

Matot-Masei 5778

BS"D Parashat Matot-Masei 5778

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Desert wanderings were a warning

Our parasha enumerates the 42 stations where the Jewish nation encamped in their 40 years of wandering in the desert; some are well known, others are just markers on a map.

Wandering is the essence of Jewish history when HaShem banished us from His holy land.

To have to leave the land in which you and your parents were born, in order to begin a new life in foreign surroundings, with the knowledge that in three or four generations your descendants will also have to leave for a new place, is traumatic. But these situations also held within them the survival of our people. The feeling that we are “permanently temporary” decreased the degree of assimilation into the cultures of our “host” countries. Some might argue that the “treatment” was much too harsh in combating the disease. Perhaps! But it worked.

Some of the places of our wanderings are well known: Babylon, Rome, Madrid, Paris, London, New York. But some are tiny, impossible to spell villages in Poland and – Ukraine, and equally difficult places to pronounce in Morocco or Yemen.

We wandered double speed on foot to escape the raw end of whips held by Spanish priests and paralyzing blows of Cossack murderers. The death marches, so skillfully conducted by the ever-orderly German army, made their way from Poland back to

Germany to escape the advancing Russian army.

The terrain we walked was as varied as the very earth itself. We trekked through deserts, up steep mountains, across dangerous ice glaciers, under the glaring sun and bedeviled subzero cold. We did it all, and Hashem kept us alive to tell the tale of our tormentors who are no more.

The means of transport were also varied. Usually it was by foot; occasionally by horse or horse driven wagon. The Russians used trains to transfer tens of thousands of Jews to Siberia. Rusty old cargo ships brought many Jews back to Eretz Yisrael; that is, those that succeeded in running His Royal Majesty's naval blockade. Jews from Yemen sat upon the "wings of silvery eagles" with four motors, that whisked them back across 2500 years of history to Eretz Yisrael.

The wanderings in the desert were a warning of what was awaiting us in the future, to wander over the face of the planet.

The little car that killed

I mentioned that some of our wanderings were with trains. So, I want to tell you about two trains that serviced our people; actually, two cars of two different trains.

The first car is on display at Yad Vashem, here in Yerushalayim. If you would not know, you would even find the car sort of "quaint", with its strange kind of roof and disproportionate large wheels. At second glance it might strike you as being strange because it has no windows. The first time I saw it, I was reminded of a childhood story book "The Little Engine That Could", although the proper name for it would be "The Little Car That Killed".

If this car could speak, you would be deafened by the screams

emitted from its slatted walls. You wouldn't understand what the screams were saying anyway, because they are in a jumbled, muddled cacophony of different languages. However, if you try hard you would be able to discern the same words in many different accents: "Shema Yisrael Hashem Elokaynu Hashem echad".

This little car carried its human baggage on the Warsaw-Auschwitz route, and after dispensing its "baggage" turned around to collect more fuel for the fires of Satan.

Now, not all trains are alike. Some spew out coal fumes others are electric powered, clean machines. Some have comfortable seats with scenic windows, others are no more than four walls astride a platform with heavy steel wheels. Some are for humans to transport animals; this car was built for animals, but it transported Jews. The "passengers" were compressed together in a dense, congested, airless mass of torsos and arms and legs. An inescapable stench reeked from every corner.

As the train stopped in the picturesque villages of Poland, the Jews inside who were still capable of standing would call out for water to the locals who had gathered to see the now frequent sight of Jews "getting what they deserve for killing God". The goyim would open their water bottles, and while approaching the Jews who were near insanity from thirst, would lift up their cups and spill the water on the ground.

Now let's talk about a different train car, in a different time, and in a way on a different planet.

The seats in this car are padded for ultimate comfort, and the car is airconditioned, so the commuters arrive fresh for a new day of productive work. The seats are wide enough so that one would not trespass on his neighbors "territory". Many of the passengers carry water bottles to prevent dehydration during the 45-minute ride to the city.

I myself did not have the zechut (merit) to see it, but was

told, and with no small degree of pride, that the passengers don't speak to one another. Not because they are antisocial: on the contrary, they are all good friends. But because they are deeply immersed in the large blue covered volumes which each one is holding. This is one of the many "daf" cars of many trains converging on the city from all directions.

Two train cars, light years away from each other in every way save for one – both are part of a holocaust which befell the Jewish people and is continuing to this very day.

Jews, ten times the number of words on an average page of the Gemara, intermarry daily in the United States and other places in the galut. But, instead of drawing the obvious conclusion that galut was and forever will spell death for us, the leaders of our people look into the mirror image of their lives, and like the mythological Narcissus who fell in love with his own image say, "How beautiful we are".

The lesson to be learned from our parasha is inescapable. The wanderings and innumerable unpleasant, and even terminal experiences of the desert prepared the Jewish nation to enter the Holy Land, in order to begin the eternal odyssey of being God's Chosen People. But, unfortunately, some people never learn, no matter how clear the indicators.

Datan and Aviram challenged Moshe Rabbeinu until their death. They saw the miracles which Moshe had wrought in Egypt and witnessed Moshe's unprecedented relationship with the Creator. Nevertheless, they were unable to inculcate what they had seen into their own lives.

Unfortunately, many of our brothers and sisters will never learn from other peoples' experiences and certainly not from the writings of our prophets or even from the miracles that their own eyes see. People like this will learn only when they themselves will have to take a train ride.

Teshuva and justification for annulment of vows

Parashat Matot begins with the authority given to a father to annul the vows of his daughter; and to a husband to annul the vows of his wife.

This authority is also given to rabbanim (rabbis) in the matter of vows of the general public. A recognized talmid chacham may do so by himself; and in his absence it may be performed by three people with knowledge of Torah.

However, there are basic differences in the performance and results of these two authorities: annulment performed by a father or husband is called hafara; whereas the act of a bet din or recognized Torah authority is called hatara.

Hafara does not require the consent or approval of the daughter or wife; whereas, the annulment performed by a bet din or rav is predicated upon a request by the party who took the vow and must also be justified as to why the vow should to be invalidated.

But there is a more basic and fundamental difference. In hafara performed by a father or husband the vow is retained in its reality up to the moment of the annulment; whereas, hatara performed by a bet din or rav retroactively eradicates and uproots the very existence of the vow from the moment it was taken, rendering it not only invalid but never having been a part of reality.

A practical difference between these two results is in the case where one takes a vow, violates it, and afterwards the vow is annulled. In the case of hafara where a father or husband invalidates the vow, the fact that it was violated prior to its annulment is recorded as a sin and dealt with accordingly. But when a bet din or rav uproots the vow retroactively, the vow is rendered as never having existed,

and subsequently its violation and resulting sin are erased from existence.

In the midrash called "pesikta de'rav Kahana", in the chapter dealing with the month of Nissan, a pasuk is quoted stating that when the time for our redemption arrives, Hashem will be oblivious to the sins of Am Yisrael. Hashem is the father of Am Yisrael as well as the "husband" as cited in many sources; but most of all He is the ultimate bet din which has the power to obliterate, uproot, erase, delete, cancel, annul, revoke, abolish, repeal, abrogate etc., retroactively the sins of Am Yisrael. But in keeping with the rules of hatara this process must be proceeded by a request for teshuva and justification for the annulment.

We are dealing here with the future of Am Yisrael on the grandest national scale. The matter therefore includes Jews who are fortunate to have had a Torah education, as well as those who are less fortunate. We can conclude then that this act of teshuva relates to things with which all Jews can identify. The only thing which exists as the common denominator in our times, is the return to our ancient historical homeland. Hashem will erase the sins of Am Yisrael retroactively when we return home.

Due to intermarriage and zero population growth of Jews in the galut, in contrast to the increasing numbers of Jews here through natural reproduction and aliya, the time is not far off when the majority of Jews in the world will be here in Eretz Yisrael.

It is noteworthy that the Minchat Chinuch states, with proof, that the Bet Hamikdash can be built only when the majority of Jews in the world are present in Eretz Yisrael. The question posed to him is: How then did Ezra Hasofer build the second Temple when only a minority of the world's Jews were here? Harav Yehoshua May'kutna suggests a far-reaching answer. He says that it is true that the Bet Hamikdash requires that the

majority of the Jewish nation be present in Eretz Yisrael. But the issue is who is included in the census? He states that on the one side are the Jews of Eretz Yisrael, weighed against those Jews in chutz la'aretz who wish to come here but are unable to for halachic reasons (sickness, infirmity etc.); to the exclusion of those Jews who have no interest or show no initiative in coming. That group of people are not even included in the count; they are me'chutz la'machaneh (outside the camp). This conclusion is shocking and requires much thought on the part of the leaders in chutz la'aretz.

Shabbat Shalom,

Nachman Kahana

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