

JOURNEYS

by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein

Journeys¹

What does it take to make a *parshah* come alive that seems to speak only of a distant past? How are we to find meaning in series of place- names completely foreign to us who couldn't locate any one of them today?

It takes but a single thought of the Besht.

So much falls into place when we realize that the forty-two legs of Bnei Yisrael's wilderness expedition point to the way every Jew must approach the great journey of his own life.

For *Bnei Yisrael*, the path led from their birth as a nation at the time of the Exodus, and took them to a permanent home and resting place in *Eretz Yisrael*. They left from a source of *tumah*, and arrived after forty-two mini-journeys in the land of *kedushah*. For each Jew, the journey likewise begins at birth, and ends with entering the land of eternal life above.

The *seforim hakedoshim* observe that the forty-two journeys correspond to the 42 words of *Ana Bokoach*, which has seven lines of six words each. These lines in turn correspond to the seven lower *sefiros*, each one considered in its combination with the other six. *Toras Avos* explained that the upshot of this observation is to expand our conception of our task and job in this world. We understand that we are obligated to meticulously heed all the expectations of halachah in performing all the mitzvos. Beyond that, however, waits another job description. Each of us comes into the world for the purpose of making some contribution to, some *tikkun* in, each of the *midos*² through which Hashem relates to the world. The scope of this task is alluded to in the 42 journeys.

One need not be a kabbalist to appreciate this teaching. The point is that we live as Jews on two tracks. On one of them, we act decidedly like all other Jews act. The expectations are set, firm, and uniform within the parameters of our own group. At the same time, we move along a different track, each one of us on a road not trodden by another, walking very much alone on a very personal journey.

Why, though, is the journey so discontinuous? Why so many starts and stops? Why would the Torah not compare the course of our lives to a single perambulation, given to twists and turns and delays? Why is the journey punctuated with layovers, which turn it into multiple, serial journeys?

In this the Torah alludes to another great truth about the nature of our lives. According to kabbalah, sparks of holiness became fixed in the world at the time of Creation. Their *kedushah* was such that their brilliance and power was masked by forces that would keep them hidden - the *kelipos*, or shells, about which the *mekubalim* speak. Another way of looking at our purpose in life is to find those *kelipos* and reveal and elevate the sparks inside them. The 42 mini-journeys accentuate the fact that these *nitzotzos* are everywhere, and that *Bnei Yisrael* stopped in those places to find the good that lay dormant there, waiting to be exposed. (Were it not for the sin of Adam and Chava, nothing of the sort would have been necessary, taught the *Ohev Yisrael*. With that sin came a blurring of the distinction between good and evil, and the mixing and blending of the two, particularly in the form of *nitzotzei kedushah* scattered about, always intermixed with the *tumah* of the *kelipos*. Man would now be charged with the labor of separating them.)

The generation of the wilderness in particular was up to the task. So says the Zohar,³ in understanding the Torah's description of that wilderness. It was "great and awesome, [a place of] snake, serpent, scorpion and thirst where there was no water,"⁴ exceeding the harshness of other places unfriendly to human habitation. The Zohar sees these dangers as symptomatic of the *tumah* that suffused the area. Precisely because of the lofty level this generation attained, Hashem led them on a path to confront that *tumah* head-on. They would challenge it, overcome it, and tame it in the process. Were it not for the sins they committed, they could have fully contained it, resulting in the complete universal *tikkun*. While that was not to be, they did succeed in weakening the *tumah* they encountered.

The place-names do not really indicate locales of population concentration - the wilderness did not lend itself to producing so many population centers. Rather, each stopover yielded a dividend of *kedushah* through Klal Yisrael's weakening of the *tumah* that encased it. Each place-name indicates the nature of that dividend, taught the Magid of Zlotchov. (While we do not have a firm grasp on the nature of either the *tumah* or the *kedushah* of a given place, we get some idea of the possibilities through a teaching of the *Kedushas Levi*, who makes an object lesson of one of them. We are told that *Bnei Yisrael* encamped at *Charadah*.⁵ The name suggests a place associated with intense fear, albeit a negative, counterproductive one. By overcoming it, they turned around the fear itself, elevating it to an instrument of progress, of reverence for *kedushah*. We can see in this example how other challenges they encountered in their long trek could have similarly been transformed for the better.)

Following this approach, we understand why there was such disparity in the amount of time *Bnei Yisrael* spent in different stops along the way. *Kadesh Barnea* occupied them for nineteen years; they left other places after a day or two. If we assume that each place presented its own challenge, we grasp that some of those required more time to successfully deal with than others. The more latent *kedushah* resident in a place, the longer they needed to spend uncovering it.

Keep in mind that the subject at hand is no academic exercise. According to the Besht, *parshas Mas'ei* is nothing less than a mission statement of every Jew. Each of us comes into the world with a mixture of good and bad tendencies, every person according to the source of his *neshamah* in the upper worlds. Our job is to unravel the two, to separate the good from the bad. The path we must take bears our individual imprint. We cannot shift roles, or trade someone else's job for our own. The *Yesod Avodah* cites the Ari to the effect that on two days from the beginning of time, indeed no two hours, were ever meant to be equivalent. What was supposed to be accomplished at one moment cannot be compensated for at another. Each moment in time is its own challenge, its own opportunity. Similarly, no two people can take identical life trajectories. Each life is a complete world unto itself.

The Zohar we cited above emphasized how the wilderness traveled by *Bnei Yisrael* was hostile and difficult. We should expect nothing different in our own personal journey. Getting the job done well requires us to spend time in an environment of burning desires and navigating our way through the *kelipos*.

The difficulties are much easier to bear when we realize the parallel to the journey to the Promised Land. The environment was harsh, and the path was convoluted. Yet, every step was guided by Hashem. Nothing was random; nothing was gratuitous. So it is with the unpredictable and complex course of our own lives. We need to stop in many way-stations on the road to our destination. Every place we find ourselves, every new situation that arises, is meant to be. Every one is an opportunity to elevate in some manner the inner content of what lies therein.

¹ Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 175-178

² The Rebbe uses the word "midos" as synonymous with "sefiros." Those with a bent towards mussar and looking at the avodah within the person, rather than within the spiritual cosmos, should consider the teaching in kabbalah that the sefiros /midos of the macrocosm are refracted in the neshamah of each person. The sefiros are a template for perfection of the inner person, of good character. Working on those traits is also a form of tikkun of the midos the Rebbe speaks about here.

³ 2:183B

⁴ Devarim 8:15

⁵ Bamidbar 33:24. The word means "fear" or "trembling."