

בס"ד

דברי תורה ד' צבי אליהו
DIVREI TORAH

מטות - מסעי

Matos - Masei

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Miracles

Rabbi Adam Singer

We have to see the patterns in our lives. Nothing is by accident, and if we observe our lives carefully, we'll see that everything bespeaks the hand of G-d. We are a people that comes from miracles, a chosen nation unlike any other. The great Torah sage Rabbeinu Bachya shows us this message in this week's parsha.

Our parsha begins by describing no less than 42 journeys that took place between the time our ancestors left Egypt and their entry into the Land of Israel (*Bamidbar* 33:1-50). One might wonder, why does the Torah need to list all 42 places the Jewish people stopped on their journey through the desert? At this point in the cycle of the parshas of the year we have read the three books of the Torah which described our journey through the desert. Why do we need the Torah to give a summary of every place the Jewish people has been when we've already seen them in the previous three books?

The commentators give different answers to this question. Rabbeinu Bachya explains that when we read about the places where the Jewish people sojourned we should remember all the miracles that the Almighty did to sustain the Jewish people in the desert. We should remember that a pillar of fire lit their way at night and a pillar of smoke by day. We should remember that clouds of glory surrounded them, that their food came miraculously in the form of manna and their water was from a miraculous spring that followed them in the desert. These are the journeys of our great,

great-grandparents. These are the miracles performed for them. When we read the simple list of locations at the beginning of this week's parsha we should train ourselves to see the miracles inherent in their journeys.

When we remember the miracles of the Exodus while reading this simple list of the travels of our ancestors, we must also learn to appreciate the spirituality and miracles in our lives and in our personal histories. This is the latent message Rabbeinu Bachya is giving us. Just as this simple history includes miracles which we may tend to forget after having read the first four books of the Torah, so too does our life include so many miracles which we may have forgotten.

It is the nature of our age to invest too much into understanding the physical world and not enough into understanding the spiritual. We would spend all of our time examining the physical causes for how we came to be here and that we totally miss how miraculous it is to be here at all. So much happens in any person's life. So much happens in any moment. So many risks avoided, so many obstacles overcome. If we deny the spiritual forces in our lives, we are closing our eyes to the a very real and essential part of what it means to be alive and to possess our unique identities.

Rabbeinu Bachya points out that the Hebrew word for nature is *teva* (spelled *tet-beis-ayin*), the same root letters as the word *tava* (also *tet-beis-ayin*) which means to drown. When our viewpoint weighs too heavily towards seeing the externalities of nature, it drowns us. We lose sight of the

spiritual side of our lives and lose sight of our true purpose in life: to develop our spiritual greatness and become truly great people.

Take a moment this week and try to reflect on how you came to be where you are. If you are fortunate enough to have a job, how did you get it? Who did you meet along the way? If you are fortunate enough to be married, how did you meet your spouse? Consider your childhood; consider every day from today backwards until you find your most recent miracle, the most recent happy occurrence where, through no fault of your own things worked out exactly as you might have wanted them to. Then, if you can, think backwards until you appreciate more and more of the awesome experience it means to be alive and to be you.

May we all receive the help that we need from Heaven to see the spiritual in our lives, to recognize the miracles of our lives and to live with true spiritual greatness. GOOD SHABBOS!!!

Steady As We Go

Reuven Formey

This year the Torah portions of Matot and Masei are read together. Nothing in Torah is happenstance and the coupling of these two portions must have great significance. Also, they are read during the three-week period known as Bein Hametzarim – “between the straits” – in which we mourn the destruction of the Two Temples, the events leading up to that time, and various unfavorable occurrences that happened during this period. The fact that we read

them during this time must also hold within it a relevant message.

The word matot means “staffs”. This term is used in the parshah in reference to the Twelve Tribes. However, the tribes are usually referred to as shevatim, “branches.” Why does the Torah now use the term “matot” and why at this point in time? Why are the tribes being called branches and staffs in the first place, and what’s the pertinent difference between the two? Furthermore, the word masei means “journeys.” What in the world do branches and staffs have to do with journeys?

A branch, even when recently cut from a tree, is moist and bendable, showing signs of life and vitality as a result of it being or having been connected to its source. On the other hand, a staff is rough, hard, and unwavering, having no pliability whatsoever. Its firmness demonstrates the fact that it was disconnected from the tree that was its source long ago.

Similar concepts apply to the spiritual state that the Jewish people have found themselves in throughout history. The Jewish people, as they lived in the desert with the Divine Presence revealed in their midst, with food, clothing, and manifest protection, are compared to branches. Their connectedness to their Source, G-d, was openly revealed and their goals in service of Hashem were more readily attainable in such a wonderful environment. This is the deeper reason why the spies who gave a negative report about Eretz Yisrael, and who were indeed righteous men, felt that the Jews could serve G-d on a higher plane in the desert and viewed entering into a more physical life in Eretz

Yisrael as detrimental. This state of the Jewish people being “branch-like” is also reflected in the time when the Temple stood in Jerusalem. G-d’s Essence was revealed and His Presence radiated throughout the world in a manner unfathomable to us today.

In contrast, a staff represents the Jewish people at a time of exile when G-dliness is not so revealed. We are seemingly disconnected from our Source and are faced with the tremendous challenges of making a living, maintaining purity in an environment where physicality seems to rule, and dealing with both the internal and external forces that seek to keep us in exile and worse. We become hard like a staff from the fact that G-d has concealed Himself to such a great degree that sometimes it’s possible that our evil inclination can make us second-guess (G-d forbid) whether He is around and still cares. But the qualities of being like a staff are meant to serve us in a positive way. Although we sometimes feel totally disconnected, the unbendable aspect of our staff-like attitude will not allow us to turn our back on our faith. We remain strong and firm in our observance of Torah. In fact, this is the purpose of exile. Only through struggle does one become strong and “stiff-necked” in their ways. There is no greater demonstration of closeness to G-d than the continued study of Torah and performance of mitzvot despite *seemingly* having been “cut from the tree” and being exposed to the elements for so long. This is the essential level of service that G-d wants to bring out of every Jew. Our essence is only revealed when it is squeezed out of us through challenges.

To take it a step deeper, in Jewish mysticism, the spiritual “infrastructure” from which souls are rooted is referred to as “the divine tree.” The term shevatim - “branches” - refers to a state in which souls exist in the upper realms and are branches of that tree. They are enveloped in revealed levels of G-dliness and perceive their connection to their Source. However, when G-d sends these souls on masei – “journeys” - down into bodies in this physical world in order to endure numerous trials and tests of faith, they become comparable to staffs. They are put into situations where they will become tougher, stronger, and not succumb to the outside forces that seek to break them. Amazingly, that original vitality that they received from their Source is still a part of them at all times, but must be brought out through exertion. In truth, the Jewish soul can never be completely separated from G-d, the Torah studied and mitzvot performed despite G-d’s concealment is the greatest testimony to that truth.

By calling the tribes “matot”, G-d is telling the Jewish people that now that they have spent 40 years in the desert and have gone through the process of preparing to enter a different form of living than they were used to, they have the tools and wherewithal to be strong and faithful like staffs. The challenges ahead would take the Jewish people through numerous ups and downs, tribulations in exile, and situations where the only way out would be to cling stubbornly to their faith. But that is indeed, all that would be necessary to come out of even the darkest situations. This is why we read these Torah portions during the period of The Three Weeks. Some of the darkest times for the Jewish people occurred during

this time. But, Hashem is assuring us that by unshakeable faith, not only will we make it through these challenges, but these times will be transformed into times of joy and celebration in the future. Many have come to destroy us, but they have all perished while we are still here, impatiently waiting, praying, and yearning for redemption.

Thus, we see that the lesson of each of these portions is tied in with the other. During our journeys amongst the “desert of nations”, we must be firm like staffs and never abandon the Torah that has sustained us. However, there is an additional lesson. One must be sure that although they are firm in their service of G-d even in tough circumstances, they should not be firm in the sense that they never “move forward” in their spiritual undertakings. Being a “staff”, unbendable in our divine service, does not mean being stagnant or satisfied with one’s level. Therefore, we must take that fortitude and use it to “journey” forward from strength to strength towards reaching our greatest potential. This includes taking on more mitzvot, praying with more concentration, studying a little more, and helping our fellow. At the same time, it’s possible that our journeys in trying to be better, whether from level to level, or physically from place to place may cause a slight weakening in our fervor. Therefore we are encouraged to be staffs, not allowing the new experiences and new challenges we meet along the road to weaken our dedication.

I recently took a drive across country with a friend. We stopped in many places of which I had never been (and wondered how many Jews had ever stopped there before) in order to pray or rest momentarily, drove through hellacious storms, and saw beautiful sites. I’m not sure people knew what to think when they saw two guys in a parking lot with big white sheets over their backs and straps around their heads and arms in the middle of mountain-filled Montana. We spent some of the time talking Torah as we drove along as well. But along the way I couldn’t help but think of something I heard from a very wise Rabbi. He said that no matter where you go, whether on purpose or by accident...whether you turn down the wrong road, or end up being called to be at some far out place, nothing is by chance. For whatever reason, G-d wanted you to be there in that place at that time in order to help bring all of creation one step closer to the final purpose for which He created it. Not that we are on such a high level, but maybe the fact that me and my friend were staff-like, stiff-necked Jews to some small degree, and didn’t allow our journey to stop us from speaking, eating, and praying like Jews in every place, was one small piece of the puzzle being put together by Jews for thousands of years in order to bring Moshiach.

Liluy nishmat Chaya Sarah bat Raizel (Based upon the teachings of Rebbe Menachem M. Schneerson)