YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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STUDENT SUMMARIES OF SICHOT OF THE ROSHEI YESHIVA

**Parashat Matot Mas’ei**

**Sicha of HarAV Yaakov Medan**

**Why the Torah Records all of Israel's Journeys in the Wilderness**

Summarized by Eitan Sivan

Translated by David Strauss

### The List of Israel's Journeys in the Wilderness

*Parashat Mas'ei* opens with a detailed account of Israel's journeys in the wilderness, for a total of forty-two – beginning with Ra'amses in Egypt and ending with Hor ha-Har, where Aharon died:

These are the journeys of the children of Israel, by which they went forth out of the land of Egypt by their hosts under the hand of Moshe and Aharon. And Moshe wrote their goings forth, journey by journey, by the commandment of the Lord; and these are their journeys at their goings forth. And they journeyed from Ra'amses… And they journeyed from Kadesh, and pitched in Hor ha-Har, at the edge of the land of Edom. (*Bamidbar* 33:1-3, 37)

The decision to document all the journeys of Israel is puzzling: the book of *Bamidbar* deals primarily with events that occurred along the way, but the journeys themselves would not seem to be of special interest. Recording what *happened* with the people of Israel as they wandered through the wilderness is understandable, but why do we need to know all the places they stopped along the way?

To answer this question, we must consider the obligation to remember the period in which Israel was in the wilderness, which Moshe conveyed in his final oration in the book of *Devarim*:

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 not.** 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 clothing did not get old upon you, neither did your foot swell, these forty years. **And you shall consider in your heart that, as a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you.** And you shall keep the commandments of the Lord your God, to walk in His ways, and to fear Him. (*Devarim* 8:2-6)

In these verses, Moshe turns to the new generation, the generation that will enter into the land, with the special importance of remembering the journeys in the wilderness, precisely because the members of that generation did not experience them themselves. During the journeys, the people experienced moments of crisis and difficulty. Journeying through the wilderness in itself is not a simple matter – and to undertake such a journey with the elderly and with children is almost an impossible task. The desert is a vast area with little trees or shade, only cliffs and sand. It is hot there, very hot. Furthermore, there is an implication in the text that after the sin of the spies, the manna lost its good taste, and thus the people were pushed to the limits of their ability to complete the journey.

From the moments of crisis, the people of Israel understood that they had no one to rely upon other than God. In the *haftara* that we read this morning, the second of the three *haftarot* of calamity, the prophet Yirmeyahu describes the greatness of following God in the wilderness:

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 nought, and are become nought? They did not say: 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? (*Yirmeyahu* 2:5-6)

It is true that God protected the people of Israel in their wanderings, but the journey was still not easy, and it was a great credit to the Israelites that they continued to advance in the desert despite the difficulties. Moreover, it could be that they did not all manage to withstand those challenges and continue to the Land of Israel; it is possible that those of less faith, such as the members of the "mixed multitude" (*erev rav*), in fact turned around and went back to Egypt because of the troubles that arose during the journey.

Remembering the journeys reminds us of the kindnesses that God performed for Israel when He protected them through their travels. At the same time, it assigns great credit to the people of Israel, who believed in God and trusted Him enough to follow Him into the desolate wilderness.

### The Divine Name of Forty-Two Letters

Not only does the Torah make a point of recording the journeys, but there is a special custom to arrange the public Torah reading in such a way that all of the journeys are read in a single *aliya*, by one person who was called up to the Torah. As the *Magen Avraham* writes:

It is written in the *Tzeror ha-Mor* regarding the forty-two journeys recorded in *Parashat Mas'ei*, that one should not make a break in them, seeing that they correspond to the Divine name of forty-two letters. (*Magen Avraham*, *Orach Chaim* 428, no. 8)

Rabbi Avraham Saba, in his work *Tzeror ha-Mor*, says all of the journeys should be included in one *aliya* because the forty-two journeys correspond to the forty-two letters in the name of God. Of course, the reference here is not to the names of *Adnut* or of *Havaya* that we are familiar with and that each have only four letters. Rather, he is referring to a divine name which is mentioned for the first time by Rav Hai Gaon and which, according to tradition, is comprised of the initial letters of the words in the *Ana be-Ko'ach* prayer.

Presumably, Rabbi Avraham Saba did not see this correspondence as a mere numerical link; we must try to get to the bottom of his opinion, to the essential connection between the journeys and the name of God. For this purpose, we will turn our attention to the *Ana be-Ko'ach* prayer, which describes Israel's appeal to God in a time of crisis and pain:

We beg you! With the strength of Your right hand’s greatness, untie our bundled sins.

Accept the prayer of Your nation; strengthen and purify us, O Awesome One.

Please, O Strong One – those who foster your Oneness, guard them like the pupil of an eye.

Bless them, purify them, show them pity, may Your righteousness always recompense them.
Powerful Holy One, with Your abundant goodness guide Your congregation.

One and only Exalted One, turn to Your nation which proclaims Your holiness.

Accept our entreaty and hear our cry, O Knower of mysteries. (*Ana be-Ko'ach*)

The time of crisis described here may be that of the journey in the wilderness. As mentioned, a journey may be arduous and difficult, and not everyone is able to survive every journey. Thus, in the book of *Bereishit* we read about our matriarch Rachel, who died and was buried along the road:

And they journeyed from Bet-El; and there was still some way to come to Efrat; and Rachel travailed, and she had hard labor… And Rachel died and was buried on the way to Efrat – which is Beit-Lechem. (*Bereishit* 35:16-19)

Thus, the journey through the wilderness was a time of trouble, and so too in the prayer of *Ana be-Ko'ach*, which alludes to the forty-two letter name of God, a description is given of a time of trouble. On top of this, it seems that there is a close connection between the name of God and Israel's appeal to Him in times of crisis. Crying out to God during difficult times expresses our connection to Him and our recognition that we are dependent upon Him. Perhaps the Israelites also called for God's help in their times of crisis, and thus their faith in Him was strengthened. It is precisely one who has experienced a crisis, called out to God, and been saved who can fully recognize the greatness of the Almighty and seal his faith in Him – as we conclude the *Ana be-Ko'ach* prayer in the *Kabbalat Shabbat* service: "Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever."

Support for the notion that the Israelites cried out to God during their journey through the wilderness, and especially in times of crisis, is found in the book of *Tehillim*:

Give thanks to the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endures forever. So do the redeemed of the Lord say, whom He has redeemed from the hand of the adversary; and gathered them out of the lands, from the east and from the west, from the north and from the sea. They wandered in the wilderness in a desert way; they found no city of habitation. Hungry and thirsty, their soul became faint within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them out of their distresses. And He led them by a straight path, that they might go to a city of habitation. Let them give thanks to the Lord for His mercy, and for His wonderful works to the children of men! (*Tehillim* 107:1-8)

It is precisely out of their difficult journey in the wilderness that the people of Israel cry out to God, until ultimately, they are redeemed and are able to thank God for His grace and miracles.

### The Journeys of the People of Israel Back to Their Land

The hope for God's salvation along the way, and the anticipation of reaching the destination, assume new significance in the stories of immigration to Israel in our time. The story of "Operation Solomon," in which Ethiopian Jews walked vast distances on foot, in the desert and in the dark, is reminiscent of Israel's journey in the wilderness. Their dangerous journey had the same goal: to merit reaching the Land of Israel, the land of our ancestors.

A similar historical event is related in the stories of those known as Ma'apilim in the period before the establishment of the State of Israel. These were people who sought to immigrate to Israel at a time when it seemed as if the entire world was uniting against them and trying to prevent them from fulfilling their dreams. Many Jews gritted their teeth and gave up everything to reach the Land of Israel. The moments of crisis when a storm breaks out at sea, and the danger when entering the country and escaping from the British, could certainly lead a person to respond to his difficult situation by crying out to God for salvation.

When we read about the journeys of the Israelites in the wilderness, and connect with the modern journeys of the Beta Israel community and the Ma'apilim in the pre-State era, our responsibility is to appreciate the acts of kindness that God performed for us, and thus to serve Him whole-heartedly. May it be His will that we merit this and that we will be able to proclaim with all our hearts: "Blessed is the name of His glorious kingdom forever and ever."

[This *sicha* was delivered by Harav Yaakov Medan on Shabbat *Parashat Mas'ei* 5782.]