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בס"ד

Parashat Mas'ei Part I The Travel Itinerary

With Israel encamped at the Jordan River poised to cross into the promised land and Moses on the verge of passing away, the present phase of the nation's history – that beginning with the Exodus from Egypt – was concluding. It was a period of monumental importance. A brief summation of the travels of the past forty years, that is to say, since the Exodus, was appropriate.

The narrative accounts in the books of Exodus and Numbers had frequently furnished place-names of episodes and travel locations as events had unfolded. But there is a breathtaking effect in surveying the lengthy wilderness itinerary in one compact unit that includes the names of the many encampment stations at which the nation had stopped, beginning with its having exited Egypt until the present moment. This is especially the case with the many allusive names that were given to locations. Forty-one encampment stations are cited with the promised land as the forty-second stop. (Based on an ambiguity, many commentators count forty-two stations.) The larger picture of the itinerary would recall the tremendous travail endured and the extraordinary achievement of it all. Moses' Deuteronomy adjuration to the Israelites not to forget G-d's wondrous leadership comes to mind: "Who led you through the great and awesome wilderness, snakes, fiery serpents and scorpions, parched land with no water, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock, who fed you manna in the wilderness ... to benefit you in the end" (Deut. 8:15-16).

One also thinks of G-d's patience with the nation despite its continual disobedience. The latter bring to mind Moses' fortieth year reminder: "Remember, do not forget how you angered Hashem your G-d in the wilderness; from the day you exited Egypt until

your arrival at this place you have been rebellious with Hashem" (Deut. 9:7).

The Rambam wrote that these places were recorded "so that men to come could see them and thus know how great was the miracle constituted by the sojourn of the human species in those places for forty years" (Guide 3:50, Pines translation, p. 616). We may add that it ever serves as a prompt to appreciate the very existence of the nation, having survived the trials and tribulations that it had been through.

The second verse of the introduction states: "Moses wrote the departure points of their travels at the instruction of Hashem" (עַל פִּי ה' [Num. 33:2]). This information highlights the importance of recording this itinerary. It should not be thought that Moses wrote it at his own discretion (in accordance with what was the common practice of the ancient Near East) but rather that Moses wrote it in the first instance at the instruction of Hashem. One wonders if עַל פִּי ה' may further signify that there is a more profound dimension to the itinerary than meets the eye, as discussed by Ibn Ezra and the Ramban.*

The beginning of the itinerary provides brief elucidation concerning the first stage of the journey, relating the Exodus date with several particulars concerning the aftermath of the tenth plague and G-d's wondrous doings. This sets an inspiring tone for the passage. Subsequently, very few details of events are included although several fragmentary comments concerning some milestones do appear. The nation was familiar with these events, so only a concise summary was necessary. Undoubtedly, the oral tradition would address the children and future generations concerning the events associated with each site recorded in the itinerary. Since the Mount Sinai lawgiving, the principal event of national history, was not mentioned, it is clear that the

itinerary was not designed to stand on its own but to be a collection of basic notes that would be expounded with the oral tradition.

There is, however, a relatively lengthy reference to events at Mount Hor, informing of Aaron's death, its date and his age at the time (Num. 33:38-39). This is the only instance in Tanakh when a complete date of an individual's passing away is provided. Such extensive information concerning Aaron serves to memorialize him in a most prestigious manner, increasing the likelihood of the nation remaining committed to monotheistic sanctuary service under the aegis of his descendant priests. The verse that follows notes that "The Canaanite, the king of Arad heard" of Israel's coming (v. 40), an allusion to an interaction without furnishing any details beyond the king's having heard of the nation's approach. The citation, of course, refers to that king's attack on Israel and Israel's military victory over him as recounted in Numbers 21:1-3. The itinerary omitted all further particulars as the battle had just occurred a short while before. Including this note, however, when far more important events were passed over, requires an explanation, as does the unusual fragmentary nature of the note.

The Numbers 21 narrative account of this event opens with virtually the same words as used in the itinerary, "The Canaanite, the king of Arad heard" of Israel's coming (Num. 21:1-3). It, too, immediately follows the account of Aaron's death. In that context, the death was described as a major national tragedy: "They mourned Aaron thirty days, the whole house of Israel" (20:29). As the itinerary basically quotes the opening phrase of the narrative account that the king "heard" and leaves it at that, the midrashic interpretation that sees a linkage with the preceding verse of Aaron's death appears to recommend itself: The king heard – upon Israel's arrival – that the long-serving Israelite high priest died. In accordance with the widespread belief that the prayers and service of the high priest protect his nation (see Lev. 10:6-7, 17), the Canaanites considered Israel to then be vulnerable. Thus, the itinerary adds to the portrayal of Aaron's lofty status, intimating that his reputation preceded him and that his presence was regarded as crucial for the protection of the Israelites. It should be noted that in

our chapter's first verse Aaron is joined with Moses as having led Israel through all the journeying from the Exodus.

2. Variations

The narrative accounts of the Israelites' travels as found in Exodus and Numbers differ in a number of details from our *Parashat Mas'ei* summary. We will discuss several aspects of this topic. (We will not address Moses' fortieth year Deuteronomy retrospective in which he also touches upon the itinerary and which also includes variations.)

In Exodus, the arrival at Sinai (Exod. 19:1-2) is the eighth station upon exiting Egypt: Succoth (12:37), Etham (13:20), Pi-hahiroth (14:2), where the miracle at the sea occurred, Marah (15:23), Elim (15:27), the wilderness of Sin (16:1), Rephidim (17:1) and the wilderness of Sinai (19:2), the region where Mount Sinai is located. There is no mention in that account of the Sea of Reeds (*yam souf*, the sea that was miraculously crossed) as a station, since Israel crossed the sea on the move without having encamped at it as an official stop.

In our itinerary account, however, after the fifth station there is divergence from the Exodus account, with Sinai being the eleventh station: Succoth, Etham, Pi-hahiroth, Marah, Elim, the Sea of Reeds, the wilderness of Sin, Dophkah, Alush, Rephidim and the wilderness of Sinai. While the Sea of Reeds is here mentioned as a station, it is not at the point of the crossing of the sea, in accordance with what is stated several verses earlier: "And they embarked from Pene-hahiroth (the same as Pi-hahiroth), crossed through the sea into the wilderness, traveled a three-day journey and encamped at Marah. They embarked from Marah and arrived at Elim ... They embarked from Elim and encamped by the Sea of Reeds" (Num. 33:8-10). Clearly, in the itinerary the Sea of Reeds station is several stops subsequent to crossing the sea. The eighth and ninth stations, Dophkah and Alush, are not attested in the Exodus account nor anywhere else in Tanakh. Serious readers of the Torah will not take the variations lightly; as often turns out to be the case there is a compelling explanation behind the different presentations.

It appears that in Exodus, as the events are described as occurring and Israel is being readied for the Sinai

theophany and contracting of the covenant, Sinai was presented as the eighth station. This is in accordance with the symbolism that we have seen so often, that the number eight is the signifier of the covenant.** Undoubtedly there was latitude as to what was to be defined as an official station – travelers always make brief stops that may or may not qualify to be counted. In addition, there appears to be a degree of allusion and metaphor in the number order of stations and probably also in the names (see Rashi, Deut. 1:1).

In the narratives of the Torah the nation arrived at Sinai on the first day of the third month following the Exodus (Exod. 19:1) and remained there until the twentieth day of the second month of the second year from the Exodus (Num. 10:11-12). On that day the cloud lifted and the second phase of travels began. The accounts of the travels that follow in Numbers 10–12 contain a degree of ambiguity.

The cloud lifted and came to rest in the wilderness of Paran (Num. 10:11-12). The nation embarked from Sinai on a three-day journey with the ark leading the way, seeking a resting place (Num. 10:33-34). It stopped at what became called Taberah (Num. 11:3) and shortly afterwards Kibroth-hattaavah (v. 34). The latter was not necessarily a different location from Taberah since there is no mention of any travel between the two (but see Deut. 9:22, where they are mentioned with another place between them). The next encampment was Hazeroth (Num. 11:35) from which they traveled to the wilderness of Paran (Num. 12:16). The specific station (the wilderness of Paran defined a large area, justifying use of a more localized position) is termed Kadesh (13:26) as well as Kadesh-barnea (see Num. 32:8; also see Deut. 1:19, 46), apparently distinct but adjacent sites, possibly part of the same large station. From there the scouts were sent to reconnoiter the land (Num. 13:3).

This occurred during the second year and it seems that no further travel narratives are recorded in the book of Numbers until the fortieth year, the first day of the first month, when the nation once again arrived at Kadesh (Num. 20:1).

In the itinerary of Numbers 33, upon embarking from Sinai the nation traveled to Kibroth-hattaavah

followed by Hazeroth, the thirteenth station in that account and the one that in the earlier Numbers narrative immediately preceded the sin of the scouts. Without then mentioning Paran (which is not explicitly attested at any point in the itinerary) or Kadesh, the next station mentioned in the itinerary is Rithmah. It is as if mention of the station from where the scouts were sent is eliminated from the list at the point of transgression. It will be cited later, but in conjunction with the new generation and their proceeding to the land. (This reminds one of Job's diatribe against the day he was born: The night he was conceived "should not be counted among the days of the year, and should not be included in the count of the months" [Job 3:6]).

Rithmah begins a series of twelve successive stations whose names are neither known nor attested elsewhere in Scripture. These are followed by six successive stations that are unattested in the Exodus-Numbers narratives but whose names do appear elsewhere. After these eighteen stations the nation arrives at Kadesh, the thirty-second station. The next station is Mount Hor. The latter two stops clearly correspond to the narrative of Numbers 20 that speaks of Israel's arrival on the first day of the first month of the fortieth year at Kadesh, followed by the nation traveling to Mount Hor. This stop at Kadesh, as described in the narrative of Numbers 20, appears to have been in the nature of a challenge to Israel to atone for the transgression that had been committed at that location the first time there.

To answer the question as to why the site of the transgression associated with the spies is not mentioned, Rashi, citing an aggadah, takes Rithmah to refer to Paran (which, as we have seen from Numbers 12, includes Kadesh). He expounds Rithmah as alluding to the sin of the spies by citing Psalm 120:3-4 to the effect that a deceitful tongue is like גְּתִילֵי רֶתֶמִים, hot coals of (presumably) *retem*-wood. This surely is not peshat. Ibn Ezra assumes that the wilderness of Paran was a large region that covered a number of stations. Most scholars today are of the opinion that the wilderness of Paran refers to a significant portion of the Sinai Peninsula, encompassing much of its northern region.

Thus, it may be that all twelve unattested stations were part of Paran, and perhaps this was the case with several more stations. Since G-d's decree was that the Israelites would wander about for forty years and die "in this wilderness" (Num. 14:29, 32, 35), they spent virtually

the balance of the forty years wandering around the wilderness of Paran waiting for the generation to pass on. Perhaps all those successive unknown places in the itinerary reflect exactly this point: The Israelites were wandering about aimlessly, going nowhere. In His mercy for the new generation, G-d provided it the opportunity to begin its preparation for entering the land as soon as possible. He arranged the process to begin on the first day of the fortieth year by having the nation arrive at Kadesh that very day.

Accordingly, the Numbers narrative account resumes details of the travels at the start of the fortieth year with the nation at Kadesh, which brought the opportunity to correct the transgression (Num. 20:1). However, here also there are variances between the narratives and the itinerary. In the narratives, the arrival at Kadesh begins a concluding series of thirteen stations at which the new generation encamps: Kadesh, Mount Hor, Oboth, Iye-abarim, the wadi Zered, Arnon, Beer, Mattanah, Nahaliel, Bamoth, the valley that is in the field of Moab, the land of the Amorites (Num. 21:25, 31) and the steppes of Moab (Num. 22:1). In the itinerary, this phase contains ten stations: Kadesh, Mount Hor, Zalmonah, Punon, Oboth, Iye-abarim, Dibon-gad, Almon-diblathaim, the hills of Abarim and the steppes of Moab, which is on the Jordan River.

Since in the Exodus portion of the narratives, at the start of the journey, there are eight stations until the arrival at Sinai and the lawgiving, it appears possible that this enumeration of thirteen stations in the narrative continuation, concluding the journey account, is purposeful. As Rabbi Sassoon has demonstrated,** in Torah symbolism the number thirteen (the *gematria* of א-ה-ו, “one”) is often found in conjunction with the manifestation of the covenant symbol of eight and indicates achievement of a basic spiritual level, acknowledging the oneness of G-d. This would be an important statement about the Israelites. Although they often complained, tested G-d and at times violated the covenant, particularly in the steppes of Moab, after all was said and done they still remained within the fold symbolized by thirteen, although not having achieved the status symbolized by eight.

In the *Parashat Mas‘ei* summary, however, the symbolism of eight and thirteen is incorporated in a different manner. Kadesh, where forward motion resumes, is the twenty-first station mentioned subsequent to leaving Sinai. As Rabbi Sassoon often pointed out, twenty-one symbolizes a thirteen plus eight, reflecting the fact that the nation came through its retributive phase intact. These matters require much further work.

The following is from the work of Ronald Benun applying the methodology of Rabbi Sassoon. Although incomplete, it is most worthy of consideration. In the itinerary, when counting Sinai as one, the eighth station is קהלתה, a likely reference to יום הקהל, “the day of the assembly,” the term Moses used several times for the day of the lawgiving (Deut. 9:10; 10:4; 18:16). Counting קהלתה as one, the eighth station forward is השמנה, or, if we look at the name’s components, ה-שמנה, eight-eight, perhaps eight plus eight, or sixteen, which exactly corresponds to its location following Sinai. When we count השמנה as one, the eighth station forward is Kadesh. (We often have seen cases of overlapping patterns in the structure of biblical texts.)

The connotations of the station names seem to reinforce this understanding. Immediately following קהלתה is הר שפף, which may indicate “the mountain where the *shofar* was blown.” Next is הרדה (translation: “trembling”), which may be the location where the nation “trembled,” given that the words *har*, *shofar*, and *vayehrad* are all attested in the same Exodus 19:16 verse describing the lawgiving. The following verse in that Exodus context describes Israel as standing attentively בתחתית ההר (“at the bottom of the mountain”) while in the Numbers account the station following הרדה is מקהלות (another aspect of “the day of the assembly”) followed by תחת (translation: “under,” “bottom”), which may refer to “the bottom of the mountain.”

Endnotes

* Ibn Ezra takes *‘al pi Hashem* (“by the mouth of Hashem”) as attached to למסעיהם (“their travels”), apparently meaning that the travels herein described were at Hashem’s direction. Some commentators on Ibn Ezra’s commentary assume that his reasoning may be that for the Torah to state that Moses wrote these travels *‘al pi Hashem* would be superfluous, even problematic;

since the whole Torah is assumed to be written *'al pi Hashem*, why should this passage require such a statement? The Ramban rejects Ibn Ezra's view partly because it had previously been stated in the Torah that the travels were *'al pi Hashem* (Num. 9:18). Indeed, in that instance the statement was repeated and emphasized at the end of the passage (v. 23). However, it appears appropriate to have such a statement in a concluding master list of travels regardless of the fact that such a statement

was made many chapters before. Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra's parsing of the verse appears strained (see Abarbanel). In addition, had the phrase referred to the travels it would more properly fit in verse 1 before *בְּיַד מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן* ("by the hand of Moses and Aaron"), similar to the statement in 9:23.

** See our study *On Number Symbolism in the Torah from the Work of Rabbi Solomon D. Sassoon*.

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