YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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**STUDENT SUMMARIES OF Sichot of the Roshei Yeshiva**

**Parashat Matot-Masei**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

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Dedicated in memory of Myriam bat Yitele z”l,
whose yahrzeit is Rosh Chodesh Av,
by family Rueff

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**"These Are the Journeys of the People of Israel"**

Summarized by Aviad Brestel

Translated by David Strauss

The *haftara* for our *parasha*, *Parashot Matot-Masei*, is taken from the book of *Yirmeyahu* andopens with the following verses:

Hear you the word of the Lord, O house of Yaakov, and all the families of the house of Israel. Thus says the Lord: what unrighteousness have your fathers found in Me, that they are gone far from Me, and have walked after things of naught, and are become naught? Neither said they: Where is the Lord that brought us up out of the land of Egypt; that led us through the wilderness, through a land of deserts and of pits, through a land of drought and of the shadow of death, through a land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt? And I brought you into a land of fruitful fields, to eat the fruit thereof and the good thereof; but when you entered, you defiled My land, and made My heritage an abomination. (*Yirmeyahu* 2:4-7)

It is notable that even if this were not the appropriate *haftara* as part of the series of "the three *haftarot* of calamity" that are read during the Three Weeks, it would still be fitting to read these verses as the *haftara* for *Parashat Masei*, for both the *parasha* and the *haftara* deal with a common theme: the people of Israel's journeys through the wilderness after the exodus from Egypt.

Our *parasha* presents forty-two journeys (or slightly more according to some views) that were undertaken by the people of Israel during their forty-year stay in the wilderness. In the book of *Devarim*,they are described as follows:

Who led you through the great and dreadful wilderness, wherein were serpents, fiery serpents, and scorpions, and thirsty ground where was no water; who brought you forth water out of the rock of flint. (*Devarim* 8:15)

And you shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness, that He might afflict you, to prove you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments, or no. And He afflicted you, and suffered you to hunger, and fed you with manna, which you knew not, neither did your fathers know; that He might make you know that man does not live by bread only, but by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the Lord does man live. Your raiment waxed not old upon you, neither did your foot swell, these forty years. (*Devarim* 8:2-4)

It would be fitting to add three verses from the *haftara* for *Parashat Pinchas* (also read as the *haftara* of *Matot* if *Pinchas* falls before 17 Tamuz):

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying: Go, and cry in the ears of Jerusalem, saying: Thus says the Lord: I remember for you the affection of your youth, the love of your espousals; how you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown. Israel is the Lord's hallowed portion, His first-fruits of the increase; all that devour him shall be held guilty, evil shall come upon them, says the Lord. (*Yirmeyahu* 2:1-3)

The wilderness in which Israel's journeys took place was cruel and desolate, full of predators, without water and shelter. Contrary to the conventional image of a journey under the clouds of glory with manna falling from heaven on a daily basis, this idyllic situation prevailed for only about two years. For thirty-eight years, the people were subject to God's rebuke on account of their sins, and they did not receive these things. The people of Israel wandered through the desert for a little less than forty years in harsh conditions, with severe material limitations, under the scorching sun and in an environment of predators. There is no doubt that this was a tiring and exhausting journey, and that this is the situation referred to by the verses: “I remember for you the affection of your youth… how you went after Me in the wilderness, in a land that was not sown.”

This being the case, we can better understand the *halakha* that one should not stop the Torah reading in the middle of the journeys, but rather complete them. The journeys constitute a single unit that should not be interrupted. The section of the journeys briefly reminds the people of Israel of all the places and difficulties that they passed through on their way to the Promised Land.

This is also the idea of the festival of Sukkot. Like the other festivals, it too is regarded as "a commemoration of the exodus from Egypt," but the question that arises is how. The answer, following our approach, is simple: The *sukkot* remind us of the booths in which the people of Israel dwelt during these thirty-eight years of difficult journeys.

Beyond the aforementioned material difficulties, another difficulty that arose during Israel's journeys in the wilderness was how to unite the twelve tribes into a single people. In the story of the daughters of Tzelofchad, for example, the members of the tribe of Menashe made sure that no inheritance passed from their tribe to another tribe. Thus, it was only later that "the tribes were permitted to marry one another." This is what the people of Israel were commanded at that time:

So shall no inheritance remove from one tribe to another tribe; for the tribes of the children of Israel shall cleave each one to its own inheritance. (*Bamidbar* 36:9)

Let us sharpen this idea. The "natural" situation of the people of Israel throughout their history is not one of national unity, but of civil war. Yitzchak and Yishmael struggled with each other, as did Yaakov and Esav. The brothers sold Yosef. From the exodus from Egypt until the destruction of the First Temple, the tribes fought each other and were divided into different kingdoms. During the Second Temple period, there were various religious sects, and later as well different groups continued to struggle one against the other.

The challenge, then, was to make the Land of Israel a shared national goal. The group that had carried the stretcher together in the wilderness had to succeed, with its back against the wall, in fighting and conquering the land during a long campaign of fourteen years. We must draw guidance from the Torah for our times as well.

In the context of turning the country into a shared national goal, mention should be made of the illegal immigrant ship "*Exodus from Europe 5707*," better known as "*Exodus 1947*." This was a ship that held about 4,500 passengers headed for Palestine, including 2,000 children, that number being four and a half times its official capacity. All of the passengers were survivors of the death camps in Europe. During the voyage, the British tried to stop it, even at the cost of sinking it. All this was accompanied by brutal violence and even shooting at the passengers. Later, they directed the ship back to Hamburg, Germany – only two years after the Holocaust! It was at that moment of inhumane and brutal conduct that the "countdown" began towards the end of the British Mandate over the country, for the British action aroused world public opinion against them. This ship was, in fact, the greatest success of the illegal immigration movement, despite its apparent failure.

The challenge, as stated, is to turn the country into a shared national goal by understanding how important it is, and recognizing how precious it is to us. The fact that one can buy cheaper pudding in Berlin should not be a consideration for leaving the country.

Returning to the wilderness and Sukkot: The holiday of Simchat Torah is not only a celebration of the Torah. On this holiday, after a week of dwelling in the *sukka* in commemoration of the forty years in the wilderness, we go back home, as did the people of Israel when they entered the land and came to the place of rest and inheritance.

In conclusion, the journey through the wilderness was intended to solidify the tribes into a single people and to cause them to dedicate themselves to the land. This is also the challenge that we face today – solidifying the people and dedicating our hearts to them and to the land.

[This *sicha* was delivered at *seuda shelishit* on Shabbat *Parashat Matot-Masei* 5777 (2017). The summary was not reviewed by HaRav Medan.]