

Last week, I spoke to those who attended service about the important place of grief in our year cycle, and in our own lives, as informed by the mentioned of multiple deceased figures in the Torah portion Pinchas.

This week, we encounter the double portion Matot-Mase'ei, Tribes and Journeys, which close the book of Numbers. Though there are some juicy narratives in both portions, I want to do what I did last week and examine the significance of a section of the portion that at first looks more rote. Mase'ei, Journeys, begins with Chapter 33 of Numbers. It opens with the line, "These are the journeys of the Israelites, who went out from the land of Egypt by their troops, headed by Moses and Aaron. Moses recorded their goings forth and their movements forward, and these are their movements forward and their goings forth.

There follows a list, detailing the 40 years of wanderings of the Israelite tribes, beginning in Egypt, and ending after 42 distinct journeys and destinations, at the plains of Moab, where, at the end of the book of Numbers, Moses prepares to transfer his authority to Joshua before the tribes enter the land of Israel.

After those opening lines, almost every verse in this chapter follows the formula: "They set off from a and encamped at B. They set off at B and encamped a C. They set off at C. . ." and so on. Each place name is mentioned at the end of one verse and the beginning of the next, first as a destination, then as a point of departure.

Why spend a whole Chapter like this? Well, as the Sfas Emes, an 18th century Hasidic master notes, Torah "is telling us that all this "movement forward" depends upon "going forth" from Egypt. Only after all those journeys is the Exodus from Egypt complete," he writes; "with each going forth," they got farther from Egypt, until they reached the land of Israel."

Contemporary Rabbi Shefa Gold, in her book *Torah Journeys*, makes similar observation: 'The word *massei* really refers to the 'setting forths' we do. As each stage of a journey comes to an end, we pull up our stakes and move on, initiating a new adventure. As each stage of the journey I become aware of my own transformation. I'm never the same adventurer who set forth the last time.

"Forty two stops or stages along the Israelites' path are enumerated and named. Each stopping point on the journey holds a blessings for us. The Ba'al Shem Tov reminds us, 'Whatever happened to the people as a whole will happen to each individual. All the forty two journeys of the children of Israel will occur to each person between the time one is born and the time one dies.' We recount the itinerary of our wanderings in order to receive the lessons and blessings of each stage in our journey.. . ."

It's fairly audacious to claim, as Rabbi Gold does, that every stage is a blessing. At some of the stages the Israelites are full of complaint, are struck by plagues, refuse to accept their destiny , worship a Golden Calf. Medieval commentator Rashi even offered the view that this listing of journeys was laid out to remind the Israelites of each place where they had misbehaved, and inspire within us a spirit of contrition and awe at the Divine capacity for forgiveness.

The Chassidic commentaries and Rabbi Gold's insight remind us that every step of the journey is also an act of faith, an investment in our own growth, a furthering distancing from whatever Egypt is in each of our own lives, and come closer to the fulfillment of our liberated visions of ourselves. It's important that each step along the journey is first a destination in its own right, then a dwelling point, before it becomes another starting point to leave behind, with a new destination in sight.

We might wish we could focus on the ultimate destination, but then we would miss out on the journey.

If you'll forgive me, I want to muse on this from where I am at in my own life. I have had reason to think a great deal about the processes of pregnancy and birth lately. Not only has each step been a temporary milestone in its own right - I can't tell you how often I thought, "Please just let me get through the first trimester," or even, "please just let me get through this bout of acid reflux," - Also, there is tremendous cultural messaging around the importance of the birth experience, and many opinions floating around about how properly prepare for it, how to do it right, and what are consequences of doing it "wrong," should birth preparations deviate from established medical or midwifery orthodoxies.

The process of birth has in many midrashim been compared to *yetziat mitzrayim*, leaving Egypt, so I hope you won't find this discuss too far afield from the Torah portion.

So every detail of how birth happens matters, on the one hand. And on the other hand, in a recent birth class, one educator asked, "What is the most important goal of your birth experience?" The answer, of course is a healthy baby. Nothing else really matters. Or as I have been reminding myself when I get too overwhelmed by all of the opinions about how to have the best possible birth experience, I didn't actually get pregnant in order to have a birth experience. I got pregnant in order to have a child.

So whether we are talking about 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, or 40 weeks of gestation, the final goal is important for our perspective. We don't want to confuse temporary milestones with an ultimate destination. But neither do we want to sleep through the milestones.

Looking at 8 months of pregnancy behind me, I can see what Rabbi Gold means about harvesting the lessons and blessings. Nausea and acid reflux were not enjoyable. They did not seem to be blessings at the time. But they were the first stages in moving some of my energy and attention towards this child that is becoming.

People keep asking me if I'm ready for the baby to be born. The honest answer is of course not, and there's absolutely no way I could be ready, until the moment it is born, but every moment of pregnancy, including and perhaps especially the unpleasant moments, get me closer to readiness. I am sure this is not unique to those who have children through biological means, by the way, but the anxieties and milestones of the adoption process create a similar kind of journey that shapes the way a child enters any family.

So for the moment of birth, too for the lifetime. There is no way we could be ready for adulthood without the pangs of adolescence, no way to have grown up relationships without having immature ones. Destinations become departure points. The blessing of Mase'ei is that ultimately, we get to decide the tone of the record of our journeys. Is it a story of blunders and punishment? Is it a story of lessons and blessings? It is up to us.