A BOOK OF MEMORIES

by Rabbi Berel Wein

The double parsha of this week pretty much concludes the narrative portion of the Torah. The stops and encampments of the Jewish nation during their forty year stay in the desert of Sinai are dutifully recorded. What is the purpose of this holy travelogue? After all, at first glance it appears to be nothing more than a list of places and oases, most of whose locations are completely unknown to later generations. Even the true location of Mount Sinai, the lowly peak where the Torah was given to Israel and the world, is a subject of archeological and historical disputes.

So of what value are all of the names and places listed in the parsha? This question is certainly not original with me. Over the ages, the scholars of Israel have attempted to unfathom the matter of the names of the places in the Sinai desert that appear in our parsha. Many commentators and the Midrash itself found deeper meanings and moral lessons lurking behind the recitation and spelling of the name of the place itself. Such names as kivrot hataavah - the burial place of desire and lust - certainly bear out such understandings.

However, not all of the names and places mentioned in the parsha lend themselves as easily to such explanations and interpretations. The masters of kabala and Chasidut imparted mystical and even prophetic overtones to these names. They gave them an other-worldly dimension. As appealing as such ideas are to our spiritual bent, the rule of Torah interpretation - *ein hamikra yotzei midei pshuto* - the verse in the Torah always means its simple straightforward sense - causes us to remain with the question of why this list of names of places in the Sinai desert is included in such length and detail in the parsha.

Rashi gives us an inkling of the moral lesson that drives the inclusion of this list of names of places in the Torah. It served and serves as a memory book. Much as on occasions of joy and sadness the family gathers round to look at old photographs and to reminisce together about the past, so too does the Torah indulge us in such an experience here in the parsha.

Reminiscences and nostalgia are part of the glue that binds families and generations together. Past experiences recalled become shared family experiences. Without the list of where we were in the Sinai desert and what occurred to us there, all of the great moral challenges, failings and lessons that represent that period of time and formative generations of Israel would be muted if not even lost to us.

I am certain that all of us are aware that the naming of streets in cities all over the world is meant to

give life, memory and continuity to the past in order to inspire strength in the present and faith in the future. Throughout our long exile, the Jewish people have always remembered where we were and what occurrences befell us there. To a great extent, this has been part of our arsenal of survival. So pay heed too these names of ancient places. They are our family photographs and grant us guidance for our future.

Shabat shalom.

Rabbi Berel Wein Rabbi Berel Wein- Jewish historian, author and international lecturer offers a complete selection of CDs, audio tapes, video tapes, DVDs, and books on Jewish history at www.rabbiwein.com

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