

# **JOURNEY TO DESTINY**

## **Parshas Masei**

**By Rabbi Menachem Rokeach\***

The Parsha enumerates all the forty-two places where the Israelites encamped on their journey in the Midbar, on the way to Eretz Yisroel. The Torah emphasizes both the movement out of one place and the encampment in another. The total number of the changes of places, forty-two, say the commentators, possesses paramount symbolism and is a reference to the Shem Mem Bais (forty-two). The Agra D’Kala shows three references to this Name in the very first sentence of Parshas Masei.

This Name of Hashem represents power against an enemy. So teaches the Talmud (Kidushin 71a), Vayehi Binsoa Haron, when the ark would begin the journey, Moshe said (prayed) “Arise, Hashem and let Your foes be scattered...”

These movements counting a total of forty-two, it seems was indispensable in preparation to enter Eretz Yisroel, which will require battle against enemies. This explains the juxtaposition following the forty-second encampment, “When you cross the Jordan to the land of Canaan...”

Though the reference is to 42 maso’oth (movements), the more important emphasis is on the encampments, “Vayachnu”. In each of these encampments the Israelites learned some essentials. Vayhi Binsoa (mentioned above) is followed by “Uvnocho Yomar”. When it (the aron) rested (resided with the people it led) in one of these forty-two places, Moshe prayed for the Divine presence (Shuva Hashem) among the myriad thousands of Israel. It is the place where the Aron with its people reside, the Beth Medrosh, the study hall, that gives them the stamina, the vitality.

The place where one studied Torah during his scholarly maturation is an important factor in his personality.

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\* Vacation’s vacation: Having taken off from issuing the weekly essays, claiming last year’s summer weeklies can use a repeat perusal, now encountering Parshas Masei, which last year was combined with Parshas Matos, thus this week’s specific commentary. [This is only the third time in twenty-one years that Parshas Masei is not combined with Parshas Matos.]

Upon reaching a level of Torah guide and leader, the entire place, the whole town, is sometimes identified by the one personage. The sixth mishna of Pirkei Avoth lists forty-eight attainments with which to acquire Torah. One of these is "Hamakir es mekomo", being a person who recognized his place. If he is among scholars greater than he, he will keep silent. In a place where his Torah knowledge is needed, his leadership requested, he will lead and build. Speaking of outstanding Torah giants, they are complimented as "Makir es mekomo" giving recognition and identity to the whole place.

The town of Radin is popular on the Torah map because of the Chofetz Chaim's impact. Bardichev is known in the Torah world because of Reb Levi Yitzchok; Brisk because of its giant Torah leaders. Sanz is known because of the Divrei Chaim, Ropshitz because of Reb Naftoli Ropshitzer, Slabodka because of the Alter of Slabodka. We might add Lakewood because of Reb Aaron.

In a vital discourse a Brooklyn Rav discussed the Mitzva of Kibud Av V'em, honoring parents. His text was the third mishna of the fourth perek in Avoth: "Do not be scornful of any person, and do not be disdainful of anything, for there is no person without his hour and no thing without its place." Even when criticism is warranted for a wrongdoing, consideration should be given to the time and place it occurred. Also on the positive side, the Rav expounded, time and place play a paramount role in a person's behavior. One of the main reasons one who recited Kaddish for a parent is also asked to be the Shliach Tzibur (daven before the Amud) during the weekdays is the time element. At such time, having suffered the loss of a loved one, one is more inclined to pray with more fervor and concentration. It is therefore to the benefit of the worshippers that he serves as cantor.

According to the mishna, the Rav continued, the element of place, too, must be taken into account. The Beth Medrosh in which one recited the Kadish and served as Sheliach Tzibur for eleven months should become his "place" of worship for many years thereafter, thereby manifesting appreciation to the Beth Medrosh. Thus, the Rav concluded, is the fulfillment of Rambam's requirement to honor a parent forever.

These two elements of the mishna in Avoth, time and place, play an indispensable positive role in Parshas Bolok, when Bilaam is hired to curse the Israelites. His designs are thwarted by the donkey on which he traveled and the

“time” element, and by an angel and the place element. He is ridiculed by the donkey who said (in the unusual miracle being granted the power of speech): “You Bilaam seek to curse a people who (is designated to) observe the mitzvah of the three festivals” (Rashi Bamidbor 22:28). The three Pilgrimage festivals are the periods (TIMES) in which the Israelites receive blessings from Hashem (see Netziv Devorim 16:16, 17, and Rashi ibid 16:11).

As the above in Avoth every person possesses a special time which affords him good fortune, so does all Israel possess such a period in their festival visits to the Beth Hamikdosh.

The angel, too, foiled Bilaam’s urge to curse, using the element of place, blocking the road in three different places, each time narrower than the former. Rashi (22:26) quotes the Tanchuma that the three different locations represent the three ancestors, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov. The rebuke of Bilaam was: “you Bilaam seek to destroy the descendants of these three sainted ancestors (who each received Divine blessings).

The use of three separate locations, indicative of personalities (the ancestors) is based on the above principle of the impact of a great personage on a location. Some Meforshim say the three places are indicative of the same place, the Beth Hamikdosh, but which were described by the ancestors each in a different manner. Avrohom called it a mountain, “Mount Moriah” (Beraishis 22:14). Yitzchok called it “a field” (ibid 24:62). Yaakov called it “a house” (ibid 28:17). “All three ancestors prayed in that place” (Rashi Pesochim 88a). According to the Levush, the third place where the angel stood to hinder Bilaam’s move “in a narrow place” (22:26) was indicative of Yaakov’s inheritance of all the Land of Israel, leaving no room for a foe.” You (Yaakov) shall spread out powerfully westward, eastward, northward and southward (Beraishis 28:14).

This, claims the angel, defeats Bilaam’s vicious plans. The two elements, time and place, blend together for blessing for Israel.

