



ארגון רבני צהר



ההסתדרות הציונית העולמית
המערך לשירותים רוחניים בתפוצות

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Parashat Mas'ei

Beginning the Journey

-Rabbi Ariel Konstantyn-

Parashat Mas'ei tells of the Jews' wanderings in the desert, as the Torah states at the beginning of the parasha: "Moshe recorded their starting points for their journeys according to the word of Hashem, and these were their journeys with their starting points." The verse repeats the phrase "and these were their journeys with their starting points," each time with the words ordered slightly differently, and the question of course is why.

One possible answer to this question is rooted in the words "according to the word of Hashem." In other words, the first part of the verse reflects Hashem's perspective, while the second part reflects that of the people. The people are completely focused on their immediate objective. When they were travelling, all they could think about was where they would next camp, and while they were encamped their focus was on when and to where they would next journey. On the other hand, from Hashem's perspective each journey had a purpose. The people were never satisfied with their then-current situation, as reflected in the words "journeys with their starting points" – the objective of the journey was to reach the next resting point.

Life itself is a journey comprised of experiences, trials, challenges and achievements. Human success is usually measured through personal achievement. A person who tries hard to succeed at a particular job, but who fails to achieve the desired result, will usually find himself out of a job. This is true for students as well, as trying to succeed but failing the exams does not make a successful student.

Hashem's perspective is different. A person is not judged based on achievement, but rather on effort, determination and commitment to improve. Hashem considers effort that results in failure as tantamount to success. A person who tries and fails, but does not surrender to his or her weaknesses, is the true winner in Hashem's eyes.

The prayer that is recited at a *siyyum*, the ceremony celebrating the completion of the study of a tractate of the Talmud, includes the following passage: "We labor and they labor. We labor and receive reward, while they labor and receive no reward." This sentence is somewhat strange. Does a non-Jew not receive reward for his or her labor? The answer is rooted in the difference between the spiritual and the physical. In the physical world reward is given only for work and achievement. In the world of spiritual improvement, one may also receive significant reward for effort and his or her chosen path, even when such effort does not ultimately bear fruit in the way one would anticipate.

Hashem directs us to live our lives according to "their starting points for their journeys," with the goal being to leave our comfort zones and expose ourselves to challenges and journeys.



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Just as our forefather Avraham left his birthplace in Ur Casdim to travel to an unknown place, we must repeatedly challenge ourselves with positive goals and resolutions, even if they may initially seem unnatural. This is the essence of the Godliness in each and every one of us that allows us to develop and hone our character and skills on a daily basis.

In the introduction to his book *Likutei Moharan*, Rabbi Nachman of Breslov cites a poem that tells of an elephant that is unable to move because it is tied to a stake in the ground. Objectively, the elephant is large and powerful enough that a single movement of its leg would be sufficient to uproot the stake from the ground. Why then does the elephant not free itself? The answer is that it was trained from its youth to think that it is unable to move the stake. When the elephant was young and small, its handlers first tied its leg to the stake. The elephant attempted to free itself, but was unsuccessful because it did not have the necessary strength to uproot the stake. Over time, the elephant became accustomed to the stake and recognized that the stake was intended to restrict its freedom of movement. The length of the rope was as far as the elephant would ever be able to maneuver. The moral of the story is obvious: people will often limit themselves as a result of old beliefs and past experiences.

The Israelite journey through the desert also knew its ups and downs. “And they journeyed from Mount Shafer” (meaning they left a place that was good: “Shafer” meaning *shafir*, good) “and they camped at Harada” (they camped in a place that caused them fear, *harada*). Fear of failure prevents us from taking steps forward in life. The Torah continues: “And they journeyed from Harada and they camped at Makhelot.” The word *makhela*, choir, comes from the field of music and harmony, but also relates to the word *kehila*, community. Similar to an orchestra conductor, a leader must ensure that there is harmony in his or her community and that each individual, as well as the collective, is constantly moving forward and progressing from a starting point to a journey.

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