses needed to write down a list of the journeys of the children of Israel. Yet, looking closely at the words of these classical commentators will also offer us additional perspectives with which to think about the risks and rewards of revisiting the past. I hope that through paraphrasing their words, I can offer a framework to guide us as we both look to the past and to the future in this moment of transition.

Rashi, the most well-known of medieval commentators on the Torah, explains that the reason G-d wants Moshe to record the name of each place where the people camped is to emphasize the immense compassion of the Divine. When you actually crunch the numbers, as Rashi does, it becomes clear that the Children of Israel were not constantly wandering from place to place. Rather, over the course of 38 years, they pitched their tents in 22 different locations. This means they moved an average of once every 1.72 years. As someone who has just moved, that certainly does not sound easy. However, it seems there was much more stability in the day to day lives of the Israelites than we typically think of. So, according to Rashi the record of the places they camped will serve as a reminder of G-d's great compassion.

Rashi's reading of the purpose of this history contrasts with that of Sforino, an Italian rabbi and commentator who lived in the 15th and 16th

centuries. Sforno says that G-d's goal here was to remind the people of *their merits* and praiseworthy behavior. In his view, this detailed account is intended to teach us that despite G-d schlepping the children of Israel all over the desert, we followed along with faith. Our hard work and dedication paid off.

In different ways, each of these comments rhyme with the second goal of history as articulated in Rabbi Hurwitz's essay. The objective of recounting the past is to celebrate the faith and devotion of both G-d and the People of Israel in order to inspire us as we continue on in our sacred covenantal relationship. While Rabbi Hurwitz hoped retelling the first half of the history of TI would inspire dedication, devotion and faith in the leaders to follow, G-d instructed Moshe to write down their places of travel to inspire the people to carry on with faith, devotion, and dedication as we pursue our sacred mission to be a collective vehicle of wisdom and blessing in the world.

One more dimension of recounting the past is introduced by the Spanish sage and commentator Ramban. He claims that the act of writing gives a greater sense of legitimacy to what might otherwise seem to be a fanciful account. If we simply *heard* from prior generations of how our ancestors survived in the wilderness, we might have assumed that the

wilderness was not such a harsh place to live; we might have reasoned that the people of Israel were in a rural, agricultural area instead of a true desert. But, this was simply not the case. G-d miraculously provided food and water for 40 years in a land without crops. To paraphrase an ancient rabbinic expression, if it were not written down, we would not be able to believe it! This parallels the first purpose of history according to Rabbi Hurwitz, while also pushing us further. Without a written record, even if we did not forget the past, we might consider our memory of the past to be a romantic exaggeration rather than a true recounting of how things were.

Yet, of course, even when we write stories down we are prone to romanticization and exaggeration. This can be risky. If we have an overly romanticized picture in our minds of how things used to be, it becomes impossible for us to embrace the possibilities and blessings of the current moment. So, as members of the Jewish people and as members of this congregation, we must honestly appraise our past, cherish our recollections, and allow ourselves to celebrate the new possibilities that the future may bring.

Before concluding his comment about the purpose of recounting Israel's wandering in the wilderness, Ramban adds an odd note. He says, who knows, perhaps there was another secret reason why G-d

commanded Moshe to write down this history. Perhaps, in the future when we look back on the past with fresh eyes, we will notice something new that will pave our path forward.

In this spirit, I want to invite you all to join me in reflecting together on the journeys of this congregation of Israel in the hope that doing so may bring forth new fruits, new blessings, for us, for all the people of Israel, and for the world.