

Matot-Masei 5777

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It is difficult to capture a moment. Time may be fleeting, but it can also seem interminable. When we look forward in time, a year can seem a lifetime away. But when we look back in time, a year ago can feel like yesterday. A fifteen-hour flight can feel never-ending, a one-week holiday can pass like a day. We mark time in all kinds of ways, from the photographs that we take, to the words we write, to annual rituals like celebrating a birthday or commemorating a Yahrzeit. Travel photography, once shared through slide-shows in people's living rooms, today ubiquitously dispersed online via social media sites like Instagram and Facebook, captures a particular place at a particular time. As philosopher Roland Barthes puts it, "What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially." In other words, a photograph captures a moment that would otherwise fleetingly disappear, rendering something temporary into something with a form of permanence.

One of the ways that we as Jews mark time is of course Shabbat, the reason we are in shul tonight: the chance to stop, to reflect, to mark the end of our week and to take a break before transitioning into the next week. It is also a chance to mark time in another way: by studying Torah. For our study and reading of Torah is also cyclical, is a way of marking time. By

reading a section, a parasha of the Torah each week, we read the entire Torah over the course of one year. And each year, we can mark time by knowing where we are in the Torah.

This week, we find ourselves at the end of Ba'Midbar, the Book of Numbers. Here, in the double Torah portion of Matot-Masei, we find the people of Israel poised to enter the promised land. They are finally at the end of the long journey that began a generation ago in Egypt. Everything they have been through leads to this point: from slavery to freedom, from wandering in the wilderness to revelation at Sinai. It is perhaps sometimes only at the end of a journey that we can look back and recognise the important points. At the beginning of the Torah portion, Masei, the second half of this week's double portion, we read that:

אֵלֶּה מַסְעֵי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר יָצְאוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְצִבְאָתָם בְּיַד־מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן:

'These were the marches of the Israelites who started out from the land of Egypt, troop by troop, in the charge of Moses and Aaron.' (Numbers 33:1)

And for the next forty-eight verses, we read in great detail about the journey of the Israelites from Egypt: from Rameses to Succoth to Etham and so on. As the great medieval commentator Rashi notes, there are forty-two stages of this journey. But why is it so important to record every single place the people of Israel stopped and camped? As someone in Parashat Ha'Shavua commented earlier this week, reading this chapter of the Torah is as interesting as sitting through a slideshow of someone else's travels. Over the course of forty years in the wilderness, the people of Israel

camped in or visited forty-two places (although as Rashi explains fourteen of these were in the first year after leaving Egypt, and eight places were visited after Aaron's death, thus reducing the total to twenty places over the course of thirty-eight years). Rashi also points out that even though this might seem like a high number of places, the people of Israel also had time to rest, because God's love for the Israelites meant that they were not continually on the move.

This is all a bit of a long-winded way of saying that this Shabbat also marks the end of my time in Melbourne – for now. A few weeks ago, I completed my first year of rabbinical school at Hebrew Union College in Jerusalem. As I look back now, there are so many important and meaningful stations on this journey. During my year in Israel, I enjoyed and learnt so much from our classes in Hebrew, Bible, Rabbinic Texts, Liturgy and History. But I learnt so much more. I learnt what it means to be a Progressive Jew in Israel. I studied and formed deep friendships with both my Israeli and American fellow rabbinical students in Jerusalem. I prayed with congregations who are as proudly Israeli as they are Progressive. It is impossible to do justice to this experience with words. Just like perhaps it is impossible to sum up a people's forty years of wandering in a few verses, except by mentioning the places that they stopped and camped. We may not know why all these particular places were recorded in the Torah. But we know that they are there, because they were important. As we mark this Shabbat, let us pause and remember the important places we have

been, the places where we are, and the places we are yet to visit... Shabbat shalom!