

DARCHAI NOAM - דרכי נועם

“Its ways are ways of pleasantness”

(Mishlei 3:17)

Masei (Bamidbar 33:1 - 36:13)
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How can the Parasha help us grow this week?

Masei – Life is a journey

In this week's Parasha of Masei, we read a summary of Bnei Yisrael's journeys in the midbar (desert). For almost 40 years they had been moving around from place to place, never knowing for how long they would be camped and when they would have to move. Sometimes Hashem would require them to move again after a very brief stopover, and sometimes they would camp in the same place for a long time. For example, they stayed in Kadesh for 19 years.¹ Sometimes they even went backwards!² The Torah recounts each stopover because they were all significant. Each journey, and each experience, contributed to the growth of Bnei Yisrael, helping them develop from a bunch of slaves to a free nation.

Similarly, each of our lives involves a journey with many stopovers. Just like Bnei Yisrael, sometimes we move quickly and other times we seem to be standing still. And sometimes we even seem to be going backwards! But we are constantly growing and developing and stumbling and learning.

Travelling from our familiar surroundings can be a difficult process. The firsts great 'journey' that we read about in the Torah is that of Avraham Avinu, set out in Parashat Lech Lecha. In his commentary to that Parasha³, Rashi explains that Avraham needed special blessings to counteract the negative effects of the journey. Travelling causes three things – it diminishes the ability to procreate, it diminishes one's wealth and it diminishes one's name and reputation. Therefore, Hashem promised Avraham that he would bless him in these three areas.

There are many stories of great tzaddikim who voluntarily decided to take themselves into exile. They would wander around from place to place, deliberately forfeiting their reputation and standing and the familiarity of their home. They understood that this was a profoundly humbling experience and an important part of their character development and their Avodat Hashem. Rashi decided to undertake a voluntary exile as a form of atonement.⁴ The Vilna Gaon also took himself into exile a number of times. It is told that he used to spend his time checking different versions of the Talmud in different houses of study in an effort to identify and correct errors in the text. When the Vilna Gaon's primary student, Rav Chaim of Volozhin, decided to imitate his teacher and go into exile, the Vilna Gaon tried to discourage him. He told him that going into exile is a difficult and painful process and he himself regretted his decision to do so. However, Rav Chaim of Volozhin would not be deterred. He wanted to emulate his teacher as closely as possible. Rav Chaim responded, "I shall also go into exile like you, and I shall also regret it, like you".

The story is told of Reb Zusha of Anipoli who put himself into exile and journeyed around the countryside. When he returned to his village, he heard that his son was dangerously unwell. He rushed home and was relieved to discover that there had been a misunderstanding. Another boy with the same name as his child was the one that was actually ill. Reb Zusha felt relieved. But then he immediately felt guilty for feeling relief. Why should he be any less distressed that there was a sick child, just because it wasn't his own child? Where was his Ahavat Yisrael and Achdut! He concluded that his exile had not been sufficient to change his middot. He needed to work on his character even more. He promptly turned himself around and went back off into exile.

¹ See Rashi's commentary to Devarim 1:46.

² See Parashat Sh'lach, Bamidbar 14:25 with Rashi's commentary and see also Rashi to Parashat Pinchas, Bamidbar 26:13.

³ See Rashi's commentary to Parashat Lech Lecha, Breishit 12:2.

⁴ Rashi's father had thrown away a priceless jewel to prevent it from being used for idolatry. As a reward for this act of self-sacrifice, he was granted the great Rashi as his son. Rashi realised that although his father was delighted to give up the jewel for the sake of Heaven, there had still been a small part of him that had grieved to lose the treasure that could have made him wealthy. Rashi felt guilty for having been connected to this secret grief. Perhaps by going into self-imposed exile he could expiate that grief. (Shulman, Yaacov Dovid, "Rashi: The Story of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki", C.I.S. Publishers 1993, page 100.

Exile has always been connected with atonement for sin. Adam and Chava were exiled from Gan Eden after the sin of eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil.⁵ Cain was sent into exile, destined to wander from place to place, after killing Hevel.⁶ One who was guilty of manslaughter needed to go into exile from their home and to live in an Ir Miklat (City of Refuge).⁷ Some have suggested that this is one of the reasons that Chag Sukkot falls after Yom Kippur. Our judgement on Yom Kippur may include the punishment of going into exile. Therefore, we try to pre-empt the punishment by taking ourselves into exile from our homes and living in the sukkah. The pain and suffering of this exile could perhaps function as a form of atonement for our sins.

These days, it is not advisable to take ourselves off into exile and journey around in order to develop our characters.⁸ We have responsibilities and we cannot just pack up and leave so easily. However, Rabbi Reisner⁹ offers an interesting alternative that we can use as a substitute. Every time that we are outside of our comfort zone, we can view our situation as a mini-exile.

There are so many opportunities to carry out this exercise on a daily basis. For example, waiting in line, walking outside in the sweltering heat (or freezing cold) while schlepping a heavy bag, waiting on hold with the bank or the phone company. We can view these annoying experiences as a form of exile. Instead of complaining and feeling sorry for ourselves, we can view the experience as a chance to obtain atonement and develop our middot. If we can control our reactions under trying circumstances and not become angry or frustrated, then we have certainly succeeded in improving our middot. This will enable us to be calmer and to see our experience as coming from Hashem and for our best.

In Israel, there is a saying "It should be a kapara (atonement)". If someone experiences something that is annoying or upsetting, we tell them that we hope the discomfort will function as a form of atonement for their sins, so they won't have to experience any worse form of punishment. They should rather experience some suffering in this world than have to pay the price in the world to come.

David was having a problem with the tax department in Israel. He had accidentally lodged the wrong form and as a result his tax bill was double what it should be. It seemed that nothing could be done. He tried arguing with the clerk. "Are you telling me that because of this simple mistake I have to pay double tax for the month!?" "Yes, I'm afraid so." "And there is nothing that we can do about it?" "That's right, but don't worry, it should be a kapara for you." David accepted that response. It should be a kapara.

That was based on a true story. Can you imagine someone from the ATO¹⁰ telling a disgruntled tax payer that their tax bill should be an atonement? Only in Israel!

Some of us actually have to go into exile, travelling from place to place or from country to country. But even for those of us who do not have to leave our homes physically, we all experience difficult times and annoying situations. We can look at those situations as an opportunity to develop our characters and to achieve atonement for our sins. We can actively remind ourselves that it is from Hashem and is for our best. This is a different way of looking at suffering which can totally turn our life around.

Let's try something this week:

1. When we experience difficult challenges, try to imagine that they represent going off into a mini-exile.
2. Remember the great Tzaddikim who chose to exile voluntarily because they knew how powerful it was.
3. Remind ourselves every time we face an inconvenience that the experience is from Hashem and is for the best. Whether it be a form of kapara, in order to prevent a worse punishment, or a way to strengthen our middot and our emunah in Hashem.

Shabbat shalom, Rabbi Ledder

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⁵ Parashat Breishit, Breishit 3:23-24.

⁶ Parashat Breishit, Breishit 4:12.

⁷ Our Parasha, Bamidbar 35:9-13.

⁸ Similarly, nowadays it is generally not advisable to take on voluntary fasts and other forms of affliction. In earlier times, these types of behaviour were fairly common. However, the poskim advise that in our weakened state these days it would be harmful.

⁹ Pathways of the Prophets, Artscroll (2009).

¹⁰ Australian Tax Office. Or the IRS for our US readers. Or HMRC for our UK readers. I think you get the idea.