

A Journey to Remember

Our focus this week is Numbers 33:1-49, a review of the travels of the Israelites from their departure from Egypt to the steppes of Moab where they stand poised to enter the promised land. Commentators have long been fascinated by the detailed itinerary and apparent tedium of this text.

In fact, in view of this ‘tedium,’ here’s a tip: create a meditative environment for your reading of Numbers 33:1-49. Light a candle. Relax your mind. Don’t rush. Approach it as a meditation. Settle into the rhythm of the text. Let God’s Word massage its way into your mind and heart...

“Moses wrote down their starting points, stage by stage, by the command of the Lord” (33:2).

As we ponder the text, let’s hear from two great Torah scholars in Jewish history: Maimonides (12th c.) and Nahmanides (13th c.) Nahmanides interprets the above verse as meaning that the act of recording was itself a divine command. Why would the Lord want such a listing of Israelite campsites in the wilderness journey? Is it simply a matter of geographic record, or something more?

Nahmanides cites the view of his predecessor, Maimonides: The Lord asks Moses to write it all down so that Israel will forever more remember the miracles and wonders that the Lord performed to sustain the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years. Without such a record, future generations will forget the wonders; they will disbelieve the miracle of the manna that fed their ancestors in the desert. They will think that talk of miracles is exaggerated, that their ancestors camped at places fertile, pleasant and safe. The Lord predicted this temptation to doubt and therefore told Moses: write it all down! The geographic details in Num. 33 ensures that the journey will be remembered for what it truly was: a trek through places distant, arid, dangerous, deathly.

The *Be’er Yitzhak*¹ adds a further creative thought: The record was ‘required reading’ for the marchers after they settled into their homeland! By reviewing where they had been and what they had gone through, “they would accordingly take to heart the kindness shown to them by the Omnipresent and the sufferings they endured for their disobedience so that, in future, they would act rightly and not sin.”

According to this view, to remember is to gain perspective. Memory opens up a path; it provides lessons and guidance for the future. In the present moment we don’t always comprehend the full impact of what is said or done. We look back, so as to look forward.

The power of memory in shaping the future is captured in a 1912 reflection by Asher Ginzberg.² He says of Moses: “The past and the future are the Prophet’s whole life... In the present he sees nothing but wilderness, a life far removed from his ideal; and therefore he looks before and after. He lives in the future world of his vision and seeks strength in the past out of which that vision-world is quarried.”

Reflection

- How did this Torah reading affect you? Do you agree with the above interpretations? What insight of your own can you add?
- What are some of the important ‘marches’ and ‘campsites’ in your own life’s journey?

1. 19th c. supercommentary to Rashi. See Leibowitz, 390.

2. Russian-born Jewish philosopher. See Plaut, 1133.

Bibliography: Leibowitz, *Studies in Bamidbar* (New York: Lamda, n.p.d.); Plaut, *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York, 2006); Ramban: *Commentary on the Torah* Vol.6 (New York, 2009).

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