

D'var Torah
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Parashah Matot-Masei

Numbers 30:2 – 36:13 (Full Kriyah)

Numbers 30:2 – 31:54 (First Triennial Cycle)

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Congregation B'nai Tzedek, Potomac, Maryland

Gut Shabbos. As always, it is an honor to *daven* with you this morning; thank you for your spirit and thank you for your presence.

Matot-Masei is a challenging parashah. It starts with regulations that allow a woman's vows to be cancelled by her father or husband. The parashah then makes an awkward transition to a bloody war against the Midianites where Moses reprimands the Israelite soldiers for sparing the Midianite women and he orders them to kill all the non-virgin women, while allowing them to keep the virgins as wives or concubines. From there we move to an award of land given to the tribes of Reuven, Gad and half of Manasseh. They are given the Trans-Jordan territories in exchange for fighting to take the land of Canaan. Also in this parshah the wandering of our people is summarized and the boundaries of Canaan are defined.

Moses was troubled by the request of the 2 ½ tribes to settle on the east bank of the Jordan and not with the rest of the nation. Moses said to them, are your brothers here in Canaan to go to war while you hang out on the east side of the Jordan? They replied, no. The tribes explained to Moses that they would join in the war to conquer Israel, as brothers in arms with the rest of the Israelite nation. Only after the conquest, and everyone in Israel is safe, would the tribes then return to the east bank of Jordan. Moses agreed to their request, only if they would fulfill their vow to help in the conquest they would be able to live outside of Israel. Moshe said, "if you do this, if you go to battle as shock-troops, at the instance of the Lord, and every shock-fighter among you crosses the Jordan, at the instance of the Lord," then you can have the land that has been requested.

Before I spend a few moments talking about wanderings and home, real and metaphorical, I want to focus on a passage in the parshah. In Ch. 32, verse 16, the tribes, in asking Moshe for permission to live on the east of the Jordan said that we want to build pens for their livestock and cities for our families. Moses responds to the request in verse 26 by cleverly reversing the order of the tribes' request. Moses said,

take your place on the east bank of the Jordan and build cities for your families and pens for your livestock.

Moses heard the request and reordered their priorities. There is a midrash here (Bamidbar Rabbah 22: 9) that says that the men of Reuben and Gad put “riches and honor” before faith and posterity. The midrash found “no blessing” in the showing of greater love for the cattle than for human souls. Yet, the Lubavitcher Rebbe tells us that the request to separate from the rest of the nation did not express a reluctance to seek out the potential for holiness contained in the Land, but an attraction to even more remote — and thus even loftier — sparks of G-dliness.” By raising the livestock in the area best suited for livestock, it’s argued, the tribes were fulfilling a mission that benefits the Israelites and God. Nahmanides also found that the tribes’ request was a good one, since the tribes wanted to expand Israelite territory. The problem, Nachmanides said, was that the tribes’ argument was sloppy and tentative. Clearly, they did not have a good lawyer.

In the end, Moses headed the request of the tribes but *ikar* comes before *tafel*, the primary thing is first and the secondary thing is second. Family comes first. Tzedakah before self. There may be divisions in families, divisions within our nation, and there may be divisions between rabbis in Israel and Jews in the diaspora. Yet, we are all supposed to be one nation, working together. In the end, when war comes, those on the outside are to be the shock troops for Israel. We must find ways to compromise because we there is no one to spare. We may wander, but that does not mean we are lost.

We are all connected, no matter which side of the Jordan we reside. *Matot* means tribes. *Matah* means a stick. Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch, a 19th Century German commentator, said that *matot* are branches that arise from a single root. Each branch is unique unto itself, but the branches derive their sustenance from the trunk, and at the same time, the branches provide nourishment to the trunk. Branches without a root cannot survive and roots without branches cannot grow. As an alternate view, Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson said that a branch cut off from the tree is precisely what strengthens us and makes us into a staff which can support and keep us going.

We are a people that is sometimes cut off from each other and sometimes joined together. We have a long history of wandering and seeking. The Torah is like a travel journal. God said to Moses: “Write down the stages by which Israel journeyed in the wilderness, in order that they shall know what miracles I wrought them.” According to this approach, the travels are enumerated to emphasize and highlight God’s power, and to ensure that the Israelites recognize God’s strength. It is God who keeps us alive and

sustains us, but we, as men and woman created in God's image, must do our part to honor God and keep that memory alive. We must keep writing a new page every day in our travel journal.

Rabbi Elliot R. Kukla of San Francisco wrote that "Jews have a powerful and intimate relationship to migration and the search for home. When we dare to tell our stories within the widest possible global context, we connect our sacred and familial memories of wandering to the ongoing global impact of violence and displacement. We have a unique voice that we can lift up to educate and advocate for the rights of displaced persons everywhere..."

In just one week this summer, in my own wanderings, I had several moments of a lifetime. I spent several days in Warsaw and then, with a guide, I visited some of the Shtetlich my and Wendy's family came from northeast and northwest of Warsaw. I could spend hours recounting every meaningful and mournful minute of the trip, which also had some hopeful moments as well. But there is one experience that seems to fit in this week's parashah.

In the only shul in Warsaw that still stands today, I went to erev Shabbos services. It was not lost on me during my walk from my hotel to the shul that what I was doing that evening, 75 years ago, was a criminal act punishable by death. Here we stand, halfway through the Three Weeks, approaching the new month of Av, but Tisha b'Av is yet still ahead of us. We commemorate Tisha b'Av because Roman rulers forbade sacrifices to be made in the Second Temple in 69 C.E., and, in the following year, the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem were breached. This attack led to the destruction of the Temple three weeks later. Fitting, it seems, to make a connection to Warsaw.

At the start of services in Warsaw, there were about 30 men about 10 women. Partway through the service, the shul suddenly grew full when busloads of young men and women, all Jews from Latin America, who showed up for services. Some 150 teenage boys downstairs and another 150 teenage girls upstairs. I venture to say that the shul has rarely been this full in almost 80 years. The young men and women from Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, and Panama spoke very little Hebrew and were not all that fluent in an Orthodox, Ashkenazic shul. And yet. And yet. They could belt out a niggun like nobody's business.

My heart was as full as the shul. I do not openly cry very often, but I shed more than a few tears in my week in Poland. There I was. In Warsaw. In shul. On Shabbos. I was crying with the heartbreak and sorrow of the ghosts that sought sanctuary in 1939

but could find no peace and crying with the joy in the hope for the future that maybe some of these young souls would remember what they saw in Warsaw and take that home with them. From the ashes might rise the embers.

When the young visitors were belting out a Carlebach tune for Shiru L'Adonai the place was on fire. The walls shook. And I cried. Like the boy who could do nothing by recite the Alef-Bet, the Carlebach melody was all they had and it worked like you can hardly begin to imagine.

Those that reside on the other side of the Jordan will be the shock troops for the Lord.

I prepared for my visit to Warsaw, in part, by reading *Aish Ha'Kodesh*, or Holy Fire, by Rabbi Klonimus Kalmish Szapiro. Rabbi Shapiro was a rabbi in the Warsaw ghetto who held services and teachings in secret. He wrote lessons on scraps of paper and when the ghetto was being cleared, before he was shipped to Trablinka and put to death, he put his writings in a milk can and buried the can in the earth. A decade later a construction crew found the can and saved it for history. Also in the can was a note that said if anyone finds this, please return it to the Jewish community in Warsaw. I had his book with me on the airplane. In a manner of speaking, Rabbi Shapiro's wanderings came to end when his teachings were given back to the Jewish people in Israel, in Warsaw, and beyond.

It says in the Book of Lamentations, "I am the butt of all nations, [the] burden of their satire all day long... But I will call to mind, to give me hope, that G-d's love is lasting, and will never fail." (3:14, :21-22).

It is not just the Torah that is a travel journey, but it is all our collective wisdom and teachings. I take everything I learned everywhere I go and I write a new page every day. Rabbi Mordechai HaCohen, in his volume *Al HaTorah*, suggests that "once the Torah was given it became timeless and cut loose from any one place: every moment is its moment and every place its place."

We wander and we seek; that is what we do. It is our learning and our teaching that are our swords and our shields. We build cities and schools first and cattle pens second. We put our community above self. We are roots and branches, whether we are connected or not. Even with teaching and learning, if all we have is a niggun or the Alef-Bet, we are shock troops for the Lord. We may wander, but that does not make us lost; it makes us seekers. Whether we live on the east side of the Jordan, or along the Sienne, the Thames, the St. Lawrence, the Panama Canal, or the Potomac, we are the

shock troops for the Lord. "Turn us, God, toward you, and we will turn. Make our days new again, like dawn long ago." (Lamentations 5:21-5:22).

Hazak Hazak V' nitkhazek! Be strong! Be strong! And may we be strengthened!"

Shabbat Shalom. Shalom Aleichem.