

The Next Stop

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There are moments when life feels settled, when the world seems to be moving along familiar tracks and even its difficulties feel manageable because they fit into patterns we recognize. And then there are moments when that sense of order begins to loosen, when events seem to arrive faster than they can be processed, and the future feels less predictable than what came before it.

For the Jewish people, that feeling is not new.

It is the story of our history.

As we proceed through the Three Weeks, reflecting on the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh and the long journey of golus that followed, we learn Parshiyos Mattos-Masei, which, at first glance, appears to be little more than a detailed record of travel stations in the wilderness. The Torah lists, one after another, the places where Klal Yisroel encamped during their forty-year journey from Mitzrayim toward Eretz Yisroel, seemingly offering a geographical itinerary that records where the nation stopped along the way.

Sifrei Kabbolah and drush explain that the forty-two encampments listed in the parsha correspond to the Sheim Mem-Bais, the Divine Name of forty-two letters, indicating that each stop was part of a deeply structured spiritual process, carefully guided and precisely arranged by Hakadosh Boruch Hu to prepare the Jewish people for their ultimate entry into Eretz Yisroel.

What appears to be a travel log is, in truth, a map of destiny. This explains the teaching of Chazal (Brachos 8b) that we are obligated to read and study the parsha each week shnayim mikra v'echod targum. Chazal add that this obligation extends to "afilu Ataros v'Divon," the names of the places where the Jews camped in the midbar. Though the names of these places have no apparent significance and no targum, we are nevertheless obligated to recite them, because every stop and every name carries profound meaning.

Our ancestors were not wandering aimlessly in the desert for forty years. They were engaging in a Divinely orchestrated sequence of stages through which Klal Yisroel had to pass in order to become the nation capable of entering the Land promised to Avrohom Avinu. Some of those stages were elevated and uplifting, while others were marked by complaint, failure, or punishment. Yet, all of them together formed the continuous process of national formation.

One of the most profound messages of this week's parshiyos is that life is not defined by isolated moments, but by movement through stages, each of which contributes – even when not immediately understood – to the unfolding of a larger story that becomes visible only when viewed in its entirety.

A person often imagines his life as a series of disconnected events – some meaningful and some confusing, some successful and others disappointing – as though each stands alone without necessarily being part of a unified structure. The Torah, however, teaches otherwise. Every stage is part of a journey, every experience is part of a direction, and every passage through life is part of an overarching design that is guided by the Ribbono Shel Olam with purpose and intention.

We are not static beings. We are travelers, and travelers, by definition, are always in motion, even when that motion is not immediately visible.

This is why Chazal emphasize that adam l'umal yulad, man was created for work, for effort, for striving, for movement toward something beyond his present state. The goal is not to stagnate, not to become too comfortable in one place for too long, but rather to pursue continual growth, continual refinement, and continual advancement through the various stages of life.

There are times when progress is visible and satisfying, and there are moments when it feels as though nothing is moving at all. There are times when a person feels elevated and inspired, and times when he feels weighed down by uncertainty or failure. Parshas Masei reminds us that the journey does not cease during those moments, even if it is no longer perceptible in the same way, because we are always in transit. Always moving.

This idea takes on deeper meaning when we consider one of the most frequently misunderstood descriptions of Klal Yisroel in the Torah: the phrase am k'shei oref, a stiff-necked people, used by Hakadosh Boruch Hu after the chet ha'Eigel. At first glance, it appears to be a rebuke, a criticism of stubbornness that led the nation to sin. Yet, Moshe Rabbeinu, in his plea for forgiveness, transforms this description into a defense, arguing that the same trait that can lead to rebellion can also be the source of extraordinary resilience and unwavering loyalty when directed toward the service of Hashem.

What appears to be a negative – obstinacy – becomes, in the context of Jewish survival, an essential strength.

It is this stubborn continuity that has carried Klal Yisroel through every stage of golus. History is filled with civilizations that rose and fell, empires that dominated the world only to vanish, and cultures that once seemed unshakable but ultimately disappeared into obscurity. Yet, Klal Yisroel, despite having been exiled repeatedly, persecuted relentlessly, and dispersed across continents, has continued forward without interruption.

The Romans thought that they had ended Jewish history with the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh.

The Crusaders thought that they had broken the spirit of Klal Yisroel.

The Cossacks thought that they had extinguished Jewish life in Eastern Europe.

The Nazis declared with chilling confidence that they were implementing the “Final Solution.”

Each generation of our enemies believed that it had brought about the end of our story, and each time, boruch Hashem, they were mistaken.

What they perceived as endings were really transitions. They were simply another station in a journey that continued regardless of how final things appeared at the time.

This becomes particularly evident when we study the accounts of the Holocaust through the lens of those who lived through it with a world of emunah. While secular historians often emphasize helplessness and victimhood, the testimonies of frum survivors reveal something far more complex and far more profound. They describe Jews who clung to mitzvos under the most impossible circumstances, who risked their lives for tefillin, and who never gave up their emunah and bitachon, even under the most trying conditions.

They were not passive. They were defiant in their faith.

And when the war ended, their response was not to remain defined by destruction, but to begin again. Survivors rebuilt families, reestablished yeshivos, revived communities, and laid the foundations for the Torah world that exists today. They did so not because they had recovered from trauma in any conventional sense, but because they understood that Klal Yisroel does not remain in any one place indefinitely.

We move forward.

This pattern can be traced throughout Jewish history.

Take Telz, for example. To describe Telz merely as a town is to miss its significance. It was one of the great centers of Torah in Lithuania, home to a yeshiva that shaped generations of Torah leadership. Sunday was the 20th of Tammuz. On that date, in 5701 (1941), the Jews of Telz were murdered in the Rainiai Forest, and it appeared, at that moment, that an entire world of Torah had been extinguished.

The Nazis were driven not only to destroy lives, but to eradicate an entire spiritual civilization.

But they did not understand the nature of Klal Yisroel. Telz was not extinguished. It was relocated.

Its Torah was carried forward and rebuilt in new places by its leaders, who understood that destruction is never the final word.

Today, the sound of Torah in Yeshivas Telz is loud and strong. On Sunday, Selichos were recited and special shiurim were delivered l'illui nishmos the kedoshei Telz. Their memory lives on. Their sanctified lives are not forgotten.

Similarly, on Tisha B'Av, we mourn the loss of the residents of the ancient city of Beitar. The Rambam describes a city filled with tens of thousands of Jews, led by Bar Kochva, who was believed to be the potential Moshiach, a moment in history when Klal Yisroel stood at the threshold of geulah. And yet, that moment collapsed into catastrophe.

As the Rambam (Hilchos Taanis 5) writes: "A great city by the name of Beitar was captured. Inside it were many tens of thousands of Jewish people. They had a great king whom all of Yisroel and the rabbis believed was the king Moshiach. He fell into the hands of the gentiles and they were all killed. It was a great tragedy, as great as the destruction of the Bais Hamikdosh."

Rav Moshe Shapiro explains that the depth of Tisha B'Av lies not only in what was lost, but in what could have been – in the recognition that Klal Yisroel has stood at the edge of redemption more than once, only to find that the moment slipped away.

And that realization becomes part of the mourning, for we mourn not only the destruction, but also the missed opportunities.

And so, the question naturally arises: How many times in history have we been closer than we realized? How many moments could have unfolded differently? And how often do we fail to recognize the significance of the place we are currently in while we are still standing within it?

These days, we are experiencing many moments that feel historically charged. It is easy to become overwhelmed by the pace of change, to gasp in awe as we perceive Hashem arranging the world for the period of the ultimate geulah.

The Satmar Rebbe would say that after the devastation of the Holocaust, Klal Yisroel stood at the precipice of the geulah. Hashem granted us a glimpse of what redemption would look like – a partial restoration of Jewish life in Eretz Yisroel that was not yet complete, not yet governed by Torah, and not yet accompanied by the rebuilding of the Bais Hamikdosh. It was, in that sense, a station along the way, but not the destination itself.

The Bais Hamikdosh was not returned. Halacha did not rule. It was merely a taste of what was to come.

However, the rebbe would say that because the Jewish people were satisfied with that small taste, Hashem determined that we were not yet deserving of the redemption, and therefore we were left with only a semblance of what could be.

And once again, we were left with yet another stop along the road, another station on the way to geulah.

And that is where we still are today. Moving. Waiting. Building. Continuing along the journey with clarity and faith.

This is the message of Ataros v'Divon, the reason we study every one of the stops in the midbar on the way to Eretz Yisroel. That is the message of Parshas Masei. Until the geulah, no place is the final stop. It is merely a station, and we are not meant to mistake the station for the destination.

We are not meant to settle where we are. We are meant to move. To climb. To grow. To improve. Not to become stationary, apathetic, or content.

People can cycle for miles on a stationary bike, sweating, raising their heart rate, feeling the strain in their legs as though they are accomplishing something significant, and yet they remain in exactly the same place where they began. There is motion, there is effort, there is even exhaustion, but there is no forward movement.

It is possible for a person to be very busy, very active, even very tired from all he is doing, and still remain essentially unchanged. He may feel that he is progressing because he is exerting effort, but if all that effort doesn't translate into forward movement, then he is still standing in the same place where he started.

This is one of the subtle dangers of spiritual life as well. A person can become accustomed to his routines, his habits, and the way he goes about life, and, without realizing it, begin to mistake activity for advancement. If he becomes too comfortable with where he is, then his entire life can resemble a stationary bike: a great deal of motion without actually going anywhere.

The Torah carefully records each masa, each journey, each departure, and each arrival, emphasizing that the defining feature of those forty years was movement. Not permanence. Not settling. Not remaining in one place for too long, but constant transition from one stage to the next, in a precisely structured process of growth under the direct guidance of Hakadosh Boruch Hu, moving forward until Klal Yisroel reached Eretz Yisroel.

That is the fundamental difference between a journey and a routine.

A routine repeats itself. A journey goes somewhere.

And that is why the Torah does not refer to them merely as encampments, but as masa'os – journeys, departures, movement.

The Torah is telling us that life must always be measured not only by intensity, but by direction. Are we moving forward or are we circling in the same place? A person is not meant to define success by being busy or engaged, but by moving toward a higher destination. It is what yeshivos refer to as shteiging. We must always strive to shteig – not just to learn, not just to go through the motions, but to become better and to grow.

When a person understands that every stage of life is meant to move him forward, then even effort, struggle, and challenge become part of a forward-moving journey rather than an illusion of progress.

Even when we slow down in the summer and take a break for bein hazmanim, we don't stop. We don't lose sight of our goals and don't take a vacation from Torah.

The parshiyos of Mattos-Masei teach us that we are not meant to become spiritually stationary, even if we are spiritually active. We are meant to be in motion, progressing from one masa to the next, never confusing where we are with where we are meant to go.

Because the difference between pedaling and a journey, between merely learning and shteiging, is not how much energy is expended, but whether you are actually going somewhere.

Klal Yisroel, from the midbar until today, has never been a people standing still. We have always been a people moving forward toward the fulfillment of the Divine promise that one day all of these journeys will be seen not as wandering, but as a single path leading home.

May we merit coming home with the geulah sheleimah bekarov.