

We're in it for the Journey

Of all the passages in the Torah, very few match the depths contained in the Torah's enumeration of the journeys of Bnei Yisrael as they left Egypt to reach Eretz Yisrael found in this week's Parshah. From being chanted using the same tune as Az Yashir (in the leining), to coinciding with the month of Av or being Shabbos Mevarchim, the Torah is revealing some unbelievable messages and teaching an extremely profound insight. As a number of key ideas have to be elucidated before everything is tied together, let's begin by explaining the symbolization of their journeys.

The Zohar Hakadosh expounds upon the first four words in the Parshah, "Aileh Maasei Bnei Yisrael" (Bamidbar 33:1) to allude to the four exiles of our people, Edom, Madai, Bavel, Yavan. Rabbeinu Bechayei proposes a similar idea and contends that the repetitious phrase in 33:2 hints to our final redemption "Moses recorded their starting points for their journeys according to the word of the Lord, and these were their journeys with their starting points." The first journey was referring to our salvation from Egypt according to Rabbeinu Bechayei, while the second one mentioned in the verse alludes to the final Geulah. Note though that the Torah switches the languages when describing the two, first it says "their starting points for their journeys" and then subsequently says, "and these were their journeys with their starting points." Perhaps this is meant to teach that the primary purpose of the journeys in the desert was the experiences—the giving of the Torah, the Man, etc, whereas the point of our experiences in Galus is for the journey itself, not the other way around. We're in it for the development, or as my high school Rebbi, Rabbi Grosberg emphasized, "it's the growing process that counts." The purpose of our journeys in Galus is for the struggle and growth that comes with it which is the exact idea that Shlomo Hamelech highlights in Mishle 3:12 when he utters, "for the Lord chastens the one He loves, as a father placates a son." Hashem only tests and gives us challenges, because he loves us and desires to see us grow. That's the significance of the 42 journeys because it is impossible for a person to achieve tremendous growth so quickly. It's a slow process that features many growing pains along its course. It took Bnei Yisrael 210 years of enslavement to finally reach the point where they were worthy of being redeemed; before they could finally proclaim Shirah on the sea, acutely understanding the necessity of the back-breaking labor that they suffered.

Bnei Yisrael proclamation of Shirah at the end of the 210 years of slavery is what Shirah fundamentally is about. It's the overwhelming surge you experience when you perceive the grandeur of Hakadosh Baruch Hu. All the incoherent events, and difficult moments, become harmonized in a manner so magnificent, so breath-taking that the only way you literally can react, is to proclaim Shirah. Chazal teach that there have only been 10 songs sung in the history of creation, with the final one culminating in the Geulah (see Yeshayahu 30:29) We'll be so paralyzed when all the events will fall into place at the end of days. When we finally begin to comprehend the necessity of the suffering and tribulations that we have endured, both individually and on a national level, we will forcefully declare the final Shirah. This is perhaps why the journeys in this week's Parshah are chanted in the same cantillations as Az Yashir, because just like Bnei Yisrael finally realized that all the hardships they underwent were ultimately for the good, so will we during the Geulah.

This is also the message of the month of Av which almost always is blessed this Shabbos or falls out during this Parshah. The Sefer Ha Yetzirah, an ancient Kabbalistic work, associates a different letter for each of the months with Av's being Tet. While on a surface level this might portend something ominous (Tisha B'av), the Gemara teaches the exact opposite. The Gemara on Bava Kamma 55a states that seeing a Tet in your dream is a positive sign, since the first time the letter Tet appears in the Torah is the word Tov. In fact, the Navi Zechariah predicts that Tisha B'av and all the other fast days will become days of much celebration and joy, "So said the Lord of Hosts: The fast of the fourth [month], the fast of the fifth [month], the fast of the seventh [month], and the fast of the tenth [month] shall be for the house of Judah for joy and happiness and for happy holidays-but love truth and peace" (Zechariah 8:19). Precisely on Tisha B'av do Chazal predict that Moshiach will be born (Yerushalmi Berachot 2:4) because it is only through the bad that the good can come. The name of the month, Av, translates as a father because Hashem is telling us that all the tragedies that occurred are only like the nature of a father punishing his child. A father punishes his child out of love because he wants his child to do better. Hashem likewise tests us because he wants to see us grow and to prepare us for the Geulah, not to punish us. That's the underlying theme of Av and also an incredible message from this week's Parshah.