

FINAL DESTINATION

by Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parshiyot mark the conclusion of the book of Bamidbar, the book with the longest narrative of the events that befell the Jewish people during their sojourn in the Sinai desert. On the whole, the events described in Bamidbar are fairly depressing. The great hopes of marching into the Land of Israel on a short three-day journey which appear at the beginning of the book were dashed by the acts of rebellion and foolishness committed against God and Moshe recorded in the latter part of the book.

Moshe himself is also destined to die now, never to reach the Land of Israel. So the recitation of all of the stops and oases that marked the Jewish journey from Egypt to the Land of Israel conjures up bittersweet memories. There is always a sense of what might have been, of opportunities lost and mistakes made.

I think that is probably true of all of us when we look back at our lives, journeys, decisions and behavior. Life many times is made up of a series of regrets. But the danger is to dwell constantly on those matters. It prevents further positive planning and actions and it weakens one's resolve to live productively and meaningfully.

The recitation of the places in the desert where Israel dwelled is a reminder of both insights. It allows the people to recall the mistakes of the past but it points them towards the fulfillment of their goal of entry into the Land of Israel. One should never operate an automobile without looking regularly into the rear view mirror, yet one's attention must constantly be riveted on looking through the front windshield to see the road and conditions ahead.

Over the long exile of the Jewish people and our complete dispersion over the face of the globe we have stopped at many locales. Sometimes the stop was a relatively short one but most times it was for the duration of many centuries. Babylonia (present day Iraq) was a Jewish home for millennia, while Iberia, North Africa, Poland, Germany and many other European countries housed us for eight hundred years. But, somehow, no matter how long we stayed in a certain place and how productive and secure we may have felt regarding our situation, all of our stops along the way proved to be temporary and impermanent.

The journeys of the Jewish people proved to be, in a manner of speaking, an endless trek. But it always seemingly had a goal. The great Rabbi Nachman of Breslov stated that "every step I take on this earth leads me towards Jerusalem." All of the stops, no matter how long their duration in the

Exile of Israel, were eventually nothing more than way stops.

Rabbi Meir Simcha of Dvinsk summarized it succinctly in his ringing assessment of Jewish exile: "Woe to the ones who imagine that Berlin is Jerusalem." Well, we now all know that Berlin was far from being Jerusalem but there are names of other current cities in the Jewish Diaspora that can easily be substituted for Berlin in his prescient statement. We pray that our travels are finally coming to an end and that we can strengthen ourselves in that hope on this Shabat of chazak.

Shabat shalom.

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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