

Parashat Matot-Masei מטות-מסעי

Torah: Numbers 30:2–36:13

Haftarah: Jeremiah 2:4–28; 3:4

The Travelogue

General Overview

This double portion is the last parasha in the book of Numbers. The contents cover a variety of subjects such as the Levitical and refuge cities, the teachings about murder and manslaughter, the final borders of Israel, and the division of the Promised Land.

The section, however, upon which we will focus our studies, is a travelogue that Moses compiled through divine inspiration. It consists of all of the places the children of Israel stopped during their forty years of wandering after leaving Egypt. We will use this list of locations in our commentary for much the same reason it was written — as a memorial to what transpired between Israel and the Lord at each given location. Of course, it is impossible to comment on every site because we do not know what happened at every place listed within this reading. However, as we come across these places in other parashiyot, we will comment on them.

By the end of this commentary, and the book of Numbers, we will have a great historical journal of the relationship between the Lord and Israel. Accordingly, we will also be afforded an opportunity to see what Israel learned about the Messiah in that early stage of their history as a nation.

Exposition

The outline for our study will be the three main divisions of travel that Moses specifies in his journal. Hence, it will look like this:

- I. The First Division 33:1–14 — The Exodus to Rephidim
- II. The Second Division 33:15–41 — Rephidim to the Death of Aaron (Mount Hor)
- III. The Third Division 33:42–49 — Mount Hor to the Plains of Moab

In this excerpt from the Parasha, we will focus on section I, The Exodus to Rephidim.

I. The Exodus to Rephidim

The travelogue begins by informing us that the Israelites moved out “by divisions(33:1).” This is a clear indication that as God was moving them, He was also forming a great army, the army of the Lord.

A. Rameses (33:3–4) — Slavery / Redemption / Passover

The name of the first location is Rameses. This, of course is where it all began. This is one of the places where Israel was enslaved, building a store city for Pharaoh. This also would have been the place where the slaying of the firstborn

occurred. In addition, it was at Rameses that the first Passover was celebrated. Then from Rameses,

The Israelites set out on the fifteenth day of the first month, the day after the Passover. They marched out boldly in full view of the Egyptians, who were burying all their firstborn, whom the Lord had struck down among them; for the Lord had brought judgement on their gods (33:3–4).

It was here that Israel came to know the misery of slavery and the feeling of desperation to be rescued. It was also here that they saw first hand, the mighty things that their God, whom they thought was apathetic to their cause, could do on their behalf. Finally, at Rameses, they received their first serving of the nourishing Torah — the teaching about keeping Passover.

Thus, this first part of Moses' entry was therefore the place where the children of Israel had their first lessons on what it means to be redeemed people and a holy community. This was the first preparation for them to begin to understand about the redeeming and saving work of the Messiah.

B. Sukkot and Etham (33:5-6) — Freedom, the Cloud and Fire

With the wonder of the Passover freshly engraved on their minds, the Israelites began to travel. Their first stop was apparently at Sukkot, and then they moved on to Etham. Most scholars generally understand these places to be located between Lake Timsah and the Bitter Lakes, southeast from where they began their journeying and approximately where the present-day Suez Canal is.

We do not know how long they stayed at these places, but it could not have been for more than a few days. However, the buzz-word in everyone's mind was surely, "What kind of God do we have? He judges the wicked, He rescues His own, He does miracles, and He wants to be remembered for who He is and the great things He has done."

The Torah also informs us that sometime, beginning either at Sukkot or at Etham, the Holy One began to show His sovereign care for them

By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people (Exodus 13:21).

C. Pi-Hahiot (33:7) — Crossing the Sea, God's Power

It was unusual for Israel to have passed through this rather obscure place. By all rights, most would have thought that they would have continued a northeast trek along the international coastal trade route, later called the *Via Maris* by the Romans. This most famous ancient trade route which connected Egypt and Africa with Damascus and the East, followed the Mediterranean coast as it went through the Promised Land.

However, God had other things up His sleeve! We learned in Exodus 14:2–3 that the Lord was tricking Pharaoh into believing that Israel was, "wandering about the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert." When Pharaoh was thinking this the Lord said,

I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord (Exodus 14:4).

Egypt most certainly found out that He was God! Hence, it was at Pi-hahiroth that God skillfully orchestrated the miracle of the dividing of the Reed Sea, permitting Israel to cross on dry ground and yet destroying Pharaoh's army, which tried to pursue them. It is noteworthy that (as stated earlier in our studies in Exodus) that Pi-hahiroth literally means, "Mouth of Freedom." Here, Israel chose freedom rather than submission again to slavery.

Undoubtedly, when Israel thought of this place, they, therefore, thought "Salvation! Miracle! Judgment for Egypt! Deliverance for us"! This then, became the paradigm for all future lessons on salvation and deliverance, including the salvation of Messiah.

D. Marah (33:8) — Testing

From the crossing of the sea, they went further south to one of the places that they would have liked to forget. They came to the bitter waters of Marah. We are not sure if it was originally called Marah or if Israel named it such. The Hebrew word *marah* (מררה) means "bitter." It referred to the water that was found there: "... For they [the waters] were bitter; therefore it was named Marah" (Exodus 15:23). The name Marah also referred to the reaction of the thirsty Israelites when they found that the water was unfit. They became embittered and, "So the people grumbled at Moses ..." (Exodus 15:24).

However, this is where the Almighty's training began. The bitter waters were no accident for Him! For, "there He tested them" and He taught them by saying,

If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his eyes, if you pay attention to his commands and keep all his decrees, I will not bring on you any of the diseases I brought on the Egyptians, for I am the Lord who heals you (Exodus 15:26).

Hence, Marah became a place where the Israelites would remember that they began to grumble against the Lord who had just redeemed them. They also would have remembered it as the place where He lovingly tested them and taught them some of their first lessons as a redeemed community.

E. Elim (33:9) — Relief, Sweetness of God's Rest

As bitter as both the waters and the lessons were at Marah, the Holy One countered that experience by leading them to Elim, "where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters" (Exodus 15:27). Many suggest that the site called Uyum-Musa or "Springs of Moses," a large oasis just south of the Suez Canal on the east side, is the place where they were.

What a pleasant memory that site must have been for them. In this memory, they would have thought of the Lord as the one who refreshes their life with sweetness, the Lord as their Good Shepherd!

Rabbi Alan Ullman suggests that Elim, with its 70 date palm trees and 12 springs of water, may have also reminded the Israelites of their beginnings.¹ They were 12 tribes and 70 people when they came down to Egypt. Now they are still 12 tribes, but greatly multiplied as they exit from slavery to head back home to the Land of Promise.

F. Reed Sea (33:10) — Thought and Contemplation

Nothing is mentioned about this particular trip to the sea. It is, apparently, a return to the body of water that was the scene of one of the most memorable miracles in Israel's history. Perhaps upon their return, however brief, the Lord wanted them to think and contemplate on what He did here to release them from the Egyptians.

G. The Wilderness of Sin (33:11) — Quail and Manna, God's Provision

So it came about at evening that the quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. When the layer of dew evaporated, behold, on the surface of the wilderness there was a fine flake-like thing, fine as the frost on the ground. When the sons of Israel saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. And Moses said to them, "It is the bread which the Lord has given you to eat" (Exodus 16:13–15).

Thus, we have the giving of the quails and the manna. This was to be their diet for about the next forty or so years, until they reached the Promised Land.

After another brief stop over at the Sea, God led the children of Israel to the wilderness of Sin. To English speakers, this sounds as if it must have been a very bad place, for it was a Wilderness of "sin." However, do not be confused because of the languages! The English word "sin" in this instance is just a transliteration of the Hebrew word and has nothing to do with sin!

Having said all of that, however we must report that it was in the Wilderness of Sin, that Israel gravely sinned! For, when they got hungry for some of the foods they left behind in Egypt, "... the whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness" (Exodus 16:2). In response, the Lord made a special appearance of His glory and promised that He would feed them with special provision that they would never forget.

H. Dophkah, Alush, Rephidim (33:12-14) — Water From the Rock and "The Lord is My Sign"

It is not often that we find a comment in this journal about what happened at a particular location. However, in verse 33:14 we read, "They left Alush and camped at Rephidim, where there was no water for the people to drink."

There is a modern location called Wadi Refatid, about thirty miles from the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula on the western shore of the peninsula, which many have suggested may be the location of Rephidim. On the other hand, others suggest even more emphatically that "Rephidim can almost certainly be

¹ Rabbi Alan Ullman is the director of Rodef School of Jewish Studies, Newton, MA (USA). This suggestion was made in a class on Exodus 15–9.

identified with Wadi Feiran, a long lush valley that leads into the peninsula [Sinai] from the coastal plain.”²

At this location, the people once again complained to Moses. When Moses brought his problem to the Lord He said,

Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it that the people may drink. And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel. [As a result, Moses] ... named the place Massah and Meribah because of the quarrel of the sons of Israel, and because they tested the Lord, saying, “Is the Lord among us, or not?” (Exodus 17:6–9, NASB).

The testing of the Lord was not the only memorable thing that happened at Rephidim. (Although, for some reason, that is the only event that Numbers 33:14 records.) We read in Exodus, “Then Amalek came and fought against Israel at Rephidim” (17:8). According to the account in Shemot, this attack was singled out particularly for an everlasting memory!

What happened was that when Israel went to defend herself against Amalek, Moses and two others watched Joshua lead Israel victoriously into battle against them. However, the victory was contingent on Moses holding up his staff,

So it came about when Moses held his hand up, that Israel prevailed, and when he let his hand down, Amalek prevailed. But Moses’ hands were heavy. Then they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it; and Aaron and Hur supported his hands, one on one side and one on the other. Thus his hands were steady until the sun set. So Joshua overwhelmed Amalek and his people with the edge of the sword (Exodus 17:11–13).

The next statement from the Holy One, however, truly revealed where His heart and mind were concerning the safety of His chosen people.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Write this in a book as a memorial, and recite it to Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven.” And Moses built an altar, and named it “the Lord is my Banner.” And he said, “The Lord has sworn; the Lord will have war against Amalek from generation to generation” (Exodus 17:14–16).

The phrase “the Lord is my Banner” became the byword for this occasion. That particular translation may, however, not be the best. We suggest that it (*Adonai Nissi*, יהוה נסי) be rendered “the Lord is my Miracle,” or “the Lord is my Sign.”

חזק חזק ונתחזק!
Chazak! Chazak! Venitchazeik!
“Be strong! Be strong!
And may we be strengthened!”

² Leen and Kathleen Ritmeyer, *From Sinai to Jerusalem: The Wanderings of the Holy Ark*, 5.