

ON THE ROAD OF LIFE

by Rabbi Berel Wein

It is hard to be on the road constantly. From my own personal life, I remember that the years when I was the rabbinic head of the OU Kashruth Division were some of the most difficult of my life, in no small way due to the inordinate amount of traveling that the job then entailed. The Talmud lists travel as one of the things in life that are enjoyable in moderation but destructive in overuse. Therefore, the listing of the forty two different travels and way-stations of the people of Israel in the desert of Sinai, is truly daunting. No wonder the people complained and grumbled. And even though Rashi points out that the Jewish people encamped in one place, Kadesh Barnea, for thirty eight of their forty years in the desert, the travels of the people in those two years - forty one journeys - were certainly grueling experiences. What, therefore, was the purpose of all of these travels and travails? What was the ennobling quality of that travel experience that was meant to improve Israel's spirituality and Godly mission? And what are we, the descendants of those desert-wandering Israelites of almost three millennia ago, to learn from their experience of travel in order to better our lives and society?

I think that there are a number of hard-won lessons here. Firstly, that all worthy goals in life involve travel, loneliness, sacrifice, discomfort and dogged persistence. There are no direct, non-stop flights in life. There are always close connections to be made, transfers to be accomplished, luggage to be stored, taken with or discarded, as the case may be. We are always on the road as long as we live. Our task is to have clearly defined destinations and the strength of will to reach those destinations, no matter how many detours in life we are forced to take. The Torah prescribes for Jews both national and personal destinations and goals. It also outlines for us a road map of life to help us accomplish our journey. The past decades and even centuries have shown us how catastrophic it can be for Jews, individually and collectively, to ignore the Torah's road map and instead follow their own sense of direction. The generation of the desert were forced to endure forty two way stations on its way to the Promised Land. But it had the distinct advantage of knowing where it was heading. The only way to survive the trip that life bids us take is to know our destination. Then, the unavoidable difficulties of the trip somehow become more bearable.

Secondly, there is the understanding that our journey is a dangerous one. The Talmud enjoins Jews returning home from a major voyage to recite a blessing of thanksgiving for having survived the journey. Rashi points out that Moses reminded the Jewish people of the problems, dangers and deliverance that occurred at each and every one of the forty two desert way stations. Rashi uses the metaphor of a parent reminding a child "that here you had a headache, here you stubbed your foot,

etc." in order to impress upon us that every way station in life is fraught with dangers and cruelties. Even with God's protective clouds and fire hovering over the Israelite camp in the desert, the Jews of that generation were not spared the heartbreaks and disappointments of life, as represented by the forty two way stations of Sinai. And successfully dealing with one challenge of life, leaving one way station whole and strong, does not diminish the difficulties of the next - and there always is a next - challenge of life, of the second or forty second way station. Thus the travels of our ancestors in the Sinai desert light the way for our journey in life as well. The blessing of thanksgiving to G-d is one that should be remembered on a regular basis throughout our trip to our holy destination.

Shabat Shalom.

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