

LIFE'S JOURNEY - A BUMPY ROAD

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

As summer rolls in, 'travel' is a word that is likely occupying many readers' thoughts. Perhaps not-so-coincidentally, this week's parsha deals extensively with the concept of travel. The first journey upon which Bnei Yisrael embarked, leaving Har Sinai after encamping there for almost a full year, is found in parshas Be-halosecha (10:11- 29). There is the "Book" (see Talmud, Shabbos 116a) of, *"Va-yehi b-nsoa ha-aron..., And it was when the Ark travelled..."* (10:35-36). And there is the lengthy description of the general procedure of travel in the desert (9:15-23). [A quick search on the Bar Ilan database for parshas Be-halosecha turned up 33 instances of the root Nasa, to travel!]

Corresponding to physical travel, there is the concept of spiritual travel. We are all - like it or not - on a lifelong spiritual journey. Our journey begins the day we are born, and will relentlessly force us to journey on, in one direction or the other, until our lives on this world come to their conclusion. The "journey of life," and of personal/spiritual growth, is a complex, multifaceted voyage that defies definition and has perplexed humanity since the beginning of its existence.

Much to our chagrin, the path of our journeys is usually not as straight and as balanced as we might like. The process of growth and maturing - of our quest to become the best and fullest Ovdei Hashem (servants of Hashem) we can - is fraught with pitfalls; sometimes the ups and downs can be daunting. We ask ourselves: Is there anything wrong with me if my pathway to perfection (shleimus) is far from consistent? Am I the only one who struggles? Is there a straight and unswerving path - and how do I get to it?

Let us hearken back to our childhood, to our earliest memories and before. Rabbi Moshe Chaim Efrayim of Sidilkov zt'l ("Degel Machaneh Efrayim" citing Rabbi Yehudah Leib Pistiner zt'l) compares our journey/struggle to an infant learning to walk. With great trepidation, one tiny hand firmly grasped by the strong, reassuring grip of his father, he shuffles his feet and with great effort and satisfaction takes his first steps. His parents' joy is reflected in the smile on his own face. Egged-on by their enthusiasm, he takes another step, then another.

Suddenly, he feels the reassuring hand of his father loosen its grip. Soon he stands alone and unsupported. His face, previously a bastion of joy and self-assurance, now reflects fear and apprehension. Silently he accuses. "Tatty (father)! How can you abandon me like this? You tricked me!" "And I: My feet nearly faltered; my steps were almost washed away! (Tehillim/Psalms 73:2)" His hands silently reach out for support; none is forthcoming. He turns his gaze towards his father, expecting anger and cruelty; after all, he has abandoned him. Instead, he sees a face full of love and

encouragement. If expressions could talk, his father might be saying: "Until now, my son, I have supported you; now it's time to do it on your own. You can do it!" Encouraged, the boy timidly lifts up one of his feet and takes his first independent step. Perhaps, somewhere deep within, he understands that, as hard as it was for his father to let go, if he hadn't done so, he might never have dared to walk on his own.

Sometimes, we too may feel like the little boy. We take on something new. At first, we filled with enthusiasm and energy. It doesn't seem difficult at all! This is the Almighty - Avinu She-BaShamayim, our Father in Heaven - holding our hand, and helping us take the first step on what promises to be a new leg in our journey. Once we have the feel of things, Hashem, so to speak, lets go. We are daunted - we no longer feel the energy and devotion we felt at first. We begin to reconsider. Our thoughts, which had before seemed so clear, are now murky. We feel lost.

This is the time for true growth - to bravely throw ourselves into the task, and thus to take our first "independent" steps. It is written (Tehillim/Psalms 48:15), "For this is G-d, our G-d, for ever and ever; He will lead us as a child." Like the child who must, against his will, learn to let go of Tatty's support and forge his own way, we too must at times serve Hashem in the face of great Hastaras Panim (Concealment of Hashem's Presence), in order that we too may accomplish true growth and fullness in our relationship with Him.

When describing the "journeys" of B'nei Yisrael, the Torah re-iterates numerous times (see 9:18, 9:20, 9:23 etc.), "By the word of Hashem they travelled, and by the word of Hashem they rested." At first Hashem gives us a taste of "travel" - we feel inspiration and growth in our avodah. Afterward, there is bound to come a period of "rest" - things cool off, and we feel uninspired and unsupported. This too is "by the word of Hashem" - to afford us an opportunity for tremendous growth, while Der Tatte in Himmel (Father in Heaven) looks on and encourages us to bravely take new steps in spiritual growth and Torah observance. Fortunate is he who does not balk in the face of difficulty, but accepts the challenge with courage and renewed strength. His "journey," though bumpy, will be a satisfying and fruitful one. Happy travels!

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