

# DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

## Parshas Masei

### The Journeys of the Children of Israel

אֵלֶּה מַסְעֵי בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם

*These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt.<sup>1</sup>*

#### INTRODUCTION: FROM EGYPT TO ISRAEL IN FORTY-TWO STAGES

The opening section of our parsha lists all the places where Jewish people encamped during the forty years from when they left Egypt until they were about to enter the land of Israel. The earliest commentators already discuss the meaning behind the Torah detailing all these places. What is it meant to teach us?

Rashi, citing R' Moshe Hadarshan, explains that the goal is to inform us of Hashem's kindness. Officially, that generation was being punished with wandering through the desert for forty years on account of the episode with the spies. However, these verses inform us that, in actuality, they only journeyed a total of forty two times, fourteen of which had already taken place in the first year.

The Rambam<sup>2</sup> writes that the listing of the places is to underscore the miraculous nature of Jewish people's sojourn in the Wilderness. We should not think that they were constantly near civilization, with accompanying conditions that could support them naturally. To that end, the Torah informs us of the places they encamped, all of which are far from any places which had resources that could sustain them.

#### SEFORNO: IN PRAISE OF THE JEWISH PEOPLE

A most beautiful explanation of the Torah's account of the people's journeyings is given by the Seforno:

*Hashem, may He be blessed, desired that the journeys of Israel be written, to make their merit known, that they followed after Him in the wilderness, into a unsown land, so that they would thereby be fitting to enter the land.*

According to the Seforno, the goal of their journeyings was not simply to experience Divine retribution, but to amass Divine merit. The words "that they followed after Him in the wilderness, into a unsown

1 Bamidbar 33:1.

2 Moreh Nevuchim sec. 3 chap. 50.

land” are taken from the verse in Yirmiyahu<sup>3</sup> where Hashem tells the people, “זְכַרְתִּי לְךָ חֶסֶד נְעוּרַיִךְ – אֶהְבֵּת כְּלוּלֹתַיִךְ לְכַתֵּךְ אַחֲרַי בְּמִדְבָּר בְּאֶרֶץ לֹא זְרוּעָה – I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the Wilderness, into an unsown land.” The point of the Seforno is that the love and faith demonstrated by the Jewish people, when they initially followed Hashem from Egypt into the wilderness, continued to be expressed in every ensuing journey over the course of the next forty years. This in turn became the source of merit through which they could eventually enter the land.

With this perspective on the journeys, Chumash Bamidbar emerges as ending off on a positive and affirming note. Arguably, of all the Chumashim, Bamidbar contains the most mishaps and setbacks. With so many negative episodes presented seemingly as happening one after the other, one could have closed this Chumash with the impression that the people did nothing right for all that time. Our parsha presents the backdrop against which all those episodes need to be considered. For all the mistakes, which are discussed in intricate and distressing detail, the overwhelming theme of those forty years was that of the people developing their faith and following Hashem to wherever He may lead them – bumps and all!

### **EXODUS AS EVENT AND AS PROCESS**

Taking this discussion one stage further, the Malbim explains that the people’s journeys through the Wilderness were not “just” about amassing merit. The opening verse introduces them as “the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt.” This reference to leaving Egypt is not limited to the starting point of their journeys, but is a statement about all of the journeys. A recurring theme throughout the time on the wilderness is that the people had not fully shaken off their sense of attachment to Egypt, and in times of crisis or uncertainty, they felt a push to return there.

This leads us to a paradox regarding our time in Egypt. On the one hand, the verse on Chumash Devarim<sup>4</sup> refers to it as the smelting furnace that refined us from impurities. This refinement took place at the core level of our identity as a people. However, at the same time, in a behavioral and cultural sense, our stay there exacted a toll and we adopted certain outlooks and attitudes that are antithetical to our ethos as a people.

Indeed, it is largely due to the second aspect that we had to leave Egypt in a hurry, seemingly before the four hundred years were up. However, this means that when we left, we took some of Egypt with us. As such, although the event of the Exodus took place on Pesach of that year, the process of the Exodus was yet unfinished. And yet, we could not meaningfully enter the land of Israel without first leaving Egypt in the full and fundamental sense of the word. It was this process of shaking off these foreign attitudes, thereby readying us to enter the land, that was achieved by our time in the Wilderness. The ongoing experience of following Hashem from station to station, in addition to the specific experiences we encountered at each of those stations, being miraculously sustained all the while, was effectively the continuation and culmination of the Exodus. Thus, when the verse says “These are the journeys of the Children of Israel who went forth from the land of Egypt,” it means to say that through these journeys, the people finished the process of leaving Egypt.

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3 2:2.

4 4:20.

## JOURNEYS AND EXPERIENCES – WHICH COME FROM WHICH?

Verse 2 of the opening chapter reads:

וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמַסְעֵיהֶם עַל פִּי ה' וְאֵלֶּה מַסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם

*Moshe wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the bidding of Hashem, and these were their journeys according to their goings forth.*

Why is the phrase “מוֹצְאֵיהֶם לְמַסְעֵיהֶם” repeated – and reversed – at the end of the verse – “מַסְעֵיהֶם לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם”?

R' Yehuda Aszod<sup>5</sup> explains. The term “מַסְעֵיהֶם” refers to their journey, while “מוֹצְאֵיהֶם” refers to the experiences they took out (הוֹצִיאָו) from those journeys. We typically see the cause and effect relationship between these two things as the experience being a function of the journey, i.e. “because I was there, I experienced such and such.” We fail to consider that sometimes, the relationship is reversed: it was *in order for me to have that experience* that Hashem arranged for me to be there. It was this perspective that Moshe was seeking to impart to the people by relating their experiences: when you recall your “experiences from your journeys,” but realize that these journeys were “by Hashem’s bidding,” you will come to understand that it was the journeys that were the product of the experiences, in order to enable them.

### LINES OF TRAVEL

The forty-two journeys of our ancestors through the wilderness would not appear to have any impact on our own day-to-day living – yet curiously, they do. The Tur<sup>6</sup> writes, in the name of R' Yehuda of Barcelona, that the columns in a sefer Torah should contain forty-two lines each. The commentary on the Tur known as the Perishah explains that these correspond to the forty-two journeys of the Jewish people in the Wilderness.

What is the meaning behind this connection?

It is to teach us that the collective wisdom our ancestors gleaned from their wanderings in the desert is all contained and available for us in the lines of the sefer Torah that we read.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in all generations, the Jewish people, both as a people and as individuals, have their journeys and experiences. The Torah is our guide for navigating all those journeys, informing us what we should be taking from them and how we should be acting within them. And indeed, throughout our many travels over the centuries, the Torah has always accompanied us, giving us strength, guidance and illumination. In the merit of our faithfulness to its message for us in all times and places, may we soon conclude the final journey in our current wilderness and reach our desired destination in our beloved land with the final redemption – speedily and in our days.

## חזק חזק ונתחזק

5 *Divrei Mahari" a, Parshas Masei.*

6 *Yoreh Deah 275.*

7 *Va'anafeha Arzei El.*