

I am a true believer in the power of a photograph. Although my memory is still somewhat accurate, although biased--- like all memories, I love taking and collecting pictures as a way of recording time. Shane and I have an entire bookshelf dedicated to photo albums. They begin with our grandparents' marriages through our parents' birth and adolescence to our own births, childhoods, and adult years. Moments that are almost never captured on film, such as my first kiss at slumber camp (taken surreptitiously by a bunkmate) and our engagement are chronicled on those shelves. Each album represents physical, psychological and emotional growth. Each album tells a tale- of where we have been personally and who has journeyed with us. They tell a tale of how we arrived at the place we now stand.

This week's double Torah portion, Matot- Ma'asey shares the same type of journey through words rather than photographs. Yet this journey is not personal, it is the communal history of the people Israel wandering forty years through the midbar, the desert. Chapter 33 of numbers begins *eleh, ma'asey bnei Israel asher Yatzu Me'erezt mitzrayim L'tzivotam B'yad Moshe V'Aharon-* These were the journeys of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, led by the hand of Moses and Aaron. The parashah continues, listing the names of forty-two places -the ancient Israelite's itinerary. So, our sages ask, as they are wont to do, why does the text list the name of every single stop the Israelites make along the way? Rashi suggests that the complete list reminds the people Israel of what had befallen them at each juncture of the journey. He sites a passage from Midrash Tanchuma comparing the parashah to a parable of a king whose son was ill. The father brought the sick child to a distant

place for treatment. When they returned, the father began enumerating all the journeys. He said to his son, “here you slept, here you were chilled, here your head ached”. Therefore, says Rashi, this short listing of the stages of their wanderings was designed as reading material for the people to recall what had befallen them at each place after they were comfortably settled in the land.

Maimonides, in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, goes a step further. The stages, he claimed, had to be recorded for subsequent generations, who might think that the people Israel traveled in a desert near to cultivated land in which it was possible to grow food or find water. Their existence in the real wilderness is confirmed by the list of actual places so that in the future, the magnitude of the miracles of survival could be understood. Through the list, we understand that the creation of our people was a long process. The Israelites needed to learn to be free before they could inhabit the land of Israel.

The Chatam Sofer, a Hasidic master of early 19th century Slovatkia, offers another explanation for listing the names. He teaches that every name is a metaphor for what occurred there. As Jews, our wandering in the wilderness is essential to our very being as a people on a continuing journey in which we share history and destiny.

Parashah Ma’asey traces the path of the people Israel from slavery to freedom, from mitzrayim, the narrow place to the place of piv- an opening. And every stop along the way provides either an opportunity for growth or a hole in which the people become trapped, reverting back to childlike behaviors. Our ancestors travel from mitzrayim- a narrow place to sukkot- where they can begin to build temporary homes.

From etam when God is with them to marah- a place of bitterness. From Sinai and receiving the Ten Commandments to dofka- knocked down again and r'difah- being pursued by others. The journey for the people Israel is not smooth- they travel from high point to low and back again. They defy God, harm each other and then, when least expected, come upon oasis of holiness. Their journey is our journey- the days of our lives.

The wilderness is not just a desert through which we wander aimlessly. It is a way of being, a place that demands openness to life around us. Being equally present for Mt. Sinai and marah- bitterness. In the wilderness our possessions cannot name us. Logic cannot define the path. We are left alone with the newness of the journey and our reaction to it. The desert is full of metaphoric hills and valleys- but only by completing the passage do the Israelites arrive at their final stop- Kadesh- holiness. Holiness comes from attempting the journey. Holiness comes from reviewing each step along the way and the lessons it taught. It is most often true that we do not know the power of a moment when we are in it because we are in it. It is too close to where we are. But when we look back, we realize the impact of that particular time and place coming together and how we were changed.

Review of the journey is looking back at who we have been. It is taking out the photos, reading old letters and remembering who we were and who we are now. It is no coincidence that this parashah occurs several weeks before the High Holidays. It is our reminder to begin the process of renewal through review. To look, with a clear eye, at what occurred and how we were affected. To look at the events which caused

us to grow and the events that taught us how much we still need to grow. To look at the journey of the past, standing again at marah, the place of bitterness, standing again at Sinai, and remembering that they were both only one stop along the path. Matot- Ma'asey teaches that to review the journey is to get to kadesh, a place of holiness. May we in the next weeks begin to look back upon our own physical and spiritual journeys so that, when the High Holydays approach, we will be at kadesh, a place of holiness, ready to enter the Holy land renewed as individuals and as a community.