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## *A Journey of Many Steps*

*“These were the marches of the Israelites...”*

Thus begins Numbers 33. This chapter reviews the travels of the Israelites from their departure from Egypt to the point where they stand ready to enter the Promised Land.

Commentators have long been fascinated by the detailed itinerary and apparent tedium of this text. Read it and see for yourself! The people set out on their wilderness trek and marched from A to B, from B to C, from C to D, from D to E and so on.... this is the pattern for nearly 50 verses! An unsuspecting reader can be forgiven for wanting to press the fast-forward button. However, the Jewish sages of old, with their creative biblical approaches and steeped in oral storytelling traditions, teach us otherwise.

What wells of refreshment are to be found in the apparent ‘dryness’ of such a passage?

With the sages, be patient as you read this long, repetitious passage. Relax. Read aloud, perhaps sharing the reading with a friend. Listen to the rhythm. Allow it ‘inside’ you, drawing you into the march. Observe how the text speaks to you through the litany of place-names.

Said one parishioner who read this text:

*“As I read along I found myself entering into the rhythm of the ‘march’ ... drawing me into a kind of contemplative experience. For the Israelites this was an epic journey—to the Promised Land, no less—yet comprised of lots of little journeys. So much of life is like that! I have noble goals—to raise a family, to accomplish important things at work—yet living those goals involves numerous ordinary, tedious steps: *I woke up at 6 o’clock, and changed my baby’s diaper. After I changed his diaper I organized the kids for school. When the kids left for school, I drove to the shopping centre. There were no parking spaces left at the shopping centre. After leaving the shopping centre, I drove on to work...* Tedious? Perhaps. But all very real and authentic steps in the journey of life.”*

And you? What reflections surfaced in your reading? Did the rhythm of the Israelites’ march resonate with the rhythms of your life?

Torah commentators who ponder this portion often note the value of reviewing our lives. In order to go forward we must have a clear idea of where we have come from and how life’s events have shaped us. Our future depends on a well-understood past.

In the midrash (Jewish storytelling traditions) there is a poignant story about a king with an ill son who takes him to a distant place to be cured. On the return journey, the father recounts for his son each stage of their first journey: “Here we slept. Here we felt cold. Here you had a headache, etc.”<sup>1</sup> Sometimes we only appreciate a stage of life with the help of someone who loves us and who has journeyed with us.

In another midrash<sup>2</sup> the desert places are seen to be holy because they welcomed the Israelites, and would one day be rewarded by God by becoming fertile and inhabited. Perhaps this story serves to remind us of places that have been blessed by our presence. Can we see this? Can we name such places and even identify some of the fruits already visible?

Continue to ponder this passage. Why do you think the Torah mentions that at each destination the Israelites both ‘journeyed’ and ‘encamped’ there? What is the significance of ‘arrivals’ and ‘departures’? •

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1. Midrash Tanchuma, 3.

2. Midrash Rabbah, xxiii, 4.

Sources: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Woman’s Commentary* (New York, 2008); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol.2* (London/New York: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (New York, 1993); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (New York: Mesorah, 2001).

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