

In this week's parasha, Mattot-Masa'ei, we not only finish the book of Numbers, we finish all of the wanderings of the Israelites in the wilderness. We go through 49 verses listing every place the Israelites set out for and arrived at, in astonishingly sparse detail, from when they left Egypt to when they arrive at the plains of Moab ready to enter the promised land. (The wilderness of Sinai, where we received the 10 commandments, built the golden calf, and most of the action in Leviticus takes place, for example, receives one verse, just like each oasis in the 38 undescribed years). Here's how an excerpt reads: (15) They set out from Rephidim and encamped in the wilderness of Sinai. (16) They set out from the wilderness of Sinai and encamped at Kibroth-hattaavah. (17) They set out from Kibroth-hattaavah and encamped at Hazeroth. (18) They set out from Hazeroth and encamped at Rithmah. (19) They set out from Rithmah and encamped at Rimmon-perez. Participants in Torah study yesterday puzzled over the tedious litany, as did generations of commentators before them.

Johanna Seasonwein pointed out in the executive committee meeting that it makes sense that before Deuteronomy (which is Moshe's farewell speech to the Israelites) begins, we would look back at where we came from. She pointed out that at moments of great transition, it's really healthy to look to our past. I think that's an important piece of what's happening here.

But this recap of the journey is not actually what finally finishes the book of Numbers. After this list, the book of Numbers ends with a surprising coda about the daughters of Tzelophehad, whom I mentioned last week, successfully lobbying for a change in inheritance law. They won the right to inherit land in last week's parashah, but at the very end of Bamidbar, after the list of the journeys

and before Moshe's final speech, which is Deuteronomy, we are told that the male members of the same clan demand that the daughters marry only within their tribe, so that their ancestral holding doesn't pass into the possession of another tribe. Moshe delivers the order in response that indeed, the daughters, Machlah, Noa, Hoglah, Milcah and Tirzah, as well as any woman to inherit a landholding in the future, may marry only within their own tribe, and the daughters comply.

Why would the narrative of our wanderings end at this moment?

I suspect the answer is to be found, first, by contemplating the litany of our wandering, listing all the places that shaped the Israelite journey, both significant, and seemingly insignificant.

Let's remember that though this litany is read very quickly, it is, in fact, describing 40 years of sojourning. As Rashi writes: "You should not think that they wandered and moved about without cessation from one station to another station all the forty years, and that they had no rest, for you see that there are here only forty-two stages." He points out that the first 14 all occurred in the first year as the Israelites left Egypt. The final eight occurred in the final year, as described in the prior three parshiyot. There are forty two journeys listed, minus the initial fourteen and the final 8. So, as he calculates it, "It follows that during the whole of the thirty-eight years they made only twenty journeys."

These aren't places we stayed a few days. These are places where events happened. Major events, like the manna, or the revelation at Sinai, the building and dedication of the tabernacle, rebellion of Korach, the striking of the rock. . . But not just places with momentous events. Also places where the humdrum of

daily life happened, particularly those places in the intermediary 38 years, where no major collective events occurred. Babies were born in those places. People tended fires, gathered water, cooked food, flirted, conceived children, complained. Though we don't know anything more than the names of those places, this litany reminds us that they shaped the lives of our people.

These were all places that our ancestors didn't just pass through. They lived there. Though they weren't in the land of Israel yet, they weren't exactly in exile, either. They were on a trajectory, looking forward, but also grounded in a certain place at a certain time. What does it mean to us to imagine all of these places being part of us, or part of our people?

A middle ground between exile and settlement is to be in the moment, present in place. As Shai Held teaches about this portion. "The text serves to remind us that even seemingly inconsequential stops on our journey can be powerful opportunities. . . My eating can be holy—and not just because it enables me to study or contemplate. Shopping for groceries, or talking to my children, or any one of a myriad other things I have to do in a given day—all of these activities can be holy, provided I am truly inside them, fully present as I do them."

This litany reminds us that the small oasis that we haven't heard of before, where some people died and some were born, is actually just as important to the Israelite history as the wilderness of Sinai where the mishkan was built. Yes, more eventful things happened in certain places, but it was the accumulation of experiences in all of the places that shaped the people. So too, it is for us. Our individual lives are shaped as much by our mundane daily experiences as by the cataclysms that make the news cycle.

And sometimes, we don't know until far beyond, at what particular place or in what particular moment transformation has occurred. And this is how I think it relates to the daughters of Tzelophechad, as well, with their big win in last week's parashah, followed by the constraining of their options at the end of this. As Rebecca Solnit's writes in *Hope in the Dark*: "News cycles tend to suggest that changes happens in small, sudden bursts, or not at all. As I write, the military men who probably murdered Chilean singer and political activist Victor Jara in 1973 are being charged. More than 40 years have gone by; some stories take far longer than that to finish. The struggle to get women the vote took nearly three quarters of a century. For a time people liked to announce that feminism had failed, as though the project of overturning millenia of social arrangements should achieve its final victory in a few short decades, or as though it had stopped. Feminism is just starting, and its manifestations matter in rural Himalayan villages, not just first world cities. . ."

All the places matter, and we are connected to all of them. It is significant that the whole narrative of Torah begins with exile from the garden of Eden, and Deuteronomy ends with us poised to enter the land, but before we actually enter, we begin the reading over. The story of the daughters of Tzelophechad didn't end in last week's parashah, and of course it doesn't end in this week's parashah, even if no more is written about it. There is perhaps no arrival, ever, to either the promised utopian land, or the perfectly just society. There are only journeys, and the significance of each place we let ourselves dwell and rest, and our willingness to step forward.

Chazak, chazak v'nitchazek. Be strong, be strong and strengthen each other.