

The Trek to the Promised Land: Thoughts for Parashat Mas'ei, July 26, 2014

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By

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This week's Torah portion offers a detailed description of the travels of the Israelites during their forty year sojourn in the wilderness. It lists the name of each stop on their route from Egypt on their way to the Promised Land.

The Midrash explains that this detailed account reflects God's loving concern for the children of Israel. It is compared to a king who had taken his ailing child to a distant place in order to be cured. On the return journey, the king would stop at each resting place and remind his child: this is where we found shelter; this is where we cooled off at an oasis; this is where you had a head ache. Each place evoked memories and created a deeper bond between the king and his child. But the recounting of past stopping places was not a mere experience of nostalgia. Rather, it was coupled with the knowledge that they were anticipating their entry into the Promised Land.

Perhaps there is a broader message in the recounting the details of where the Israelites encamped. This account might also be viewed as a parable on the nature of life's journey.

We live our lives with a goal. We want to be good people, serve our families and communities. We want to bring the world closer to a Messianic time, an era of peace and understanding among all humanity.

Maimonides taught (Hilkhos Melakhim 12:4-5) that our prophets and sages yearned for Messianic times, not so that the Jewish people would rule over others nor for any material benefits. Rather, their desire was to live in an age of peace and prosperity so that everyone could turn their attention to spiritual advancement without disturbances. In the Messianic era, there will be no famine, no war, no jealousy, no strife. People will universally be engaged in pursuing the knowledge of God and will attain their greatest human potential.

This is the goal toward which we strive.

But we are still in the wilderness of an unredeemed world.

On our journey toward the Messianic era, there are many stops, many detours, many setbacks. We move a bit forward only to fall backward again. We bide time, we go in circles; a generation passes, and we are still in the wilderness.

It can become discouraging to wander from place to place without feeling that real progress is being made. But we keep looking ahead to the Promised Land.

The wilderness in which we live today is scarred by ugly fanaticism, violence, hatred, warfare. Israel is under constant attack. Anti-Semitism does not abate.

Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, in his "On Repentance," offers a description of what it means for a Jew to identify with Keneset Israel, the eternal Congregation of Israel:

"The Jew who believes in Keneset Israel is the Jew who lives with Keneset Israel where she may be and is prepared to die for her, who hurts with her pain and rejoices in her joy, who fights her wars, suffers in her defeats, and celebrates her victories. The Jew who believes in Keneset Israel is the Jew who joins himself as an indestructible link not only to the Jewish people of this generation but to Keneset Israel of all generations. How? Through Torah, which is and creates the continuity of all the generations of Israel for all time."

Being part of Keneset Israel does not guarantee a smooth journey through life; but it guarantees that we live a life of idealism and hope. We have many stops and setbacks along the way to the Promised Land, but we never flinch in our faith that we will one day achieve our goal.

Our goal, as Maimonides taught, is a goal that should be shared by all humanity; the Messianic era for which we strive will be a time of peace and harmony among all nations and all people.

ParashatMas'ei reminds us that the trek through the wilderness of life can be long and frustrating; and yet we will ultimately reach the Promised Land.

[Angel for Shabbat](#)