

1 MASSEI July 10, 2021 Neiel Baronberg

This week we have a double portion Mattot and Massei and I will concentrate on Massei the second of the two. Also we are in a three week period of mourning prior to Tish B'Av. But I will be a bit more upbeat. Massei is essentially the finale of the Torah. What I mean by that is that this portion, Massei is the last Torah portion of the Book of Bamidbar. After this parsha we enter the book of Deuteronomy-Devarim which is a recitation and review by Moses; a recapping of the teaching of the previous 4 books. In Devarim, God is not speaking to us any longer, Moses is on stage center and instructs us in summary fashion of all we should have previously learned. God retreats into the background. We, humanity, are on our own. So, we must ask and be curious about what the ending of the formal instructions of these 4 books in parsha Massei would look like and how it would be framed. We are at the Jordan River. What are the final words and what might be the final summary as in any good story? How will the author on the final pages capture the essence of these four books and leave us with a plan going forward. An answer seems apparent and occupies most of the parsha. All of our encampments and all of our journeying from the Exodus to our present camp by the Jordan river are enumerated, recounted, and listed. We remember each waystation as they all become reminders of what we have been through and what we should have learned along the way from Genesis, Leviticus and Bamidbar. It all started with Abraham when in parsha Lech lecha he was told to "go to himself and to a land which I , God will show you". Begin this family, go inside and follow your awareness as a man with a new faith and I will guide you and your descendants along a rigorous path. And that is exactly the journey we continue to be on. Each stopping point, each encampment, each engagement choreographed by God to refine this people; to look inside ourselves and be forced to encounter the varied circumstances of life, and at each encampment to learn new lessons about how to refine our character, become a holy people and build a good and just society. 2 Abraham begins this journey, affirms a commitment and each of us in some manner identifies with our ancestor who led the way. We emulate his tenacity and note his decisions, as we walk with him and his descendants along a convoluted path. This complicated road becomes part of our psyche our very being as Jews and prepares us to understand personal and societal struggle in all its manifestations. Massei means "to journey". To be a Jew is to be on a journey. We are a people who over history travel and do not stand still. We go along our desert trails and we deal with fears and hesitations carrying on the search for the promised land either geographically or within lofty hopes and aspirations, all the while doing our best to find answers within Torah teaching. We do this each week as we camp out with the parsha hoping to garner a new insight. And we have continued to do this over three millenia. Along the road we encounter the panoply of characters, friends, allies and advisors but also enemies who would block this journey. In some manner they all ask us to pay heightened attention. We have been taught lessons and explored decision making for our own lives and for a nation as a whole. In Genesis we have learned of sibling rivalry, deception, and the pains in all manner of family life. With the laws of Leviticus we have learned what it means to be a holy nation and how that can be achieved. And in Bamidbar, in the wilderness, we have built a sanctuary for God to dwell and built a functioning community and nation for us to prosper. We have dealt with challenges and we have accepted responsibilities to become a holy nation following the blueprint that has been offered. At each encampment we stopped, reconsidered and regrouped. And when not actively engaged, we took another census to account for all participants and hold each accountable. . When we felt we had adequately or even superficially observed what could be learned, we packed up filled our water jugs and journeyed again leaving the comfort of our campsite and of our neighborhood. We moved to Babylonia and then we dispersed. We encountered Amalek wherever we settled. We doubted our abilities as we

were thwarted by multiple other enemies wishing to block our advancement and hinder our efforts. And even today antisemitism stalks us as we peacefully go forth.<sup>3</sup> These subplots and teaching encounters, taught us that to be a Jew is a dynamic learning process a healthy process where we periodically stop and take stock but are motivated and impelled to carry on undeterred by adversity. The hesitation of the spies is our archetypical story of the uncertainty that plagues many, hindering our enthusiasm for our agenda. We trusted in Moses and in God's presence in the Mishkan which gave us the needed confidence. That presence ends with parsha Maaei now we must trust in ourselves. The continued journey will become our purpose, and it does not end. And so, in parsha Massei which means "journeys" the 42 encampments are enumerated and the subsequent journeys through the millennia confirm that we are a nation on the move. The stations along the way are necessary for all of us to ground ourselves in Torah practice and to take with us the lessons learned to inject into our own lives. The general story or growth and new awareness is familiar to the world of myth, the journey of the hero who overcomes Scyllas and Charibdus or Darth Vader, and heroically returns home elevated in his or her new vigor and potential. Our story is different. Our journey is undertaken by everyone, by a whole nation, and some will say a whole family. This process or journeying and encamping has been a Jewish motif for all of our history and for us defines our purpose in this perpetual dynamic manner. This all need not be taken in such a serious vein. We have fun along the way and do all the mundane stuff – but the real work is what Massei and the journeys teach us and that life can be seen alternating with dynamic movement, then peaceful settling either geographically or just in our homes as we honor the sabbath. Always being repeated as we review our lives and think of the next step. There is no perfection - there is no red heifer – and there is no absolute enlightenment or rapture - but there is available always a sense of greater awareness of ourselves, of shortcoming and of strengths in ourselves and others and what should be our proper and godly appropriate response. It is all in these four books and Massei concludes this and reminds us of our passage through time.<sup>4</sup> So, where does the journey lead.? Is it the land of Israel that continues to beckon us? Are we encamped in Denver or other diaspora settings just for the time being? Things are temporary and transient as we look to the future. This is a perpetual journey. We are wanderers, nomads in a world where we are often misunderstood and where antisemitism stalks us. We are a people of the diaspora, but also of the Book always seeking, studying learning and practicing. We seek to understand what the idea of the land of Israel means to each of us; the land to which we have been directed and to which Abraham initiated the journey which we are all presently on.