YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**PARASHOT MATOT-MASEI**

**SICHA OF HARAV AHARON LICHTENSTEIN ZT"L**

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Dedicated by the Wise and Etshalom families
in memory of Rabbi Aaron M. Wise,
whose yahrzeit is 21 Tamuz. *Yehi zikhro barukh*.
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In memory of my beloved parents
Yaakov ben Yitzchak, Fred Stone, z”l, whose yartzeit is on 25 Tammuz, and my mother Adia Bat Avraham, Alice Stone, z"l, whose yartzeit was 2 Tammuz.

Ellen & Stanley Stone, their children and grandchildren, Jacob & Chaya, Micah, Addie and Ruby; Zack & Yael, Allie, Isaac; Ezra & Talia, Shai, Ami; Yoni & Cayley, Azi, Kovie; Eliana & Marc, Adina, Emmy and Shira;
Gabi & Talia, Adriana

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The Importance of the Journey

Translated by Kaeren Fish

Parashat Masei begins with a description of the journeys of Bnei Yisrael through the wilderness:

These are the journeys of Bnei Yisrael, who came out of the land of Egypt, by their hosts, by the hand of Moshe and Aharon. (*Bamidbar* 33:1)

As we review the lengthy list of stations that follows, the question that immediately arises is why it is important for us to know the route that Bnei Yisrael followed. The *Rishonim* offer a variety of explanations: that it shows the great love demonstrated by Bnei Yisrael in following God through the wilderness; that it shows the great love demonstrated by God in leading the nation, over 40 years, via only 22 stations; that it provides historical documentation of the journeys in order to prevent future denial of the possibility of the nation’s existence in the wilderness, etc. The Ramban offers a unique view, arguing that the stations of the journey were dictated by God and that although we have no way of knowing why this was written, we must accept it.

The Gemara (*Bava* *Metzia* 79a) discusses the situation of a person who hires a donkey to transport him on a journey, and it dies midway:

Rabbah son of R. Huna said in Rav's name: If one hires an donkey for riding and it perishes midway, he must pay him his hire for half the journey, and [the one who hires] can only bear resentment against him [i.e., against the owner of the donkey].  How so? If another [donkey] can be obtained for hire [at the place where the first one died], what cause is there for resentment? If not, is he then bound to render him his hire?  — In truth, it means that another is not obtainable [here] for hiring, [yet he is bound to pay for half the journey,] because he [the owner] can say to him, “Had you desired to go as far as this [where it died], would you not have had to pay its hire?”

The Tosafot here (s.v. *Illu*)ask, quite justifiably, what is the logic of the owner’s claim, “Had you desired to go as far as this [where it died], would you not have had to pay its hire?” This makes no sense, because the person who hired the donkey did not want to go halfway! If there is no other donkey to be hired, of what use was it that the owner rented him a donkey that died in the middle of nowhere? It would have been better had he remained at home! For this reason, Tosafot explain, it is clear that the Gemara means that another donkey is available for hire at that place, but not at the same price. If this new donkey costs only slightly more, then the buyer must pay the owner of the dead donkey half of his fee; and as for the slightly higher cost he will pay, he has cause to complain to the owner of the first donkey, but he has no legal claim against him (for reasons explained in Tosafot there).

The Tosafot’s question is understandable: when one is engaged in commerce, or a trip for some specific purpose, one has no need for all of the stops along the way. If one suddenly becomes stranded in the middle of the journey, with no possibility of continuing, then one is obviously justified in complaining to the seller and withholding payment – even though one has traveled half of the way already.

The journey of Bnei Yisrael through the wilderness was quite unlike this scenario. During their travels, what mattered for them was not only the final destination, but also the journey itself. Encamping and journeying on at God’s command, accompanied by the pillar of fire and the pillar of cloud, was an objective in its own right, with its own independent significance. Had this been a journey to Eretz Yisrael for business purposes, there would be no benefit arising from a stay in Rimon Peretz; it would have been better to remain in Egypt. However, where the journey is “at God’s command,” it is certainly better to travel and to arrive at Rimon Peretz. The journey itself, each moment and each day of it, with each station along the way, is significant and makes its own contribution.

We express the same idea in a different way at the Pesach Seder, when we sing “*Dayenu*.” While it is true that building the Temple was the fulfillment of our national destiny, had we wandered in the wilderness for forty years without eventually entering the land, “*dayenu*” – that would have been sufficient reason to praise God. The journey itself is important, and its importance arises not only from the final goal that we aspire to attain. For this reason, we commemorate all of Bnei Yisrael’s journeys: each stage was important in its own right and made its own contribution to the development of the travelers.

The same may be said of yeshiva study. While the aim of the yeshiva is to educate its students towards a life of Torah, the importance of yeshiva study arises not only from this ultimate goal. Its effect is manifest not only in “what the student does after he leaves yeshiva,” but in each and every moment that the student spends learning. Every moment contributes – not only in terms of its influence and effect on the future, but also because of its effect and impact in the present.

This principle also applies to life itself. On the one hand, our life in this world is a “corridor that leads to the hall,” but on the other hand “better one hour of Torah and good deeds in this world than all of the life of the World to Come.” Admittedly, our aim is to reach Gan Eden and to experience the perfect existence of life in the World to Come, but can we say that if a person has not attained that, then he has not achieved anything at all? Heaven forefend! Every single act is important in its own right, even if one does not ultimately reach that final destination.

This would seem to be the meaning of the prayer that we recite every day, “*she-lo niga la-rik*, that we not exert ourselves in vain.” We ask of God that the actions that we perform should not ultimately turn out to be empty – even if we do not reach the goal to which we aspire.

We must know that in life, not only the final goal is important. We reject this pragmatic view of reality. As we have seen, the journey towards the goal is also important, and so are the tools that one uses to progress. This is true of the wilderness, and no less so of yeshiva and of Jewish life in general.

(This sicha was delivered on Shabbat Parashat Masei 5762 [2002].)