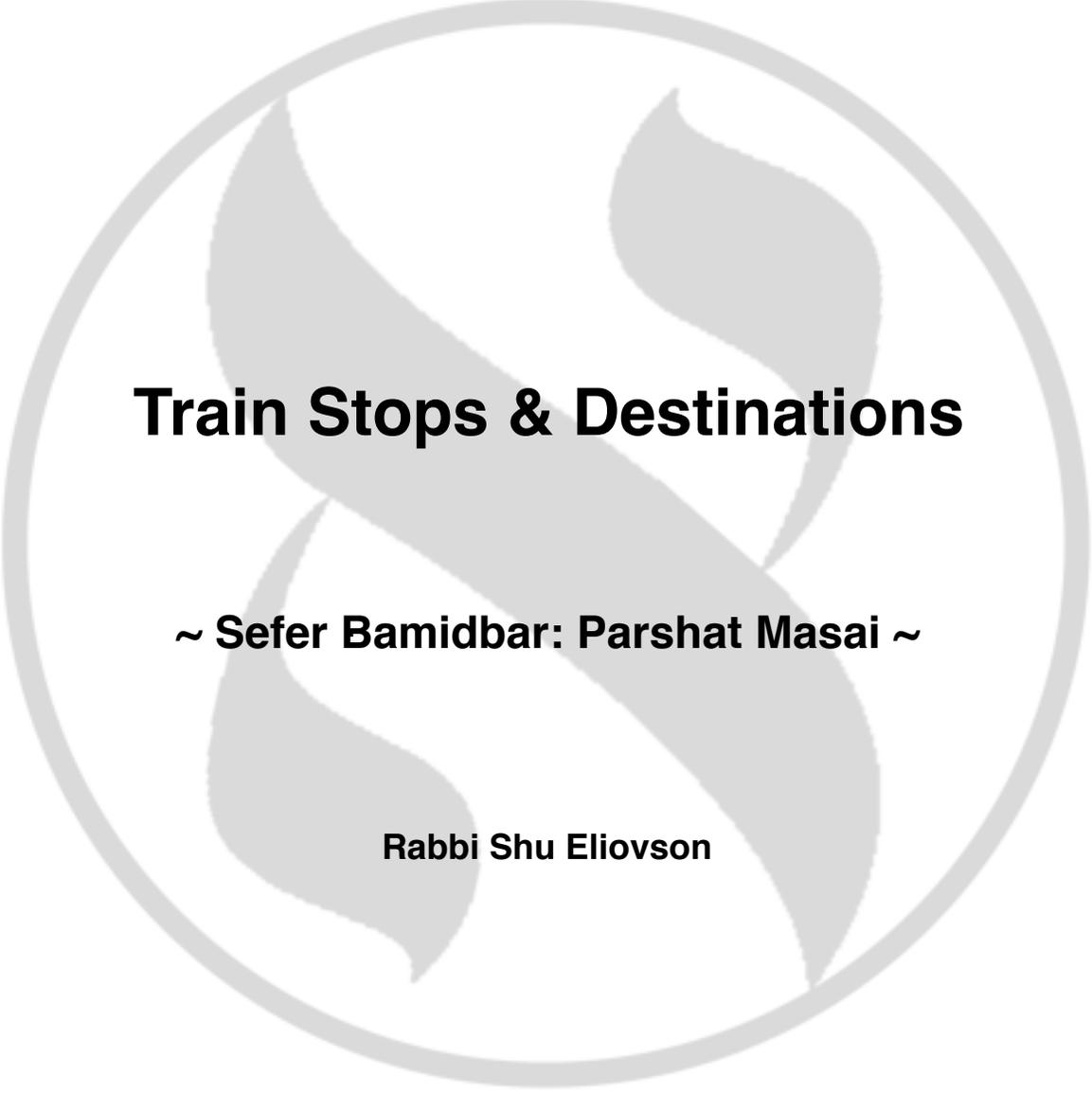


**שיחות מעיני הישועה**  
**ספר במדבר**



**Train Stops & Destinations**

**~ Sefer Bamidbar: Parshat Masai ~**

**Rabbi Shu Eliovson**

*Transcribed from audio by Josh Fleet*

So the last Torah portion of the book of *Bamidbar* is the Torah portion of *Masai*, the Torah portion of *journeys*. And it starts out, interestingly enough, by listing a whole slew of stops — forty-two stops in total — that the Children of Israel made on their journey through the wilderness.

What's interesting about these stops is that the majority of them are the stops that took place during the 40 years that they wandered in the wilderness. This was the period between the time when the spies spoke negatively about the Land of Israel, and the generation of that time accepted their negative account and chose not to enter the Land. And now, 40 years later, a new generation has arisen who have elected to go forward and want to go enter into the Land of Israel.

The Torah tells us nothing about those forty years in the middle. We hear a little bit about it in the beginning, and we hear a little bit about the last bit of that period. But the whole space of 40 years in the middle isn't written about.

And we know that the Torah itself, while on one level it's a historical document of the actual history of what happened during the birth of the Jewish people, our roots and our values, on another level the Torah is also here to teach us certain lessons. And so there are pieces of history that are not in the Torah or that are just glanced over, simply because there was no timeless lesson in that period of time, and so it's glanced over.

And the 40 years of wandering are such a time-interval in the Torah where we know that the time passed, but there was nothing specific that happened during that long duration in terms of lessons to learn.

So it's strange then, that suddenly the Torah takes the time to go into such great detail about listing for us what appears to be a rather monotonous block of details: They left *this* place, and they got to *that* place. Then they left *that* place, and got to *this* place. Then they left *this* place, and go to *that* place...

And that's really how it goes!!

Th Torah says:

וַיִּסְעוּ מֵאֵילָם וַיַּחֲנוּ עַל־יַם־סוּף

They departed from Elim and they camped on the Yam Suf. (Bamidbar 33:10)

וַיִּסְעוּ

means "they departed"

וַיַּחֲנוּ

means "they camped"

וַיִּסְעוּ מִיַּם־סוּף וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר־סִין

וַיִּסְעוּ מִמִּדְבַּר־סִין וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּדִפְקָה

## וְיִסְעוּ מִדְּפָקָה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאֶלּוּשׁ

And it goes on and on like this. Forty-two times!!

But we're not hearing any of *the stories of what happened* during those years. We're not being taught about any of the events!

And so the question is: How does all this recounting of all these stops along the train line, looking at the train map of where they stopped, how is this something that we're meant to learn anything from?

Another interesting thing in this week's Torah portion is the instruction from God to create *Cities of Refuge*.

These cities were created so that a person killed someone else would have somewhere to run to so that the family of the person who was killed wouldn't kill them in a bloodlust for vengeance. The killer would stay in the City of Refuge until they were brought to trial, and if they were found guilty then they would receive their punishment. But if it was found to be a case of manslaughter — a case where the death was truly accidental, where the person who committed the act had no malice toward the person who died — and it's determined that it was something like the top flying off an axe handle or some other type of event which was truly an accident — then the accidental-killer was told to return to the City of Refuge and to stay there so that, again, the family who lost a loved one would not exact vengeance upon them and kill them. And this prevented escalating clan-wars, feuds of vengeance and bloodshed between families.

So, on the surface, it sounds like a very cool idea. This idea of the City of Refuge and what it's all about.

But then there's something very strange about the city of refuge.

And that is that the person is told, the person who committed this act of involuntary manslaughter, who effected this accident, he or she is told to stay there, and they are *only allowed to leave when the High Priest passes away*.

That seems kind of strange! After all, the High Priest could pass away the next day, the next week, or in 80 or 90 years.

So the whole idea here is to prevent some kind of a blood feud from escalating between families, and that the person who lost a loved one shouldn't go and exact vengeance in their rage and all the anger and hurt that they're feeling, right? So then how does the seemingly randomly timed death of the High Priest suddenly make it safe for the person who cause the accidental-death, for the agent of this tragedy, to suddenly walk free?

And on another level, if it was an accident, then why does this person have to live in this City of Refuge at all? Why aren't we simply policing the land and enforcing the law and the ruling of the court? Innocent is innocent, right?

So, on the surface we could say, "Well, maybe those times were primitive..,"

And it's true that times then were more primitive, and there were things like blood feuds and people *did* exact that kind of vengeance. We've seen it at other times in the Torah. We've seen it done to the Jewish people. We've seen it exacted by the Jewish people.

And so these *were* more violent and, in some ways, more primitive times, so to speak, when there was that kind of eye-for-an-eye behavior. And while our Torah might teach us that "eye for an eye" *doesn't* actually mean to take an eye for an eye, but it means to *compensate a person* for what that harm has done to them and how it's affected their life, that doesn't mean that people were living up to those higher ideas yet.

So, all that being said, it's still a little bit strange. And it's especially strange in terms of the timing-mechanism of when the person's released, based upon the death of the High Priest.

How does the death of the High Priest suddenly make it safe for this person to walk about again? And what do these two ideas in the Torah portion have to do with each other? What is this idea of journeys, this week's Torah portion, and listing for all these kind of train stops along the way during the 40 years (without any further details at all)? And what is the story of the person in the City of Refuge, and their living there when it's found to be an accidental death until the High Priest dies?

What do these things have to do with each other? And what do we take from all of this?

So it's interesting that this week's Torah portion is called "Journeys" because, in fact, when we look across the different ideas that we've explored in the various Shu-Shines over the weeks, we have been talking about journeys. And one of the things we see is that there is a concept, a very deep and profound concept, that life itself is, of course, a journey. And that lessons have a way of illuminating that journey for us as we walk upon it.

This week I gave someone a lift, a stranger who was looking for a ride into town. His name was Daniel Cohen, and I asked him if he had any insights on the Torah portion and the idea he brought forward to me was this concept of all these different stops along the way in the 40 years in the wilderness.

And he said, "We know it has to have meaning, but what is it?"

And he said, "That's actually just it."

The message is that every stop they took during those years, that it wasn't just 40 years of wandering and waiting for them to die, that every stop they made was a lesson. And in fact there's pretty much a stop for every year because we know that they were in the wilderness for a year, pretty much to the day, until the episode happened with the spies. When they finally left the camp at Mount Sinai and they first begin to travel with the Tabernacle, with the Mishkan, they had been in the wilderness for a year. They were in the second year. And then we know they wandered for 40 years after this event and then there was a little bit of time afterwards until they went into Israel. So we're looking at 41 years plus in the wilderness. And so we basically have a stop almost for every year. And the idea we're learning here from the Torah, some of these are more obvious than others.

Like the place called Harada—that's the idea of trembling. So they were doing a tikkun, they were addressing this component of them, this fear that they had and dealing with their fears.

We saw the one Kivrot Hata'ava, that we talked about a few weeks ago, where they buried their lust. That idea of seeing things and lusting after things which aren't really what they needed. Being distracted by the superficial and being led astray, and then burying that aspect of themselves. That distracting force that takes them away from what's important.

So some of the names of the places have a very clear meaning. Some of them need a little bit more learning out. But the message is: People often make the mistake—and this is a deep concept that comes out of the Tae Te Ching—people think that the point of life, the point of the journey, is to reach goals, and what we learn in our holy Torah and what the Tao Te Ching really brought into focus 1,500 years later is that it's just the opposite. That the point of the goals is to engage us in a journey.

A thousand mile journey begins with one step. Why is it one step? Why isn't it two steps? This is something we saw with Avraham, when he embarked on his journey to himself. This is something we see when the Jews left Egypt. This idea of the "one step." Why is it one step, and not two steps or three steps?

And the answer is: Because every step has a lesson. And we're not taking steps to reach a goal, but rather we set a goal to bring us out and extract us from our sedentary place, to break our stationary inertia, and get us going. But then we have to take every step for itself because every step in life has a lesson.

Every step has meaning.

In every event there is something to take from it, to learn from it, to draw from it. But we've got to open our eyes. We've got to look. We've got to pay attention. And so what the Torah is letting us know is that during those 40 years, there was a process taking place. It wasn't that this was the rotten generation and now here's a good generation. No, there was a process going on. There was a learning experience. There was growing for that generation that didn't enter that took place before they left the world, and there was growing going on for their children who were going to take up the mantle in their stead and move forward and fulfill the destiny of the Jewish people.

The Torah is letting us know that every single step along the way there was something to learn. There was a process taking place. And the events had meaning. It wasn't just about getting from point A to point B. There was a process, an experience, a wisdom, a learning to take place. There was an experience to draw from.

And that's what we see with this idea of the city of refuge. The reason that person stayed in the city of refuge, let's understand again. The reason they stayed there until the high priest died is because when it was understood that this was truly, so to speak, a random accident—a random event, a random tragedy—the thinking soul, the knowing soul knows that there's no such thing. Yes, on the one hand, the death of the person—a person doesn't enter this earth randomly and they don't leave this earth randomly. A person goes when it's their time and if it was that person's time, it would have been their time.

But our Torah teaches us to separate between the destiny of a person in terms of their time in the world, and then the agents around them, and what that event means to us as human beings. We don't just say, "Oh, it was their time, and therefore it's not our problem." If someone, God forbid, dies in a car accident, we don't say, "Oh, it was their time." We still need to understand why these car accidents are taking place, what happened, investigate it and hold accountable anyone who might have caused it, and if it's road conditions or other things we need to learn to make our roads safer. We need to take those lessons, too. There are many different layers to an event. And there's the meaning of the person's life who was with us, and there's the lessons we take as those who are still here and responsible in this world.

And what the Torah's telling us is two things: When an untimely death occurs from our point of view, there's a message—there's something spiritually going on here. And when a tragedy happens involving people who otherwise might have been friends, who otherwise were members of a community, and when that loss takes place and it's a shock to the community, the High Priest himself took responsibility on a spiritual level for the fact, so to speak, that these bad tidings had come to bear. Because the High Priest was responsible for the overall spiritual welfare of the Jewish people. Moses was the decider of law. He was the master of law and principles, and if people had a dispute they would come to him. But if Moses couldn't decide—and of course that was only after going to the first and second and third ranks of officers before Moses—but if none of the judges could decide or understand it on a logical level, and even Moses couldn't determine it, they would go to Aaron the High Priest. And he wore the Urim v'Tumim, the holy breastplate, which would then show them by lighting up, which way, on a divine level, the issue was to be found.

So Aaron was this concept which was higher than even the logic of the human mind. Sometimes it goes beyond the human mind. It goes beyond logic. And all we can see is to understand the wisdom of God and realize that this comes from a higher place. It's beyond us. And there's an aspect of this life which is deeper than us.

And so what we're seeing here is that this isn't a case of He Did Wrong or She Did Wrong. This isn't a case of being able to say what happened and who's responsible. This was a random tragedy, so to speak. But in the language of a spiritual person, a random tragedy means there's a message coming from a higher place. And that's the role of the High Priest.

The High Priest represents that connection between the people and God. That role of: “There’s a higher message going on here, there’s a higher place.” And so the High Priest is involved in this. And then obviously the person who affected the tragedy, who was the agent of the tragedy, they’re tied in too. And so the introspective process links those two together. Whatever happened here, God has chosen to engage the High Priest as the one who is spiritually responsible for the people as a whole when things go beyond the form of logic, beyond our understanding. And so the person who was the agent has to recuse himself to the city of refuge, and they’re meant to be there for exactly, so to speak, a life sentence with the High Priest. A life for a life. A life sentence on the spiritual message that has been communicated through the tragedy that took place.

And so we see here on such a deep level the idea of looking beyond the surface, of knowing that there’s something deep happening beyond the surface. The need to examine and probe and to contemplate and to meditate. The understanding that life is deeper than just the surface experiences that happen to us.

This week will be Rosh Chodesh Av, and we will enter into the Nine Days that precede Tish b’Av, the day when both of Holy Temples were destroyed. The day that the spies chose to slander the land and the people wept, when it was meant to be a blessing. It’s a day that’s been filled with tragedy throughout Jewish history – when the expulsion of the Jews was ordered, when World War I broke out, the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, so many tragedies throughout our history occurred on these dates. And this period is a period which, so to speak, accelerates our state of mourning, which began three weeks before Tisha b’Av, when the holy walls of Jerusalem were breached during both the siege of the First and the Second Temple. And so we have this period of time leading up to the destruction of the Temple.

And one could say, “Well, why do I need to mourn for this? It’s 2,000 years later.” Really, it doesn’t make any sense. It’s one thing for a country—and every country has it—to have a memorial day to mourn their fallen soldiers. But it’s another thing to sit and mourn for three weeks, for the Nine Days, and to create this entire process. I mean, really, do we expect the French to be mourning for three weeks over people who died in the French Revolution all these hundreds of years later? Centuries later? Do we expect Americans to still be mourning for people who died in the Civil War for week on end? It doesn’t make sense. At a certain point, it’s like, you gotta let go. Take a day to mourn all soldiers who have fought for your country, who have fallen for your people. Take a day. Treat the day with honor. Say prayers. Engage in meditation. Why this long period? Are we so moribund as a people? Are we so negative? Are we so caught up in the unhappiness of things?

And the answer, of course, is no. That’s not the case at all. It was my brother who brought it to my attention in many different lessons over the years. He pointed out to me that Rav Yaakov Weinberg, may the memory of the *tzadik* be a blessing, taught: It says in the Talmud, every generation that the Temple is not rebuilt in, it would have been destroyed in. And what that means is, if the Temple were standing in our time, it would be under siege right now. If the Temple is not rebuilt by Tisha b’Av, on Tisha b’Av in our generation it would be ablaze again. Right now, our city walls have been breached. Right now, we are under siege. And we are under siege, most significantly, because of *sinat chinam*. The wholesale hatred, the wholesale disdain of our fellow Jews and our fellow human beings, of our fellow people in the world. It’s that wholesale disregard for other human beings. It’s that quick casting aside of people who we just don’t like or don’t care for or find annoying.

It's our inability to look beyond the surface and see the beautiful soul inside every human being and know that every person is worthy of our love as we are worthy of theirs.

We're not mourning for what happened 2,000 years ago. We're going through a reflective process. Because this is the time of year to contemplate that we are ourselves are very much in the same situation, struggling to overcome the same social problems that brought these disasters upon us so long ago.

We're not mourning the past. We're reflecting on where we stand today. And this time is a time to do it. This isn't a random event along the pathway. It's not that this happened 2,000 years ago and that was just that. No.

The Torah teaches us in the idea of Masai, the journeys, that it's not about simply train stops on the way to the final destination. Rather, it's that we're in a process where every step, every stop along the way, every event that takes place, is there to teach us something. And especially right now, we're in a time as a nation of personal reflection.

To think about where we are as a people. What's holding us back. What's bringing us forward.

To think about how we relate to each other and the people around us.

To think about who we are and who we aspire to be. As people, as individuals.

And to pay attention to the events on national and familial and personal levels.

Realize that beyond the surface of the physical events that we experience, there's a message. There is a wisdom. There is a learning to take place.

Every step is there to guide us, not only forward in our lives, but deeper into understanding and fulfilling everything that we can become.

