



Shabbat Table Talk Page

Overview

- **Parashah: Masei (מַסְעֵי, "Journeys of")**
- **Chapters: Numbers 33:1-36:13**



בְּרוּךְ אַתָּה יְיָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ מֶלֶךְ הָעוֹלָם, אֲשֶׁר קִדְּשָׁנוּ בְּמִצְוֹתָיו, וְצִוָּנוּ לְעִסוֹק בְּדַבְרֵי תוֹרָה

– Torah Study Blessing –

Synopsis

Last week's Torah portion (Mattot) ended with the Israelites camped east of the Jordan River, near the plains of Moab, ready to finally enter the Promised Land. In anticipation of their return to the land, this week's portion (Masei) begins with Moses recounting 42 sites the Israelites stayed during their 40 years of wandering in the desert – from their first camp after the Exodus (called Sukkot) to their current encampment across the river from the land of Canaan.

After recounting the various "stations" of the journey, God said that when the Israelites crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, they were to drive out all the inhabitants and to utterly destroy all traces of their culture and religion. After this, the land would be divided by lot according to tribes of Israel, based on the size of each tribe. God then warned Moses that if the Israelites would not drive out the inhabitants of the land, they would become a "snare" to them, and God would then judge and exile the Israelites as he intended to do to the Canaanites.

The boundaries of the Promised Land were then given (Num. 34:1-10). Note that these borders are *not* the same as those described earlier to Abraham (Gen. 15:18-21), since that larger land area will be given to Israel after the Messiah returns to restore Zion during the Millennial Kingdom (Ezek. 47:15-48:35). Instead, the promised land is restricted to "the land of Canaan according to its borders" (34:2-13), that is, to the local region occupied by the seven Canaanite nations living there at the time of the conquest under Joshua.

The Israelites were then instructed to assign towns with surrounding pasture lands to the Levites. There were to be a total of 42 towns, chosen by lot and distributed throughout the land according to the size of each tribe. In addition, six more cities were to be given to the Levites and designated as "cities of refuge" to which a person who unintentionally killed another may flee to take refuge from an "avenger of blood" (i.e., next of kin). Of these six cities of refuge, three were to be located east of the Jordan, and three located in the land of Canaan. However, these cities were not meant to harbor murderers, who would be tried in court and put to death at the hand of an avenger of blood. The death penalty required testimony from at least two witnesses and admitted of no "ransom" (plea bargain) to be offered in place of the murderer's execution. On the other hand, a person responsible for involuntary manslaughter of another was required to dwell within the confines of a city of refuge until the death of the High Priest, after which time he was free to return to his home without fear of retribution from an avenger of blood.



The leaders of the tribe of Manasseh then came before Moses to discuss the legal implications of the case of Zelophehad, whom you will recall was a man of the tribe of Manasseh who died in the desert without any sons to be his heir, though he had five daughters whom the LORD said could inherit their father's portion in the land. These leaders were now concerned that if these daughters were to marry men from other tribes, the original inheritance would be transferred out of the territory of Manasseh, thereby diminishing the inheritance given to their tribe. Moses then ruled that to prevent the transference of inheritance from one tribe to another, the daughters of Zelophehad were only permitted to marry men within their own tribe. Therefore it became a general law that no tribe's inheritance may be passed or transferred to another tribe, and any daughter who had obtained a land inheritance could only marry someone within her own tribe.

The Book of Numbers – and the historical narrative of the Torah itself – concludes with the resolution of this legal question just before the Israelites invaded the land of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua. The book ends with this statement: “These are the commandments and the rules that the LORD commanded through Moses to the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho.”

Possible Route of the Exodus:





Parashah Questions

1. What does the word *masei* mean? ¹
2. Whom does the Torah name as the leaders of the Exodus? ²
3. Whose idea was it to record all the camp locations of the Israelites while they wandered in the desert? ³
4. When (exactly) did the Jews leave Egypt? ⁴
5. How did God direct the Israelite refugees as they fled Egypt? ⁵
6. What was the name of the first campsite? ⁶
7. What was the name of the second campsite? ⁷
8. What was so unusual about their third campsite called Migdol? ⁸
9. What was “Baal Tzephon”? ⁹
10. What happened at their fourth campsite, called Marah? ¹⁰



¹ The word *masei* means “journeys (of),” from *massa*, a noun that means “breaking camp,” or “pulling out.”

² Moses and Aaron (33:1).

³ It was a direct commandment of the LORD (33:2).

⁴ They set out from Rameses in the first month, on the fifteenth day of the first month (33:3). The Rameses district was of the highest quality land in Egypt (Gen. 47:11), awarded to Joseph by Pharaoh. The *Seder Olam Rabbah* determines the date of the Exodus to be the morning of Nisan 15, 2448 (i.e., 1313 BC).

⁵ God led the people by manifesting a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night (Exod. 13:21).

⁶ Sukkot (סוכות), an Egyptian city near the border (Num. 33:5; Exod. 13:20).

⁷ Etham, which is on the “edge of the desert.” It was here the Pharaoh heard of their location and mobilized his army to go after the escaped Hebrew slaves (Num. 33:6; Exod. 13:20-14:2).

⁸ God ordered them to turn back (toward Egypt) in a ploy to destroy the pursuing Egyptian army by directing the Israelites to Pi hahiroth (“Mouth of the Gorges”), east of Baal-Zephon (“lord of the north,” a storm god later associated with Zeus) where they camped before Migdol (33:7). This was the site where Pharaoh’s armies caught up with the Israelites, who were delivered by God by miraculously crossing the Sea of Reeds into the desert of Etham.

⁹ Baal Tzephon means “lord of the north” and may refer to a “god” the Hellenes knew as Zeus who abode atop Mount Aqraa (in Syria) on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. According to Ugaritic texts Baal-Tzephon was the sacred mountain of the storm god Baal (Baal-Hadad in ancient Canaanite mythology), located on the Syrian coast. The cult of the god of the mountain was “transferred” or reinterpreted to be Zeus Kasios, the “Zeus of Mount Kasios.” According to Isaiah 14:13, Mount Zaphon is associated with the palace of Satan, the devil. It is unclear if there is any connection between the Canaanite god and the location of the crossing of the sea.

¹⁰ They came to Marah (33:8). The people had gone three days without finding water. When they arrived at this location, the water there was “bitter” and therefore they complained against Moses. Moses then asked God to help, and was instructed to throw a tree into the waters to make it drinkable (Exod. 15:22-25). The Torah describes this as a test (*nisayon*) intended to teach the people to trust and obey the LORD (Exod. 15:25-26).



11. After Marah, what was the next stop in the journey? ¹¹
12. After 30 days, they reached “Alush,” in the Desert of Sin. What happened then? ¹²
13. What happened at Rephidim? ¹³
14. What happened at Mount Hor? ¹⁴
15. What is the date of Aaron’s death and why is it significant? ¹⁵
16. What is special about the mention of the Canaanite king of Arad (Num. 33:40)? ¹⁶
17. God told Moses to tell the Israelites to do five things when they came into the land (Num. 33:51-53). What were they? ¹⁷
18. What did God say would happen if they did not drive out all of the inhabitants? ¹⁸
19. How many tribes of Israel are there, and how many of these were to receive an inheritance in the land? ¹⁹
20. How was the land to be apportioned among the tribes? ²⁰
21. Are the boundaries of the land mentioned in this portion (Num. 34:1-15) the same as those promised to Abraham? ²¹

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- ¹¹ From Marah the people traveled south to an oasis named Elim (עֵלִים) where there were “twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees.” Perhaps Elim was a foretaste of *olam haba*, the world to come, when healing will be for all Israel as well as for the 70 nations of the earth (Rev. 22:2).
 - ¹² The bread the people brought with them ran out, and the people complained against Moses and Aaron (“Alush” means “I will knead bread”). God then gave the people manna but tested them to ensure they would not gather any on the Sabbath day, which was now revealed as His law (Exod. 16). He also sent a plague of quail that covered the camp, an incident more fully described in Numbers 11.
 - ¹³ At Rephidim the people again complained that there was no water to drink. God instructed Moses to bring forth water by striking the rock with his staff before the elders of the congregation. This incident is called Massah and Meribah, “testing and strife” (Exod. 17:1-7; Num. 33:15). Later Amalek attacked Israel there (Exod. 17:8-16).
 - ¹⁴ Aaron died there, in the 40th year after the people left Egypt. Aaron was 123 years old (Num. 33:7-9).
 - ¹⁵ The 1st of Av (the fifth month), later associated with the calamity of Tishah B’Av and the destruction of the Temples. Aaron’s *yahrzeit* is the only one specified in the Torah.
 - ¹⁶ Ancient Arad was located in the Negev and once was a prosperous Canaanite city. An Israelite temple, dating from the time of Solomon, was discovered at Arad (in the northern Negev) that was modeled after the Tabernacle, with a Holy of Holies, etc. This temple was destroyed, apparently as a result of the reforms of Hezekiah (8th cent. BC).
 - ¹⁷ They were to drive out all the inhabitants, destroy their figured stones, destroy their molten images, demolish their high places, and take possession of the land and settle within it. Note that the Torah also commands that the inhabitants of the land were all to be killed (Deut. 7:1-6; 16; 20:16-18).
 - ¹⁸ Those that remain will be as “thorns in your eyes,” as pricks in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. Moreover, God would deal with Israel just as he intended to deal with these inhabitants – by vomiting them out of the land (see 33:56).
 - ¹⁹ There were 13 tribes, though only 9, plus half of the tribe of Manasseh, were given inheritance in the land of Canaan (Reuben, Gad, and half of Manasseh settled east of the Jordan, and the Levites were not given territories in the land).
 - ²⁰ It was to be divided “by lot” according to the size of clans, under the supervision of tribal leaders (33:54; 34:18-29).
 - ²¹ No. The boundaries defined here refer to the immediate allocation of the land when Israel first returned to reclaim it according to God’s promise to Abraham. In the Millennial Kingdom, the boundaries will be extended.



22. Why were the Levites not given a territory in the land? ²²
23. How many cities were given to the Levites, and how was it decided who gave them these cities? ²³
24. Outside the cities of the Levites, how much land was to be provided, how was it divided, and what was each part to be used for? ²⁴
25. How many “cities of refuge” were given to the Levites, and where were they located? ²⁵
26. What is an “avenger of blood”? ²⁶
27. What protection did someone who accidentally killed another have under the Jewish legal system? ²⁷
28. How long must a person who fled to a city of refuge remain there to be safe? ²⁸
29. How many witnesses were required to impose the death penalty for murder? ²⁹
30. What “ransom” could be given for the life of a murderer? ³⁰
31. Could an avenger of blood legally kill someone who was proven to be guilty only of accidental death rather than of murder? ³¹
32. What was the “inheritance issue” with Zelophehad? ³²

²² God wanted them to be spread throughout the territories to ensure Torah knowledge would be available for all.

²³ The Levites were given 42 cities among the tribes, as determined by lot and the territorial size of each tribe. In addition, the Levites were given six “cities of refuge,” for a total of 48 cities (35:7-8).

²⁴ Each city was to be given a 2,000 cubit (roughly 3,500 feet) surrounding area divided into two parts; the first 1,000 cubits was to be left open or for cattle grazing, and the outer 1,000 cubits was to be for vineyards and planting. Note that the Shabbat walking limit of 2,000 cubits from one’s habitation is derived from this verse (i.e., *eruv*: עֶרֶב).

²⁵ Six, with three located east of the Jordan and three located within the land of Canaan.

²⁶ A near kinsman of someone who was killed by another (in Hebrew, he is called *go’el ha-dam*, “a redeemer of blood”). The avenger was given the legal right to kill the murder suspect unless that suspect was vindicated by trial and remained within a city of refuge until the death of the High Priest.

²⁷ He was given the opportunity to flee to a city of refuge and make his case within a religious court composed of members of the Jewish community. If he was cleared of a charge of murder, he was allowed to dwell there under the protection of law.

²⁸ Until the death of the High Priest.

²⁹ Two. No person shall be out to death on the testimony of only one witness (35:30).

³⁰ None – all murderers were to be tried in court and put to death.

³¹ Yes, if a manslayer left the city of refuge before the death of the High Priest, he could be killed with impunity by the avenger of blood (35:26-28).

³² To prevent the transference of inheritance from one tribe to another, the daughters of Zelophehad were only permitted to marry men within their own tribe.



Discussion Topics

1. This portion begins with a list of place names, many of which are unknown or otherwise obscure. Why do you think God commanded this detailed list (Num. 33:2)? The Baal Shem Tov said that the 42 “stations” from Egypt to the Promised Land are replayed in the life of every individual Jew, as the soul journeys from its descent to return to its Source. Discuss...
2. The first stop after the Exodus was called “Sukkot.” Discuss the significance of this.
3. One great puzzle in the account of the places given in the Book of Numbers is that the camp at Mount Sinai – the place of the great revelation of the Torah – is not even mentioned. Why do you think the revelation at Sinai was left unmentioned?
4. The account of the route of the Exodus is described differently in the Book of Exodus than in the Book of Numbers. For example, the incident of “Kibroth-Hattaavah,” where God sent the plague of quails, is only briefly mentioned in Exodus 16:13 at a location named “between Elim and Sinai,” whereas it is more fully discussed in Numbers 11:4-34, *after* Moses had met up with Jethro at a location near Sinai. Attempt to harmonize the accounts given in both books.
5. Why didn’t God “drive out” the pagan inhabitants of Canaan, but instead made this Israel’s responsibility (Num. 33:50-53)?
6. The historical narrative of the Torah ends with a discussion regarding Jewish law (i.e., the inheritance rights of the daughters of Zelophehad). Is this the ending you would have expected? Discuss the meaning of the entire Book of Numbers...
7. Midrash Numbers Rabbah equates the establishment of cities of refuge with God’s judgment of Adam and Eve after their sin in the garden (Gen. 2:17), and this portion explains that a person banished to a city of refuge must remain there until the death of the High Priest. How does the death of the High Priest “compensate” for the loss of a life? Is this another picture of the Yeshua as our High Priest?

חַזַּק חַזַּק וְנִתְחַזַּק! **Chazak, Chazak, v'nitchazek!**

At the end of this parashah, as with every other parashah that concludes a book of the Torah, we say, *Chazak, chazak, v'nitchazek* - “Be strong, be strong, and may we be strengthened!”

For Next Week:

- Read Parashat **Devarim** (Deut. 1:1-3:22)
- Read the Haftarah (Isaiah 1:1-27)
- Read the New Testament (Acts 9:1-21)

