

A FUTURE BUILT ON THE PAST

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

"And Moshe wrote their departures according to their journeys by the word of G-d, and these are their journeys according to their departures..." [33:2]

This verse is confusing. First of all, it seems redundant. The previous verse begins "These are the journeys of the Children of Israel..." and thus we already know that Moshe is in the process of writing them down. And whether "by the word of G-d" is intended to refer to Moshe's writing (as Nachmanides says) or the journeys themselves (the opinion of the Ibn Ezra), we already know that both are true. But furthermore, why must the verse repeat, and reverse, both "departures" and "journeys?"

My thanks to Rabbi Yonason Hirtz for the following insight: one lesson of this verse is that when we look to the future, we must also know our past; and when we look back into our past, we must also realize what lies ahead. The (future) departures must be according to the (previous) journeys, and we must look at our past journeys with an eye towards upcoming departures. We must always remain cognizant of the entire continuum of Jewish history.

The first part of this is very understandable: our future must be built upon our past. "Learn from the lessons of history," or in more specifically Jewish terms, "ma'aseh avos siman l'banim," the stories of the forefathers are a sign for the children. We should use the lives of our forebears as guidelines for the future. How did Avraham deal with Avimelech? How did Yaakov deal with Esav? From these stories, we learn what we should do in similar situations.

What does it mean, though, that one must also remain cognizant of the future when looking at the past? The answer, which is very relevant to the Three Weeks of mourning between the Seventeenth of Tammuz and Tisha B'Av, is: hope. When we look back in our past, there are terrible stories. Times of destruction, causes for mourning. But we must always remain aware of the bright future that lies ahead.

Tisha B'Av is the nadir, as it were, of the Jewish calendar. G-d said that since the people mourned needlessly on that day when the spies returned, He would set it aside as a day when we would need to mourn. It is the day both Temples were destroyed. It is the anniversary of the Expulsion from Spain. It is also, according to some, the day the first gas chamber was activated, as well as the start of World War One, which brought Hitler to power.

Yet our Rabbis decreed that Tachanun, the penitential prayers, should not be recited on Tisha B'Av,

just as they are not said on all Jewish holidays. Why? To remind us that in the future, it will be a day of rejoicing! It is the birthday of the Messiah, and thus a day of redemption.

So yes, let us turn and look at our past -- but not without hope for a bright and beautiful future, more than we can imagine.