

Matot/Masei, 28 Tammuz 5770  
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The historian Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, writing about Jewish history and memory, recounts that during the Nazi war crimes trial of Klaus Barbie, a French newspaper asked its readers, “Of the two following words, *forgetting* or *justice*, which is the one that best characterizes your attitude toward the events of this period of the war and the Occupation?” Yerushalmi responded to this question with his own: “Can it be that the journalists have stumbled across something more important than they perhaps realized? Is it possible that the antonym of *forgetting* is not *remembering*, but *justice*?”

This week’s dual parsha, Matot and Masei, is, in no small measure, about not forgetting and about the extension of justice. In combination with last week’s parsha—Pinhas—Matot and Masei begin the story of what the *Etz Hayim* refers to as the generation of conquest—the generation of Israelites that will enter the promised land.

We learn from the census recorded in Pinhas that the Israelites are a wholly new generation; only Joshua, Caleb, and Moshe Rabbenu

remain of those who fled Egypt and received the Torah at Sinai. And Moshe, we already know, will not be allowed to enter the land.

Today's parsha deals with the seriousness of oaths and vows, the equitable apportionment of land, intention as a concept in criminal law, rules of governance, and creating balance between individual rights and tribal obligation. These ordinances and regulations were given prior to entry into the land so the Israelites would know how to govern themselves in a just manner.

This morning, I want to look briefly at two curious passages from the parsha. One is a list—an inventory—that Moshe creates of the Israelite journey through the wilderness. The list is a minimalist itinerary of the Israelite wandering, a record devoid of narrative, a seemingly simple transcription of the 42 starting and stopping points during 40 years on the road.

But before exploring that issue, I want to look at what appears to be a phrase of little consequence, a simple geographic identifier. In chapter 33, verse 48—at the end of Moshe's list—we read:

“They set out from the hills of Abarim and encamped

בְּעֶרְבֵי תְּמוֹאֵב עַל יַרְדֵּן יְרִיחוֹ:

in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho.”

With only slight variation, this formulation—“in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho”—is used eight times between the encampment first mentioned in Chapter 22 and the final verse of Bamidbar, in today’s parsha.

What strikes me as most curious is not once does Rashi comment on the phrase. Indeed, I found little substantive commentary about it.

This absence of commentary raises several questions: Is this geographic locator unimportant? Is it merely a device to let us know where the action is taking place? Is it assumed that our memories are so bad, we will forget where the Israelites are just before they enter Canaan? Is it a throw-away line? Looking ahead, it is not used in the book of Devarim even though the Israelites are still “in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho” for the whole of that book. Why, then, is it used in these eight instances in Bamidbar?

In order to better understand what the meaning of this phrase might be, let's move three millennia into the future and review a short speech from modern America history that might be instructive. The Gettysburg Address is among the most sacred American national documents. Remembering back to our school days, at least those of us of a certain age were required to memorize the address. If lucky, we also learned its context.

Gettysburg was the site of one of the pivotal and bloodiest battles of the Civil War. In this beautiful, bucolic site nearly 8,000 northern and southern soldiers died in three days of fighting. Another 40,000 were wounded or captured.

Four months following the battle, the Soldiers National Cemetery was dedicated at Gettysburg. President Lincoln was asked to give a brief dedication speech; he followed Edward Everett's two hour oration. In two minutes, employing 271 words, Lincoln invoked our founders, the glory of the American experiment, our national journey, the tasks and promise of our future, and the American ideals of liberty, equality,

freedom, and “government of the people, by the people, for the people.”  
He spoke of duty, obligation, and justice.

During these two minutes, Lincoln made 14 references to the land upon which he stood and 19 references to the American people as a coherent social and national entity. He noted that hallowed ground had been consecrated by those who “gave the last full measure of devotion.” And he called on all to never forget that ultimate act of devotion.

Lincoln, in the fullness of the language of American civil religion declared the land holy and placed that land, the events on it, and the people affected squarely in the grand sweep of the American past, present, and future. That is, he placed us within our own living and evolving history, a history anchored in, but also transcending place and time. He wasted no words.

There are no superfluous or wasted words and phrases in Torah. "In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho" has a power and meaning that moves beyond the p'shat reading of the text. “In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho”, is repeated eight times, just

as Lincoln made his 14 references to the field of Gettysburg. "In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho" is the final stop in the wilderness, it is the site of the second census, it is where the formation of a new generation is realized, it is the site for receiving law before entering the land, it is where the Israelites become a nation and learn the rules of governance, and it is where Moshe's journey ends.

"In the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho" is also where Moshe compiles his list of the 42 stations of the Israelites' 40 years of wandering. It is the culmination of the wilderness experience and, I would argue for the reasons just stated, that it is second only to Sinai in importance on that journey. The formulation is not repeated because we need to be reminded of where the action is taking place; it is repeated because we are required to remember it as a transcendent point in time and space in our collective history.

Now to the second issue, found in Chapter 33, verses 1-49. On the verge of entering the land, Moshe compiles the wilderness itinerary. It is an odd thing. It has no narrative; it is just a listing. It is like being on

vacation and making a note of every place you went without saying what you did or experienced.

Tuesday we went to the Old City. Wednesday we went to Beit Ticho and the Midrahov. Thursday we went to Machne Yehuda and Nachlaot. And so on.

Moshe produces a document with no mention of the miracle of the manna; there is no mention of Amalek; he doesn't even mention the revelation at Sinai. Some of the places he lists are not found anywhere in the biblical narrative of the wilderness. Well we might ask, what is the point of it?

Maimonides says the list is compiled to document that the Israelites survived these wanderings through many miracles of divine intervention and guidance, and that the reason to create the list is so that generations to come can remember and understand the miracles in the desert and the subsequent national redemption.

In an interpretation based in modern biblical criticism, Robert Alter notes that the itinerary is a Near Eastern literary form. He points

out that there are extant Mesopotamian examples similar to this going back to the second millennium BCE. In creating this “grand recapitulation,” as these lists are often called, Moshe simply was doing what came naturally to leaders in his era.

Ismar Schorsch, former chancellor at JTS, asserts that this list is a history of sorts, despite its brevity and lack of detail; it is, as Maimonides suggests, a memory aid. Schorsch argues the social historian’s point of view: we are composites of our experiences and our ability to remember those experiences fosters the formation of social, political and cultural identity. The fact that there is no detail, no narrative in the list, is irrelevant to its purpose. When Moshe composes his list, he repeats each place name:

They ... encamped by the Sea of Reeds. They set out from the Sea of Reeds and encamped in the wilderness of Sin.

They set out from the wilderness of Sin and encamped at Dophkah. They set out from Dophkah, and so on and so forth.

Each place is recorded twice, as if to reinforce retention of memory.

This is consonant with the biblical imperative to remember—or as Rabbi Meir Levin argues "to not forget."

In the last four sentences of the Gettysburg Address, Lincoln, referring to the "great battle-field," uses the word *here* eight times. In his construction, *here* refers to both space and time, and its repetition carries the moral responsibility of not forgetting. "The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, **but it can never forget what they did here.**"

Lincoln asked that we dedicate ourselves to a rebirth of the nation, a nation conceived in Liberty and equality. Moshe's list is a similar call for dedication to the shaping of Israel's national character, a character formed by covenant and God's justice.

Matot and Masei are full of the language of hallowed ground, national journey, and future expectations. Much of it speaks to justice. It contains the full expression of duty and obligation, which coupled with liberty and freedom, form the foundation of a just society.

Let's return, full circle, to Yosef Yerushalmi and consider his central question: "Is it possible that the antonym of *forgetting* is not *remembering*, but **justice**?"

Moshe—and Lincoln three millennia later—call us to **justice** with their admonitions to **not forget**. Moshe's list reminds us that we are formed from a vast history of shared experience. And his giving of these laws "in the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho" reminds us of **our own responsibility to seek and sustain justice**.