



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Masei 5774

Names on a List

Rabbi Reuven Spolter

When my children grow up, I imagine that one day we'll look at the old photos and tell them about the places where we lived. "Well, we got married and lived in the Washington Heights. Then we moved to Linden, NJ, and then to West Hartford, CT. From there we moved to Oak Park, MI (We moved around a lot.). Then we made aliyah to Yad Binyamin ."

What will my children think about these different places? What could Linden, New Jersey or a small city in Connecticut mean to them? What about their children? To us the names of these cities bring back memories of small homes, early married life, friends and relationships from an earlier time in our lives. But to our children – and especially to their children (God willing!) the names of these places will probably mean nothing. They're just names of places, no different than any other place to which they've never been and will probably never visit.

I think about these names of places when I read the first section of Parashat Masei. The first section of the parashah lists a number of places, most of which we've never heard of and could never locate on a map. Did you know that the Jewish people traveled from Livnah to Risah to Keheilatah to Har Shafer? It's right there in the Chumash; (33:21-23) the list goes on and on, a litany of places that I neither remember nor care about.

Chazal too wondered about this long list of names. Rashi and Ramban suggest that the list is surprisingly short to teach us just how much God loved the Jewish people. He loved them so much that He only forced them to uproot the camp a relatively small number of times over a forty-year period. Ramban also quotes Rambam who suggests in Moreh Nevuchim that one day people might claim that the Jews never really traveled in the desert. (Can you imagine?) Therefore, the Torah meticulously chronicles their travels to affirm that the nation really did

survive miraculously in the desert. Yet, even after quoting Rambam's long explanation, Ramban adds,

והנה מכתב המסעות מצות ה' היא מן הטעמים
הנוכחים או מזולטן, ענין לא נתגלה לנו סודו...

Behold, the writing of these travels is a commandment of God, either due to the reasons mentioned or without them; this is a matter whose secret is not revealed to us...

In essence, says Ramban, we don't know why Moshe wrote down the names of the places, other than the fact that God commanded him to do so. God wanted us to have this long list, and didn't tell us why.

Yet, while I don't know precisely why God commanded Moshe to record the list, I can tell you how reading the list of these places makes me feel: I feel like I'm reading a list of Jewish communities destroyed by the Nazis in the Holocaust .

Have you ever tried to look at map of Jewish Poland, and just read through the names of the communities? Just Google "shtetels in Poland". I recognized perhaps five – of more than fifty! The names are foreign, strange. Have you ever heard of Kanczuga, Kiernozia, Kleczew, Konin, Korczyn, Krasnosielc, or Kurzelow? And those are just the K's that have websites. Have you ever visited the Valley of Communities at Yad Vashem? It's a haunting canyon that simply lists the names of destroyed Jewish communities during the Holocaust. If I would ask you how many communities are on the list, how many would you guess? 500? 1,000? Would you believe that over 5,000 names of communities are engraved on the walls of the Valley of Communities?

They don't even feel real to me. And despite this feeling I know that each name not represents not just a place, but tens or hundreds or thousands of Jews who built families, communities, shuls and schools. And now they're gone. How many thriving Jewish communities from Northern

Africa are now just names on a list? What about the former Soviet Union? Ukraine? The Middle East? The list goes on and on.

This is the mournful message of Massei. The travels of the Jewish people outside the land of Israel are fleeting, temporary, and anonymous. We might stop at one location for a shorter time, and another for longer – perhaps much longer. But in the end, each place will be forgotten, just a memory of its former self, a name on a list, but nothing more .

Can it be a coincidence that we always read Massei during the Three Weeks, the period of time when we recall the destruction of Jewish communities from around the world? We know that as they traveled through the desert, the Midrash teaches us that each Tisha B'av, every Jew who reached the age of sixty that year died. How many

Jewish graveyards were lost in the sands of the Sinai desert? Maybe this list is both a lament and a foreshadowing; a kinah of God for the lost time and the destroyed Jewish community which perished in the desert - a lamentation for the tens of thousands of Jews who died needlessly in the desert, and the tens of millions who would perish after them in the desert of the exile.

And what about America? To me names like Baltimore and Akron and St. Louis and Lawrence and Oceanside and Brooklyn seem natural. I've been to those places. I know people who live there. But do we have any illusion that they will always be known as Jewish places? (Is that something we even want?) How long will it be before those cities also become anonymous names on a meaningless list, foreign and alien and hard to imagine?

I'm sorry to be so depressing. Tisha B'av is coming.

There's Something in the Air

Rabbi Josh Hoffman

In parshas Masei, the nation is given the boundaries of the land it is about to enter, and which it is charged to capture. Forty-two cities are then assigned to the Levites, and an additional six cities are given them to serve as cities of refuge, to save the inadvertent murderer from the avenger of blood. We have noted in the past the comment of the Talmud that there were an equal number of cities of refuge on each side of the Yarden River, even though there were only two and a half tribes on the eastern side of the river, and nine and a half tribes on the western side. The Talmud explains that there was an abundance of murderers on the eastern side, and that is why there had to be a proportionately larger number of cities of refuge there. The Maharal of Prague asks, aren't the cities of refuge set aside to serve the inadvertent? How, then, can an abundance of willful murderers have any repercussions for the number of cities of refuge needed? He answers that, because there was an abundance of willful murderers on the eastern side of the Yarden, life, in general, was not valued properly, and, in such an atmosphere inadvertent murders occurred more often, as well. This observation of the Maharal can, I believe, help us understand the verses preceding the section on the boundaries of the land and the purpose for bringing, at length, the laws of the cities of refuge after setting out the boundaries.

Before the nation is given the boundaries of the land, it is told, "If you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land before you, those of them whom you leave shall be as pins in your eyes and as thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you upon the land in which you dwell" (Bamidbar 33: 55). The nation, then, was commanded to drive the inhabitants of the land out. As the Talmud tells us, three options were given to these inhabitants. Either they could make peace and accept observance of the Noachide laws upon themselves, or they could leave the land and go to another country, or they could wage war. In most cases, the war option was chosen, and, as a result, the nation had to engage in a great deal of battle in the process of inhabiting the land. Such an atmosphere, if carried into everyday life once they settled into their designated homes, had the potential of having a negative effect on the atmosphere of the country in general, placing it in a militaristic mode, and lessening the value of life in general. Just as the Maharal taught us that an abundance of willful murders can lead to an increase in inadvertent murders, a militaristic mode could have the effect of viewing life as less important than it is. Perhaps for this reason the laws of the city of refuge are presented at length precisely at this juncture, in order to emphasize the value of life, and the safeguards that must be taken to preserve it.

Rabbi Yehudah Leib Ginzburg, in his commentary *Yalkut Yehudah* to parshas Shoftim, mentions the Talmudic comment regarding the address made to Jewish soldiers before waging war in the Holy Land. The kohein begins his address by saying, “Hear Yisroel (Shema Yisroel) you are today approaching battle against your enemies” (Devorim 20:3). Rashi, citing the Talmud (Sotah 42a), writes that the seemingly superfluous words, ‘Shema Yisroel’ - Hear O Yisroel - are an allusion to the prayer of Shema that is recited twice daily. The kohein, says the Talmud, by beginning his address with these words, is telling the soldiers that even if the only merit they have is that of the recitation of the Shema, they are worthy of having God save their lives during battle. Why should the Shema be effective specifically in regard to the battles that are described in parshas Shoftim? Rabbi Ginzburg explains by referring to Rashi’s explanation of the first sentence of the Shema, “Hear Yisroel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one” (Devorim 6:4). This verse expresses our hope that God, who is at the moment recognized as the One God only by his people Yisroel, will, eventually, be recognized as such by all nations. Before embarking on a war in which many human beings will likely be killed, we must know that our motivation in doing so is not any form of hatred of humanity, but, on the contrary, by our love for humanity and hope that they will join us in our recognition of God’s unity.

The nations we are commanded to wage war against transgressed the seven Noachide laws, thereby ignoring,

the fundamental elements of morality, or, as my teacher Rav Ahron Soloveichik put it, the natural law that is embedded in every man’s heart and mind. Before we wage war against them, we offer to make peace with them, on condition that they accept observance of the Noachide laws upon themselves. Although there is a dispute among the medieval commentators as to whether we send this peace offer even to members of the seven Canaanite nations, Rav Ahron Soloveichik maintained that all agree that if they offer to make peace on their own, we do accept their offer. Only if they insist on remaining in the land and at the same time persist in violating the seven laws do we go on to wage war against them. To allow the seven nations to remain in the land and continue with their immoral, inhumane practices would make our goal of bringing all the nations to a recognition of the One God virtually impossible to attain. The kohein, in addressing the soldiers, alludes to the Shema in order to remind them of the reason that they are about to wage war. Keeping this message in mind as they go out to fight will help them wage war with the proper intention, and thereby provide them with the merit they need to win the battle. Following our discussion of the placement of the section concerning the cities of refuge close to the section on driving the nations out of the land, we can add that keeping in mind the true motivation behind these wars when fighting them will prevent the creation of an atmosphere in which human life is not valued, such as the institution of the cities of refuge is meant to deal with.

Natural or Supernatural?

Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

The book of Bemidbar draws to a close with an account of the cities of refuge, the six cities – three on each side of the Jordan – set apart as places to which people found innocent of murder, but guilty of manslaughter, were sent.

In early societies, especially non-urban ones that lacked an extensive police force, there was always a danger that people would take the law into their own hands, in particular when a member of their family or tribe had been killed.

Thus would begin a cycle of vengeance and retaliation

that had no natural end, one revenge-killing leading to another and another, until the community had been decimated, a phenomenon familiar to us from literature, from the Montagues and Capulets of *Romeo and Juliet*, to the Sharks and Jets of *West Side Story*, to the Corleones and Tattaglias of *The Godfather*.

The only viable solution is the effective and impartial rule of law. There is, though, one persisting danger. If Reuben killed Shimon and is deemed innocent of murder by the court – it was an accident, there was no malice aforethought, the victim and perpetrator were not enemies

– then there is still the danger that the family of the victim may feel that justice has not been done. Their close relative lies dead and no one has been punished.

It was to prevent such situations of “blood vengeance” that the cities of refuge were established. Those who had committed manslaughter were sent there, and so long as they were within the city limits, they were protected by law. There they had to stay until – according to our parsha – “the death of the High Priest” (Num. 35: 25).

The obvious question is, what does the death of the High Priest have to do with it? There seems no connection whatsoever between manslaughter, blood vengeance and the High Priest, let alone his death.

Let us look at two quite different interpretations. They are interesting in their own right, but more generally, they show us the range of thought that exists within Judaism. The first is given by the Babylonian Talmud:

A venerable old scholar said, I heard an explanation at one of the sessional lectures of Rava, that the High Priest should have implored divine grace for the generation, which he failed to do. (Makkot 11a)

According to this the High Priest had a share, however small, in the guilt for the fact that someone died, albeit by accident. Murder is not something that could have been averted by the High Priest’s prayer. The murderer was guilty. He chose to do what he did, and no one else can be blamed. But manslaughter, precisely because it happens without anyone intending that it should, is the kind of event that might have been averted by the prayers of the High Priest. Therefore it is not fully atoned for until the High Priest dies. Only then can the manslaughterer go free.

Maimonides offers a completely different explanation in The Guide for the Perplexed (III: 40):

A person who killed another person unknowingly must go into exile because the anger of “the avenger of the blood” cools down while the cause of the mischief is out of sight. The chance of returning from the exile depends on the death of the High Priest, the most honoured of men, and the friend of all Israel. By his death the relative of the slain person becomes reconciled (ibid. ver. 25); for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one has befallen another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest.

According to Maimonides, the death of the High Priest has nothing to do with guilt or atonement, but simply with the fact that it causes great collective grief, in which people

forget their own misfortunes in the face of larger national loss. That is when people let go of their individual sense of injustice and desire for revenge. It then becomes safe for the person found guilty of manslaughter to return home.

What is at stake between these two profoundly different interpretations of the law? The first has to do with whether exile to a city of refuge is a kind of punishment or not. According to the Babylonian Talmud it seems as if it was. There may have been no intent. No one was legally to blame. But a tragedy has happened at the hands of X, the person guilty of manslaughter, and even the High Priest shared, if only negatively and passively, in the guilt. Only when both have undergone some suffering, one by way of exile, the other by way of (natural, not judicial) death, has the moral balance been restored. The family of the victim feel that some sort of justice has been done.

Maimonides however does not understand the law of the cities of refuge in terms of guilt or punishment whatsoever. The only relevant consideration is safety. The person guilty of manslaughter goes into exile, not because it is a form of expiation, but simply because it is safer for him to be a long way from those who might be seeking vengeance. He stays there until the death of the High Priest because only after national tragedy can you assume that people have given up thoughts of taking revenge for their own dead family member. This is a fundamental difference in the way we conceptualise the cities of refuge.

However, there is a more fundamental difference between them. The Babylonian Talmud assumes a certain level of supernatural reality. It takes it as self-understood that had the High Priest prayed hard and devotedly enough, there would have been no accidental deaths.

Maimonides’ explanation is non-supernatural. It belongs broadly to what we would call social psychology. People are more able to come to terms with the past when they are not reminded daily of it by seeing the person who, perhaps, was driving the car that killed their son as he was crossing the road on a dark night, in heavy rainfall, on a sharp bend in the road.

There are deaths – like those of Princess Diana and of the Queen Mother in Britain – that evoke widespread and deep national grief. There are times – after 9/11, for example, or the Indian Ocean tsunami of 26 December 2004 – when our personal grievances seem simply too small to worry about. This, as Maimonides says, is “a natural phenomenon.”

This fundamental difference, between a natural and supernatural understanding of Judaism, runs through many eras of Jewish history: sages as against priests, philosophers as against mystics, Rabbi Ishmael as against Rabbi Akiva, Maimonides in contradistinction to Judah Halevi, and so on to today.

It is important to realise that not every approach to religious faith in Judaism presupposes supernatural events – events, that is to say, there cannot be explained within the parameters of science, broadly conceived. God is beyond

the universe, but his actions within the universe may none the less be in accordance with natural law and causation.

On this view, prayer changes the world because it changes us. Torah has the power to transform society, not by way of miracles, but by effects that are fully explicable in terms of political theory and social science. This is not the only approach to Judaism, but it is Maimonides', and it remains one of the two great ways of understanding our faith.

The Never-Ending Journey of the Jewish People

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

This week's parasha, parashat Masei, concludes the fourth book of the Bible, the book of Bamidbar (Numbers). The name Bamidbar means "in the wilderness." It is therefore not at all surprising that the final parasha of the book of Bamidbar deals with "masei," the journeys of the Jewish people during their forty year trek in the wilderness.

When parashat Masei is read in the synagogue, the Torah reader reads it with a special singsong melody, conveying the idea of journeying from place to place. Most verses of the opening chapter begin with the word, "vah'yis'ooch," and they traveled or journeyed, and end with the word "vah'yah'chah'noo," and they encamped or settled. So, for instance, in Numbers 33:18, the verse states that the Israelites journeyed from Hazeroth and encamped in Rithmah.

After recording the forty-two locations where the people encamped, parashat Masei concludes with a listing of the borders and boundaries of the land of Israel. The Torah then instructs the people to set aside cities for the Levites and the cities of refuge for unintentional murderers. The parasha concludes with the laws of inheritance of the land for women, specifically, the daughters of Zelophehad.

Not surprisingly, parashat Masei begins with a verse concerning traveling (Numbers 33:1): "Ay'leh masei Bnei Yisrael, ah'sher yahtz'ooch may'erezt Mitzrayim, l'tziv'oh'tahm, b'yad Moshe v'Aharon," These are the journeys of the Children of Israel, who went forth from the land of Egypt, according to their legions, under the hand of Moses and Aaron.

In parashat Pekudei, at the very end of the book of

Exodus, the Torah also speaks of the journeys of the people. Scripture there states that the journeys of the People of Israel were dependent upon the "cloud" that hovered over the Tabernacle. When the cloud moved, the people moved; when the cloud rested, the people rested. The final verse of the book of Exodus states (Exodus 40:38): "Kee ah'nahn Hashem ahl ha'Mishkan, yoh'mam, v'aish, teeh'yeh laylah boh, l'ay'nay chohl bayt Yisrael, b'chohl mahs'ay'hem." For the cloud of G-d would hover over the Tabernacle by day, and fire would be above it at night, before the eyes of all of the house of Israel on all their journeys.

When commenting on that verse, Rashi (Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, 1040-1105, foremost commentator on the Bible) first explains how the travels of the people were dependent upon the cloud. Rashi then further explains that the places where the people camped are also referred to as "journeys," since after encamping the people would travel again to a new camp. To prove his point, Rashi cites two examples. The first example is the opening verse of parashat Masei. The second example is found in Genesis 13:3 and refers to Abram's travels: "Vah'yay'lech l'mah'sah'ahv," Abram proceeded on his journeys when he returned from Egypt to the land of Canaan. Rashi explains that when returning from Egypt, Abram traveled in the exact reverse order in which he traveled when he left the land of Canaan, and he stayed overnight in the same lodgings in which he had stayed on his way to Egypt.

The Yalkut Yehuda (a commentary on the Torah and rabbinic writings by Yehuda Leib Ginsburg, 1885–1946, rabbi in Yaroslavl, Russia and Denver, CO), cited in Iturei

Torah, elaborates on the comments of Rashi in parashat Masei, suggesting that though it may appear to human eyes that the People of Israel dwell quietly and peacefully in a particular location, it is important to recognize that their dwelling is only a temporary way-station and that a new journey always awaits.

Although it is frequently stated that one must not lose sight of one's destination when on a journey, Judaism often regards the journey to be as important as the destination. It is not enough to reach our goals; the question must be asked, how were the goals reached? Was the journey conducted in the proper manner, in an ethical and moral fashion? Or, were innocent people possibly harmed in the process?

Frequently, it is the journey itself that builds character. Without the proper preparation, those who arrive at a destination, no matter how exciting and captivating it may be, may wind up with very little. Those who are unable

to march in an organized and meaningful manner with the rest of the travelers, will hardly be able to dwell in an organized and meaningful fashion with the others, no matter how luxurious the destination.

Consequently, it is important to carefully consider and review the ancient journeys of our people, to learn from them, from both the successes and the failures, as we travel on our own personal journeys, to our own longed-for destinations.

Especially in the three week period of mourning, which concludes with the Fast of the Ninth of Av, it is important for each of us to carefully assess and consider the paths of our ancestors that resulted in the destruction of the Temple. It is, perhaps, even more important for us to review and learn from the ancient journeys, if we ever hope to avoid destruction and to succeed in rebuilding the third Temple. Our destination is clear. It is vital that the steps of our journey also be clear.

The Lesson of Arei Miklat

Rabbi Avraham Gordimer

In Parshas Masei, the Torah presents the laws of Arei Miklat – Cities of Refuge, whither one who kills unwittingly must flee and live in exile. In conjunction with the laws of Arei Miklat, the Torah provides a lengthy and comprehensive treatment of many of the laws governing acts of bloodshed and the relevant punishments.

The placement of the laws of Arei Miklat in Parshas Masei is somewhat perplexing, for the majority of Parshas Masei addresses the trek toward Eretz Yisroel and its conquest, borders, and inheritance – topics to which the concept of Arei Miklat seemingly has no relationship. Although the idea of Arei Miklat indeed fits into the general theme of the geography and apportionment of Eretz Yisroel (in particular since the same cities which were designated for the Levi'im served as Arei Miklat), the concomitant treatment of bloodshed and the detailed elaboration of its halachos which Parshas Masei features would seem to be more appropriate for Parshas Mishpatim or Parshas Shoftim. In fact, one who reads Parshas Masei carefully will notice that the Torah's presentation of Arei Miklat focuses primarily on bloodshed and its regulations, with the territorial aspect of Arei Miklat being almost of a

secondary nature. As such, why are the mitzvos relating to Arei Miklat and bloodshed found specifically in Parshas Masei rather than in a different parshah?

Unlike most sins committed in error, where the sin can be erased and its effect often reversed, the result of killing another person unwittingly is permanent and irreversible. Nothing, short of the miracles in the future eschatological era, can bring the victim back; there is no way to compensate for the profound, unthinkable damage which has been wrought.

Correlative with the act he committed, one who sheds blood unwittingly must go into Golus, Exile, and be severed indefinitely from his home, his family, his surroundings, his security and his sense of physical and emotional comfort. The Goleh, the exiled person, experiences a life of disorientation and disconnection from his origins. Just as the Goleh has indefinitely severed his victim from the world, is the Goleh himself in large measure severed from his own world.

This concept seems to form the underlying connection between Arei Miklat and Parshas Masei. The majority of Parshas Masei speaks to the significance of the Jew having a

home, such that each shevet (tribe) and its family divisions are assigned permanent inheritance land, to remain forever with that shevet and family. As depicted in midrashim, the land assigned to each grouping of B'nei Yisroel as its home territory reflected the essence of that grouping.

One's positive identity and spiritual and emotional peace are largely related to having the sense of belonging and self-essence that the word "home" implies. Dislocation and estrangement from one's home and place of personal essence and resultant isolation and disorientation are not mere physical or emotional conditions; rather, they reflect a spiritual severance and a very real loss of self.

Such dislocation, estrangement, isolation and disorientation are the lot of the Goleh, the unwitting killer, who, through a degree of negligence (as Chazal explain), severed someone else from his surroundings in the most permanent manner possible. By presenting in Parshas Masei the concepts and mitzvos associated with Arei Miklat, along with the related laws of bloodshed and

the punishments assigned thereto, the Torah establishes the spiritual importance of identifying and connecting with one's natural place and environment, in contrast with the dislocation, estrangement, isolation and disorientation of the Goleh and his victim. Parshas Masei depicts the natural, spiritual identification of various groupings of B'nei Yisroel with their lands, and the lack of such identification and the utter dislocation from one's environment that are faced by the Goleh in consonance with his act of permanently severing his victim from his surroundings and life sphere. In Parshas Masei, we are taught that spiritual identification with one's natural place creates religious stability and positive self-definition, and that estrangement and dislocation from one's natural place and the resultant disorientation are steps on the path of decline and death.

May we soon merit to be Ge'ulim – redeemed ones – and once more connect to Hashem in the Land where our spiritual essence is optimally nourished and expressed.

Wanderings

Rabbi Asher Brander

You wouldn't think so, but in most Ashkenazi synagogues around the world, Bnei Yisrael's forty two desert journeys that open our parsha are a reason [for the ba'al koreh] to break out in song, a special uplifting four part cadence that echoes the shiras hayam (song at the sea). Not to be outdone, a fascinating Yekkish (German Jewish) custom finds the forty two journeys written in special Ha'azinu [double column] shira style. Finally, Magen Avraham [428:8], a classic commentary on Shulchan Aruch records the custom based on Kabbalistic notions that we don't break up the forty two journeys, making the first aliyah a rather lengthy one while making Monday/Thursday reading a whopping fifty three pesukim. All this for mostly anonymous journeys already taken and never to be repeated - so what's going on here?

An enigmatic verse commences our journey tour: *Moshe recorded their departures for their journeys according to Hashem's command; these were the journeys for their departures [Bamidbar, 33:2]*

It is hard to miss the inversion of the journeys/ departures – we will yet return to this point.

A simple question: why record all the pit-stops in the first place? Certain famous and/or notorious locations

deserve special mention; names like Refidim (Amalek attack), Yam Suf [split-sea], Marah (bitter waters) certainly bear recap; but between you and I, would we have blinked had the Torah omitted *almon divlasayma* or *reesa*?

For Rashi, the main purpose of the Torah's expansive delineation is to demonstrate Hashem's kindness. Consider that the first fourteen journeys took place in the pre-spy era march to Israel [the 1st sixteen months] and eight happened on the back end [after thirty nine years] re-march to Israel, and one realizes that even though the Jews were punished to be desert wanderers, they enjoyed more than a modicum of stability. In fact, Bnei Yisrael stay in one specific location [Kadesh] for 20 years. Thus their punishment is somewhat mitigated – for Hashem's munificence extends to all.

Probing Rashi a bit deeper only frustrates – for we must understand why some places receive a mere 12 hour jaunt while others were the Jews' pitched home for close to twenty years.

Rambam, [Moreh Nevuchim, 3:50] feels the Torah's focus on extensive details is to verify the miraculous nature of the desert existence [an effective antidote to historical revisionism] By listing the specific locales, the barrenness

of the desert is borne out, effectively highlighting the incredible Divine miraculous sustenance of a nation, two million + strong. A flip side to Rambam's coin, of course is demonstrating Bnei Yisrael's incredible chessed neurayich - youthful faith/kindness that the nascent nation displays, as it willingly enters the desert without having it all "worked out". It is this latter theme that Seforno finds in the expansive desert listings.

It is Rashi's 2nd insight, spiced with a mystical Ohr HaChaim notion that moves me greatly.

First we must cite Seforno, who tackles our textual question (journeys for their departures/departures for the journey) by distinguishing between two types of travel; in life, we sometimes leave [in order] to go while other moments require one to go because we must leave. In the former it is the destination that is important while for the latter it is the departure that is key. Holocaust Jews seeking refuge were not picky about their destination; they were the prime example of the latter notion, while the North American aliyah movement, who wrest themselves from the comfortable 'burbs of New York or bid adieu to their California palm trees, are a perfect example of the former. So too, the Jew in the desert had places he wanted to desperately depart from and destinations he so much pined for. The text's dual terminology now becomes clear, for certain places inspired the Jew to leave while other destinations inspired him to look ahead and pine for that very destination.

We now turn to Rashi – who presents another notion for the Torah's focus on detail:

R' Tanchuma expounds: This is compared to a king whose son was ill, and he brought him to a distant place for treatment. When they returned, the father began enumerating all the journeys. He said to him, "Here, we slept; here, we were chilled; here, your head ached, etc.'

To Rabbi Tanchuma, our parsha's journey recap represents a nostalgic peek back at places that represent significant experiences that were and no longer are. The backwards glance presents the beneficiary [the son] with a deeper retrospective appreciation of what was accomplished at each stage. Why then does the Torah list every last journey? Because each and every place was an engine of growth, a necessary stop in the development and strengthening of Bnei Yisrael so that they were finally ready to dwell in God's palace – the Holy Land of Israel.

In his depth, Rashi provides us with a total redefinition

of a journey. For most, travel is a means, a way to close the gap between two points. For the Jew however, the journey is the essential thing. Amalek, our theological opposite, catch us on the road. In this world, a Jew is always on the road and his life is constantly under construction – a dynamic work in progress. [Woe to the one who thinks there's nothing more to do]. As we move through life, we must consider where we are, where to grow and what we need to pick up in order to get there.

In a mystical and wondrous restatement of the very same notion, Ohr Hachaim, [Rabbi Chaim Ibn Attar] the great Kabbalist teaches that Bnei Yisrael – the nation, were to draw out and internalize the resident sanctity, the sparks of holiness, found in every desert locale. Once accomplished, it was then time to move on. The more resident kedusha, the lengthier the stay [.. the less sanctity, the quicker the stop]. Thus Kadesh was the stop for 19 years. These kedusha infusions are able to fuel the journey that ultimately allows them entrée into Eretz Yisrael.

Three millennia after our forefathers walked the desert on their way to the Promised Land, the collective and the individual Jew remain wanderers. Many a Jew finds himself in places he had never dreamed of and perhaps in locations he can not even spell. [Consider the Chabad kid who grew up in 770 and is now an emissary in Kathmandu, Nepal.] And like Seforno's duality, many are aching to leave, while others are quite happy where they are – perhaps even forgetting where they need to be.

For those that want more, to move ahead, [get married, have children, more time, deeper avodas Hashem, better job, retire, improve health, fiscal security, ...], the challenge that Rashi/Ohr HaChaim and Seforno pose to us is that of drawing out the sanctity inherent in every life circumstance. We must consider:

Maybe I did not plan to be here and perhaps I won't be here for that long, but while [and now that] I am here, it behooves me to probe the how/why I am, how can I grow from it and whither my aspirations.

To turn our journeys into destinations and our thoroughfares into points of departure becomes the lifelong task of the Jew. Specifically this time of year, the saddest part of our calendar requires that we consider how we got here – for it may just be our only way out. To the extent, that we can cultivate an awareness and vigilance of this task we will merit to reach our final destination.