



Matos Maasei – Moving Forward While Standing in Place

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“These are the journeys of the children of Israel who left the land of Egypt in their legions, under the charge of Moses and Aaron.” (Bamidbar 33:1)

In the beginning of *Maasei* (the second of the two *parshios* we read this week) the Torah lists the 42 places we camped during our 40 year sojourn in the desert. There are 49 verses dedicated to this geography lesson; a staggering amount of biblical real-estate devoted to listing names of places which have disappeared into the sands of time. Why spend so much time focusing on these places many of which have ceased to exist? Furthermore, the Torah opens this section with the words “*Eyleh maasei* (these are the journeys)”; a journey reflects movement, yet the Torah then goes on to list the places where we camped (stopped moving). If we are listing the encampments, let the verse state, “These are the encampments of the Children of Israel.” How are we to understand this strange verbiage?

The Lubavitcher Rebbe (Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, 1902-1994) explains that in fact the Torah is teaching us a two-part lesson. *Eyleh maasei* (these are the journeys); life is about perpetual movement. A person must choose between being a *holeych* (one who walks) or an *omeyd* (one who stands still). God communicates His preference; life must be a journey, a *masa*. A person is commanded to live in a state of *halicha* (constant movement) and to never remain in the stagnant state of *amida*. *Eyleh maasei* (these are the journeys), is not a historical statement, it is the life mantra of the Jew. I will journey forward, I will constantly move and grow, I will never give in to the temptation of standing in place.

And yet, after stressing the importance of movement, the Torah lists the places our ancestors camped and stopped moving. And herein lies the second lesson. There are times in life when we lose our momentum. There are situations which can sideline and derail our journeys. There are circumstances which leave us standing in place. These 42 stops along the journey represent the set-backs and defeats we each experience throughout the journey in life. The Baal Shem Tov said, “the 42 journeys of our ancestors are the same journeys we each experience from the time we are born into this world until we transition to the World to Come.” There are times of *halicha* and times of *amida*. However, it becomes our sacred obligation to use the set-backs and defeats as opportunities for growth and development. We learn much about ourselves from the difficult chapters of life. We learn to confront our weaknesses and discover strengths we never realized we possessed. If we find the courage to grow from the moments of *amida* and failure then even these moments and episodes become part of the *halicha*, the forward movement of life.

It is in these simple verses that the Torah conveys to us, perhaps, the most important life message. *Eyleh maasei* (these are the journeys); life must be filled with constant growth and movement. We cannot remain rooted in the present, we must constantly look for opportunities to advance. But know that along the way there will be stops. During the long journey there will be moments of *amida* which prevent us from moving forward. There will be challenges and failures. But know that if we learn something and grow from these difficulties then these moments of adversity become part of the forward moving journey.