

Bringing meaning to life

Parasha with Rabbi Benji Levy

BAMIDBAR

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BEHAALOTECHA

SHELACH

KORACH

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A JOURNEYING NATION

The Torah goes into an unusual level of detail describing the 42 journeys of the Jewish people through the desert, to the Land of Israel - 49 verses to be precise. It repeatedly records departure points, encampments and destinations. With no navigation detail left to the imagination, **the Torah metaphorically swings the camera lens, takes a break from the macro stories of the Exodus from Egypt, the Revelation at Sinai and the pending entry into the Promised Land, and temporarily zooms in on the more micro details of the journey itself.**

Indeed, journeying has been a central theme of our people ever since the days of Abraham, when God calls on Abraham to take the first step, 'Go forth from your land and from your birthplace and from your father's house, to the land that I will show you.'¹ From that day on, the Jewish people have been journeying from land to land and from exile to exile.

When travelling long distances, people tend to look up towards the horizon. The trouble with the horizon is that when you finally think you are about to reach it, you discover that it is even further away, and you start trying to reach it all over again.

In essence, this is our purpose on earth - to constantly move forward, to keep striving upward, higher and higher, and to continually push ourselves towards our own 'horizon', towards the goals that we have set for ourselves. **For even if we are not actually physically travelling with our passport and ticket in hand, each and every one of us is on an ongoing journey of growth and discovery.**

The question is, towards what are we striving? What is the essence of our journey? The *tefillat haderech* (travellers' prayer), said whenever going on a journey, offers an interesting insight:

You should lead us in peace and direct our steps in peace, and guide us in peace, and support us in peace, and cause us to reach our destination in life, joy and peace.²

The recurring theme seems to be an ongoing wish for peace. The question is: To what does this peace refer? Perhaps nestling within the words of the travellers' prayer is our ongoing existential hope and desire that our journey will eventually lead us to a place of inner peace and tranquility. The trouble is, though, that as we all know, **life is not always rosy and our journeys are not simple.**

Does anyone ever really achieve a long-lasting inner peace? Is this prayer referring to an unattainable dream, much like the quest to reach the horizon?

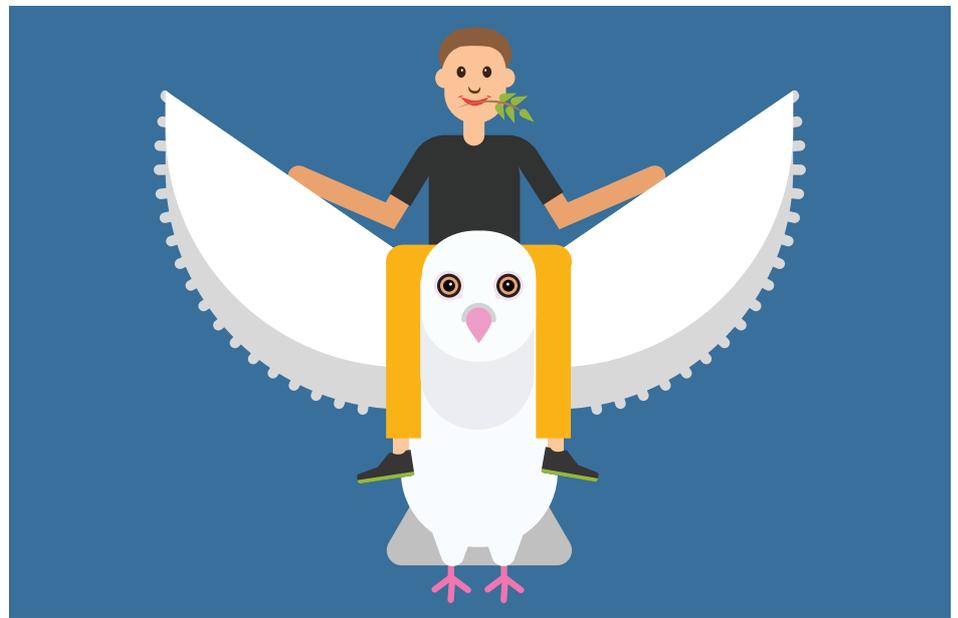
Interestingly, the United States Declaration of Independence states, 'that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among

these are Life, Liberty and the *pursuit* of Happiness.³ The use of the word 'pursuit' is intriguing. Why not simply state, 'life, liberty and happiness'? Perhaps the implication is that happiness is something towards which we are only able to aspire, but never actually reach. Or perhaps true inner happiness and peace is experienced primarily through the *pursuit* - through the journey itself.

Rav Kook teaches that when a person leaves his or her comfort zone and embarks upon a journey of any kind, the inner soul begins to stir. Whatever our journey might be - a new school, job, relationship, home, experience, spiritual direction or conversation - there is a parallel journey of spiritual growth taking place inside us. As our inner soul stirs, we pray for peace on the journey itself. We pray to preserve the balance of our morals and values, and to regain tranquility on our new path.

As the Jewish people stand on the brink of conquering the Promised Land, the enormity of the moment could well have overshadowed any seemingly irrelevant details of the journey itself. However, the Torah shows us otherwise. The extensive description of our journey in the desert emphasises the significance of the odyssey.

We are all travelling on a constant journey of discovery and growth - a journey through the highs and lows of life. It is not coincidental that the Hebrew term for Jewish Law is *Halacha*, the root of which is *halach* - walk. Similarly, the Torah commands us to 'walk in His ways.'⁴ Our



relationship with God and ourselves, by definition, is one of journeying - movement and growth.

This section of *Parashat Massei* highlights the importance of the journey. We must pause from focusing only on our destination - on our never-ending pursuit of other things like success, money, recognition and pleasure-long enough to enjoy and feel happiness from the experience of the journey itself. This is the ultimate key to our inner tranquility and peace of mind - otherwise known as *menuchat hanefesh* - peace of mind and the peace we pray for as we embark on every journey.

Notes

¹ Genesis 12:1. ²The source of this prayer is found in Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot 30a.

³Thomas Jefferson, United States Declaration of Independence, July 1st 1776. Italics added for emphasis.

⁴Deuteronomy 28:12.

Parasha Fact:

The wife of the High Priest would bring food to the killers hiding in the cities of refuge so that they would not pray for the death of the High Priest (which would earn them freedom from the city).

Next week in Devarim:

How often do we pick up the phone to ask a friend for advice and listen intently to their valuable words? And then, how often are the tables turned, and we find ourselves dishing out pearls of incredible wisdom and revolutionary advice to those exact same friends? An enigmatic omission when Moses is reminiscing about his strategic plan for leadership, teaches us that, with just a little digging below the surface, and tapping into the nuances of our inner resources, we can discover all the advice that we may ever seek, simply waiting to be revealed.

שבת שלום