

PARASHAH: Masa'ei (Stages)
ADDRESS: B'midbar (Numbers) 33:1-36:13
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AUTHOR: Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman

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(Note: all quotations are taken from the Complete Jewish Bible, translation by David H. Stern, Jewish New Testament Publications, Inc., unless otherwise noted)

Let's begin with the opening blessing for the Torah:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-‘Olam,
asher bachar banu m’kol ha-amim,
v’natan lanu eht Torah-to.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you, O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have selected us from among all the peoples,
and have given us your Torah.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

Parashat Masa'ei (say “mah-sah-ey”) marks the end of the book of **B'midbar** (Numbers). As the book closes, we find the people anxiously poised in the east side of the Yarden (Jordan) wanting to finally leave this Wilderness (Heb: midbar) and enter into the promise that HaShem made so long ago with their forefathers.

Moshe takes this opportunity to recount each significant encampment along the way of their long and arduous journey. In a way, his narrative in chapter 33 serves as a look back from where they've come, anticipating where they are headed.

The Land and the Tribes are in full view here. I want to open our commentary by recalling some of the things that I stated in my haftarah commentary to **Parashat Mattot**. As some of you may know, the haftarah commentary is not made available to regular readers of the website, but only to those who have subscribed to the weekly portions, as received personally from me. In this opening to **Parashat Masa'ei**, I will use some of my material from my previous haftarah commentary. After that, I will go back over each of the previous nine commentary portions to B'midbar and construct a summary of the whole book.

“By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the Promised Land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same

promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Hebrews 11:8-10, NIV)

As we notice from a reading of **Parashat Masa’ei**, the Land is in view here. HaShem is preparing to have the people go in and take possession of their promise. But in our western mindset it is easy to overlook just what that glorious promise made to Avraham (referred to in the above-quoted verse from Hebrews) entailed exactly. Was the promise just some far-off distant Heavenly Land that he would only be able to experience in his life to come as a spiritual child of HaShem? If we attempt to interpret this Land as only referring to heaven, then we make the physical promise of no effect! We do damage to the literal aspect that back in Genesis chapter 12 God was indeed making a covenant with a literal man, to become a literal people, who would inherit a literal piece of real estate! Sure, there are heavenly qualities that the Land is supposed to eventually possess, ones which it lacks at this juncture in history, but that doesn’t negate the fact that HaShem can and will bring his promises to Avraham’s offspring to pass!

The sages refer to this glorious future time as the “Olam Haba” (the Age to Come). In our theology, we would equate this to the Millennium time period. The TaNaKH is replete with passages describing a glorious dwelling place, within the Land of Promise, for ‘Am Yisra’el—and others! This Land is the very same location today where war and conquest are still rampant. But HaShem will change all of that one day. The desert will blossom and the mountains will drip with sweet wine! When that day arrives, Avraham will truly rejoice to see his children nestled in the glorious promises of a faithful, covenant-keeping God!

Let’s go back and capture a Birdseye view of the entire book of Numbers, using the parash’ot. Amazingly, as we shall see, the book is about wandering in the desert under the divine judgment of HaShem, only to be placed right where they started from: at the entrance to the Land.

Parashat B’midbar - This book, (whose English name comes from the fact that the initial chapters begin with a census taken of the entire assembly of ‘Am Yisra’el (People of Israel) picks up where **Sh’mot** (Exodus) leaves off—with ‘Am Yisra’el camped at the base of Har Sinai. From here the people journeyed into the wilderness (b’midbar) of Paran, south of the Promised Land. Scouts were sent to explore the Land and give a report on its inhabitants. When they returned to the camp, their report was not favorable, and the people began to doubt HaShem’s ability to give them their inheritance, and they complained against him. Because of their sin, God condemned them to wander in the wilderness until the generation of k’vetchers (complainers) died off and a new generation took their place. Forty years later they slowly made their way back to Kena’an (Canaan)—this time ready to obey the mitzvot of ADONAI. After winning some important campaigns east of the Yarden River (Jordan), ‘Am Yisra’el prepared to enter the heart of the Promised Land they had waited so long to see.

Parashat Naso - The census of the first few chapters of B'midbar continues into chapter four of this portion. HaShem was masterfully preparing his army, which would go into the Promised Land and take possession of it for him—and for themselves. The census also regulates certain chosen individual who would be needed to disassemble, transport, and then reassemble the portable House of God, the Mishkan (Tabernacle). The Gershon and M'rari families were singled-out for these purposes

Chapter 5 spells out certain regulations concerning relationships between men and women, specifically between husband and wife. Interesting to note is the phenomenon of the “spirit of jealousy” which may come over the man (v. 14) in the event that his wife is unfaithful without his direct knowledge. What is this mysterious “jealousy” that the Torah mentions?

I believe that it testifies of the unique and mysterious “echad” (one-ness, unity) that even Rabbi Sha’ul spoke of in the Renewed Covenant. When HaShem joins husband and wife, they share the same “basar,” that is “flesh.” I believe that the Holy One, blessed be He, preserves the holy union of two individuals made one, by giving them divine insight in matters of fidelity. That the union of husband and wife is of great sanction is evidenced from a general examination of the Talmud. What the Torah had to say about marriage and faithfulness left an indelible mark in the minds of the sages.

Parashat B’ha’alotkha - The Torah frequently employs the use of "word pictures." These are phrases and words coined for the explicit purpose of calling the reader's attention to a certain Truth of the understanding of HaShem and his purposes among mankind. When the Torah uses the word "anoint" for example, the "picture" that is painted is one of a horn of oil (presumably olive) being poured out and down upon an individual. In the case of the High Priest Aharon, the Torah describes the oil as being poured upon his head as an anointing (Sh'mot 29:7). In our haftarah to **B’ha’alotkha** (see Z'kharyah 2:14-4:7) we will again read of this anointing property of oil and the Spirit. I can almost imagine seeing the oil as it runs down Aharon's head, down his face, into his beard, and down his shoulders as Moshe makes sure of the God-given instructions. The oil is a representation of the Spirit of ADONAI! The Torah is explicitly teaching us that the office of Cohen HaGadol (High Priest) cannot function properly without the supernatural anointing from the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit)!

Parashat Shlach L’kha - This portion avidly demonstrates the awesome mercy and judgment of our Heavenly Abba. Opponents of the grace of the "Old Testament" are hard-pressed to explain away the merciful actions of ADONAI in chapter 14:5-20! Surely the disobedient, unfaithful bunch of them deserved HaShem's punishment. Yet, at Moshe's pleading, HaShem stayed his severe ruling and instead mercifully gave them an object lesson that they should NEVER forget. The rest of the Torah would draw from this event for the successive

generations to witness—indeed that was HaShem’s purpose for treating them thusly (read 14:34-35)! Even the B'rit Chadashah mentions this divine incident:

"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says: “Today, if you will hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tested me, proved me, and saw my works forty years therefore I was angry with that generation and said: ‘They always go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.’ So I swore in my wrath, they shall not enter my rest.”” (Heb. 3:7-11)

The really sad part about this incident is that it was the very same adult generation that witnessed the wonders of Egypt, which HaShem is speaking about here! The very same individuals saw the fiery Law, which went forth at Mount Sinai! The very same crowd was familiar with the pillar of Cloud and pillar of Fire! The portion closes with Judaism’s first mitzvah concerning the tzitzit, that is, the tassel that adorns a modern observant Jewish person’s clothing. Chapter 15:37-41 clearly teaches the offspring of Avraham to attach a “ribbon of blue” to the corner (Heb: kanaf) of their garments.

Parashat Korach - This is the telling of the story of the disloyalty of Korach, son of a Levite, and that rebellious bunch that followed him. I call it disloyalty owing to the fact that this complaint of Korach's was an audience designed to address the current leadership of Moshe and Aharon. However, knowing Korach’s heart, a better-suited term might be open mutiny!

A summary of the story goes like this: Korach and followers from the leaders of 'Am Yisra'el challenge the authority of Moshe and Aharon, accusing the two brothers of "lording" over the people. Moshe's response is divine. He instructs them—nay challenges them to an authoritative proof-test. Since the human factor of choosing leadership is (in the eyes of Korach) obviously faulty, let God choose the appropriate man for the job! And that is exactly what God does! The remainder of the parashah describes the various priestly functions within the community, while outlining some of the privileges and inheritances afforded to the L'vi'im (Levites).

Parashat Hukkat - The mitzvah of the Red Heifer is a peculiar command indeed. A couple of details make this mitzvah unique. To begin with, the participants are commanded to slaughter and burn completely this female cow without blemish. If you will recall from reading Vayikra, touching a dead animal’s carcass renders one tamei (ritually unclean). As we discover from our current portion at 19:7-22, the preparation of the ashes also rendered the individuals involved tamei.

Yet the end result of their efforts produced a substance that possessed the supernatural ability to cleanse, as HaShem endowed it. True, the real healing

always comes from HaShem, but in this case, the focal point of the healing (the ash mixture) began by defiling those who made the mixture.

Peculiar indeed.

Herein lies the secret of faith. To follow HaShem's instructions to the letter was to act and live in an arena of trusting faithfulness. To do what the Torah asked sometimes required its participants to perform various rituals and functions that defy logic and common sense. Life from death? Only the Will of HaShem could produce such an effect. Particularly, we see this demonstrated graphically in Yeshua!

Parashat Balak - Our opening sequence has Balak, king of Mo'av (Moab) seeking a way to destroy these seemingly unstoppable and numerous people. Based on his observation of their might (because of their sheer numbers), he decides that a military campaign is futile. Therefore, he decides to fight fire with fire: he hires the top pagan prophet of his day, Bil'am (Balaam).

Now Bil'am was a peculiar man. Here is a prophet who hears, converses and knows the ineffable name of HaShem! Yet, he does not follow the ways of HaShem's Torah. How can this be? Occasionally in the Torah, to our seeming dismay, God actually converses with unbelieving pagans. In these dialogues we catch a glimpse of the incredible nature of our God in his dealing not only with the Jewish Nation, but with other people groups as well. I believe that even the greedy Bil'am could have found a place in the community of God's Called-out ones, but as we shall see, he chose a difference course for himself.

The power of blessing...

So how did the people fall? I have seen this lesson enacted in my own life all too well. I brace myself for the attack from the Adversary (or my own flesh), and just when I think I am successful, I get hit from the "blind side"! Isra'el fell prey to their lustful passions, which was their blind side. The blessing of the LORD was their strong side, and Blessed be the Holy One for that! But it just goes to show that we all have weakness in areas that we least suspect at times, and that we are all in need of the supernatural protection of Almighty HaShem!

Parashat Pinchas - In his letter to the congregation at Rome, Sha'ul addressed the important issue of Jew and Gentile head on in chapter 11. His resulting commentary there would later become known as "Olive Tree" theology, owing to the fact that he graphically points out that the objects of jealousy and "cursing" are actually the root which is supporting the tree in the first place! On this note, he cautions the existing branches not to become proud or boastful against the root that is supporting them! In our haste, sometimes we arrogantly think that we have come this far by our faith in Yeshua alone, and that we don't need further support.

How foolish this mindset is, in that it runs counter to the plans of HaShem! He has predetermined in his gracious foreknowledge that Avraham's offspring would forever be the recipient of the covenant blessing of HaShem, and that try as they would, anyone playing the part of Bil'am would forever meet with disappointment and failure! The actions of Pinchas demonstrates for us those whose hearts are spiritually in tune with the purposes of HaShem, in ridding the community of the effects of this world's Bil'ams.

The gross effect of the jealousy and greed of history's Bil'ams, and their attempts at cursing, are still noticeable today. Our community is rife with ignorance concerning thinking lowly of Avraham's seed. Yet, thanks be unto our God, we have seen our share of Pinchases as well.

Parashat Mattot - Here in our Torah portion, Moshe gives instructions from the tongue of HaShem (no pun intended) as to what some certain vows and oaths entail. I won't go into the details of each vow, but I will make a correction to a common misunderstanding related to these passages.

In the Torah portion, Moshe clearly allows for vows and oaths to be taken by individuals. This, by the way, also includes by context, the familiar Nazir vow spoken of at other places in the Torah. In our misunderstanding of Torah concepts, we sometimes see a contradiction of this passage with a well-known phrase spoken by Yeshua in the **B'rit Chadashah**. Our passage in question is Mattityahu (Matthew) 5:31-37 and the setting is Yeshua's own halakhah (manner of Torah interpretation involving practical application) on what is known as the Beatitudes.

Yeshua's teaching there is an admonition to uphold the validity of one's word, even to the simple form of a "yes" or a "no." This is made clear by his closing remarks to his listening audience (verse 37). In other words, far from abolishing the importance or application of oaths and vows, he is actually strengthening the bond that goes into effect once a person places himself under such obligations. To be sure, his halakhah centers on the fact that a simple "yes" or "no" actually carries the same weight as a more complicated vow or oath.

Conclusions

From here until the ending of B'midbar, the subject of Land and Tribes is in full view. HaShem is preparing the desert-weary people for entering into their long-awaited inheritance. After 40 years of wandering under the divine judging hand of the Almighty, coupled with over 400 years in physical, mental, and (in every way) spiritual bondage in a foreign land, the descendants of Avraham are finally ready to have a land of their own!

Thus from this compilation, we have seen that the 40 years of wandering is really a very sad note in the history of Isra'el, as it robbed them (that wicked generation who had to die in the wilderness) of what by covenant belonged to them through their Father Avraham. Had they not forfeited it by lack of faith, many of the incidents (hypothetically) in B'midbar may never have occurred.

Even so, we have become very familiar with the 40 years of wandering that the people eventually had to endure as a result of their doubt. The Bible teaches us that each incident recorded was for our example that we might learn from previous mistakes. The number 40 signals trials, testing, endurance, and sometimes punishment.

I want to close out with a comment by The Stone Edition **TaNaKH**, which has this to say about the book of B'midbar:

'The Book of Numbers begins and ends with Isra'el on the verge of entering its Land—but the thirty-eight intervening years of wandering in the Wilderness were a low point in Jewish history. This Book contains the episodes of the spies, who poisoned the minds of the people, the rebellion of Korah and his assembly, and the error of Moshe and Aharon that cost them the privilege of entering the land. But it also ends with the first step in the conquest of the Land of Isra'el.'¹

It is customary after the completion of a book of the Torah to say,

“Chazak, chazak, v'nit'chazek!”
(Be strong, be strong, and let us be strengthened!)

The closing blessing is as follows:

***“Baruch atah YHVH, Eloheynu, Melech ha-'Olam,
asher natan lanu Toraht-emet,
v'chay-yeh o'lam nata-b'tochenu.
Baruch atah YHVH, noteyn ha-Torah.
Ameyn.”***

(Blessed are you O' LORD, our God, King of the Universe,
you have given us your Torah of truth,
and have planted everlasting life within our midst.
Blessed are you, LORD, giver of the Torah.
Ameyn.)

“Shabbat Shalom!”

Torah Teacher Ariel ben-Lyman yeshua613@hotmail.com

¹ *Tanach*, (Stone Edition, ArtScroll Series, Mesorah Publications), p. 321.