

מסעות החיים The Journeys of Life

I Shall Not Want

Every year, when we read Parashat Masei, the question arises: Why does the Torah take the trouble to mention every one of the 42 stops that Israel made during its 40-year journey in the desert? Why must we know the name of each and every place in which the nation encamped?

In our previous lesson on this weekly portion, we decoded one of the secret codes in this listing. Let us now present another approach, which we begin by turning to the well-known Chapter 23 of Tehillim. This beautiful Psalm masterfully paints the circle of human life as a journey of three stations. It begins with the period of childhood, passes into adolescence, and continues onto what we call old age. The opening verse makes a strong impression:

מְזֹמֵר לְדָוִד ה' רֹעִי לֹא אֶחְסָר.

A song of David: the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.

"Since G-d is my shepherd," King David says, "I am guaranteed never to be lacking anything." If the Creator of the World is the loyal shepherd for a flock of sheep, is there anything He cannot provide them? Certainly not. And we are each a sheep in G-d's loving care – and truly, it appears, **I shall not want**. As the Psalm continues,

בְּנֵאוֹת דְּשָׁא יִרְבֵּיצֵנִי, עַל מֵי מְנַחֹת יִנְהַלֵּנִי.

He has me lie down in green pastures, He leads me beside still waters.

Grazing aplenty, green pastures, flowing brooks. Nothing is missing, and everything seems to be perfect... for sheep! Sheep truly do not need any more than that, and for them, this description is one of Paradise on Earth. The Psalm continues: "**He restores my soul** – Hashem allows me space and expanse to jump around to my soul's desire; **He leads me in circles of righteousness for His name's sake**, guiding me not to graze in fields of others, but rather in ownerless areas, so that I not engage in 'theft,' for I am His sheep and His name is called upon me."

But we are not sheep! Is this truly all man needs? Was he created merely to have food and drink and room to play? Is he not worthy of something on a slightly higher level?

As mentioned, a careful look at this beautiful chapter shows that its first part symbolizes the period of childhood. When we are children, our material comfort requirements are quite significant, while our need for spirituality is practically non-existent.

The Talmud (Megillah 7b) formulates a very simple adage: "*The poor person is hungry, but he is not aware of it*" – because his stomach has already shrunk and has very few demands. Similarly, a person who has never heard a song does not yearn for good music. So too, a person, such as a child, who lacks utensils with which to incorporate spirituality, does not even realize when he is lacking it.

The phrase "**Hashem is my shepherd, I shall not want**" appears at first to be said in praise and thanks to G-d. But in truth, it is really just a sign that the person is in a lowly state, sufficing with grass and brooks, just like an animal. And to add insult to injury, he even adds that he lacks nothing!

But of course, as man grows and develops, he learns that fulfilling his physical needs is far from enough. The Nation of Israel learned this lesson from Moshe Rabbeinu, when he scolded them in his parting speech in the Book of D'varim:

זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה ה' אֵל-לְהִיךָ עִמָּךְ לֹא חָסַרְתָּ דָבָר.
For forty years G-d has been with you; you have lacked for nothing. (D'varim 2,7)

Our Sages contemplated these simple words and found pearls. The Medrash (Sh'mot Rabba 21) explains as follows:

"Nothing was missing in the world – but what *was* missing? *Teshuvah*, repentance, as is written, "**Take with you words [of contrition], and return unto Hashem...**" (Hosea 14,3)

This is very curious. The Torah says nothing was missing, and then the Medrash comes and asks, "What was missing?" How can this be?

Let us delve a bit deeper into the hint that Moshe gives Israel, regarding the relative values of physical needs and spiritual strivings. Moshe says:

"For 40 years, Hashem gave you everything you need physically – for what? So that you might do your share and work to accomplish spiritual achievements! You were missing nothing - so now climb the spiritual heights and return to G-d! Hashem left nothing out, in order that you realize what you were missing spiritually, and proceed to discover the road to Hashem."

In other words, you – the Nation of Israel – were not missing a thing. But what about the rest of the world? This was the question asked in the Medrash. And the answer is that the world is lacking man's return to G-d.

We must develop a sensitive ear in order to understand the Torah's message.

Childhood

We saw that the Psalm opened with the period of childhood, in the form of a sheep being led to graze amidst green pastures and flowing brooks. A shepherd's professional tools are a rod and a staff:

שֶׁבֶטְךָ וּמִשְׁעַנְתְּךָ הַמָּה יְנַחֲמֵנִי.
Your rod and Your staff, they will comfort me. (verse 4)

The rod is for hitting, and the staff gives support. Both are necessary for the training of the flock: Sometimes they must be hit in order to be taught, and at other times, they must be supported and encouraged. The same is true for the education of our youngsters, as our Sages expressed:

Always have your left hand push away [that is, be firm and tough with the youngsters], while your right hand brings [them] close. (Sanhedrin 107a)

One must never try to bring the students close with both hands; this is as bad as pushing them away with both hands. The proper way to educate is by using both hands for their different functions, one at a time. Sometimes you must be loving and happy with your child, but other occasions call for a stern and angry disposition; both methods should be employed in alternation. And it is fitting that the right hand, the stronger one, should be the one that brings near, while the weaker, left hand represents the tougher approach.

Adolescence

The Psalm continues to describe the circle of life, with a transition from the level of child/animal to the level of adult/man:

תַּעֲרֹךְ לִפְנֵי שֻׁלְחָן נֶגֶד צָרְרֵי דְשִׁנְתְּ בְשֶׁמֶן רֹאשִׁי כּוֹסֵי רִנָּה.

**You prepare a table before me, against my enemies.
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.** (verse 5)

As opposed to grazing in the pasture and guzzling leisurely from a brook – activities that take up most of the animal's existence – we now see man presented in his full glory. He sits down regally to eat at a **table**, holding an **overflowing cup** to drink. His **head, anointed with oil** of royalty, further manifests human dignity. This paints a picture of the grandeur that man can attain.

The symbolism in these verses is clear. They represent the passage from materialism to spirituality, the primary uniqueness and distinction of man. The pair of tools mentioned in the previous verse, the rod and the staff, stand for how we deal with sheep, or with children. They are now replaced with a more advanced pair: **Goodness and kindness**, as we read in the next verse:

אֵךְ טוֹב וְחֶסֶד יִרְדְּפוּנִי כָּל יְמֵי חַיֵּי...

Just goodness and kindness will pursue me all the days of my life. (verse 6)

That which was at first "**your rod and staff**" has now become "**goodness and kindness pursuing me all the days of my life.**" Our transition from childhood to adulthood reveals our spiritual side – our advantage over animals. Goodness and compassion are the steering wheel that guides us to the correct destination: a true inner ambition to do goodness and kindness. What are these traits? Goodness is when we grant someone the sense that we are working with him in partnership, while kindness is the unilateral help that one gives to another, expecting nothing in return.

How do we pass from a sense of childhood to adulthood? What characterizes the turning point? The key is a sense of responsibility. When a child begins to feel that he must do things himself, that he can no longer cast his every problem to his parents, and that he must struggle on his own to find solutions - this is the point that marks his development from a child into an adult.

From this point, it is but a small step for him towards being able to accept tasks upon himself and make sure they are taken care of, without leaving them half-undone for others to finish. The principle is: When others can count on you, that's the sign that you have grown up. There are those who make this jump at a very early age. For others, however, it is a long process, and some remain children even after having already established their own families.

This turning point appears in the above-quoted verse 4: "**Even as I walk in the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me.**" Walking in a threatening and scary valley through the darkness, the shadow of death, surrounded by dangers that seem to lie in wait at every turn - this certainly helps a child grow up quite abruptly. It is when he realizes that he alone is responsible for his fate and very existence, and that no one is around to help him, that the inner sense arouses within him of G-d's voice speaking to him. Only then does he realize that Hashem is standing before him in nature, and that He is within hand's reach.

Eternity

In the third and last stage of the circle of life, the Psalm describes man's ultimate ambition.

וְשָׁבְתִי בְּבַיִת ה' לְאָרְךָ יָמִים.
I will dwell in G-d's House forever. (verse 6)

The word *v'shavti*, meaning "**I will dwell,**" can also mean "**I will return**" - meaning, "I will return to eternal life, to a long life full of light, the eternal world of the soul and spirit." It is at this stage of old age when a man generally feels his spiritual side much more strongly than before, while material and physical desires wane.

The word *v'shavti* in this verse is parallel to *y'shovev* of verse 3: **He restores my soul** (both are from a similar root); if in my childhood I was mischievous and not settled (also from the same root; see Jeremiah 31,21), I now return to my permanence and stability.

Only now, at the end of this Psalm, do we grasp the extent of the foolishness of the opening sensation of "**I lack for nothing**" merely because I can "**lie down in green pastures.**" How can I feel that "**I lack for nothing**" when the entire world of the spiritual is waiting for me just around the corner?

Yes, when we were children, we did not know what we were missing – but now, when we are much older, we realize how much we truly lacked when we were younger. But given the spiritually-poor tools we had then, it is clear why we could not realize then what we now know - that we were missing spirituality in our lives. The marvelous life of spirituality was beyond our grasp; we could not even conceive of it.

The Holy Sabbath

During the course of the week, we are busy working and running from place to place, and find it difficult to feel spiritual longing. This is the "childhood" of the week, during which we do nothing but graze in the fields and imbibe from the brook.

On Friday, the Sabbath eve, our spirituality begins to increase and expand; we take the products of our work and prepare for the holy Sabbath day. The spiritual begins to take over, and we prepare for the holy Sabbath. We set the special Shabbat table, symbolizing human dignity and our supremacy over animals, where we will sing Sabbath songs and discuss ideas of Torah wisdom.

And finally, when the Shabbat itself arrives, we return to the world of eternity and of spirit, the world of "long life" and light. This is the third and final station - and the end of this so-special chapter of Psalms.

The Journeys of Israel

How does all of the above connect with the various journeys and stops that the Children of Israel made during their forty years in the wilderness on their way to the Promised Land in Parashat Masei? The Parashah begins as follows:

אֵלֶּה מִסְעֵי בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם...

These are the journeys of the Children of Israel as they left Egypt... (Bamidbar 33,1)

Israel made 42 stops in the Sinai Desert. The entire purpose of this long trek was for Israel to overcome its childhood illnesses and weaknesses, reach its proper spiritual heights and maturity, and enter the longed-for promised Land of Israel proudly and uprightly.

We asked above why Hashem instructed Moshe to list each and every station in this Parashah. He did this so that we would be able to re-enact the various milestones along the journey, and realize the importance of each and every one of them. Just as we traced the development of man from child to adolescent to adult, so too we will be able to retrace the 42 indispensable steps in the development of the Nation of Israel, from a "regular" people to the ultimate "**treasured nation and holy people.**" (Sh'mot 19,6)