

Parshat Matot-Mase'ei 5776

Perspectives on a journey

1. Different perspectives

Twice this week I made journeys by car that I had previously only covered when cycling to work. Familiarity with the routes helped me find my way and I found myself pointing out waymarks to my not-quite-interested passengers. I was reminded of Rashi's opening to the parsha of Massei.

After lauding the merciful fewness of the stops on the route (always welcome when there's a train to catch), Rashi cites the parable of the king who takes his ill child to a distant place to be cured. On the return journey the king points out what happened at each stop on the outward route. The king is enthusiastic; we are not told the child's reaction.

2. Change of perspectives

These trips were characterised not just by a change in purpose and mode of transport (or 'mode of transportation', for our American readers) but a change in perspective. A long journey to work through alien territory was changed in retrospect to a scouting out of exotic lands to aid future navigation.

We see that change in perspective hinted at in the Torah's recounting of the travels of the Children of Israel. "They journeyed from Livnah and encamped in Rissah. They journeyed from Rissah and encamped in Kehelata" (Numbers 33:21-22). Why tell us each time where they travelled from? It is always the prior destination!

It is to tell us that the journey from Rissah is different from the journey to Rissah. Is this to do with what happened at Rissah, or merely the perspective gained by moving on? Perhaps these are just two sides of the same coin. We are told that salvation will come if the entire people keep Shabbat. It is debated whether this means two successive Shabbatot or

just one. In the former view, keeping the first Shabbat sets the scene for the week to follow, and the week of work is elevated, setting the scene to appreciate the second Shabbat. In the latter view, one Shabbat itself is sufficient to change our perspective as we look back on the previous week.

3. Changing perspectives

Rabbi Label Lam writes that one reason why Rabbah would begin his Torah lessons with a joke (Shabbos 9A) was to prepare the students to learn something new. Typically the punchline changes the listener's understanding of the situation. (More generally, humour is based on dissonance, seeing the gaps between things that do not quite fit together.) To hear a new idea one must be willing to shed some old assumptions.

As we try to make sense out of life or a given scene, we tend to fill in the details with facts based upon our prior experiences. It can take a surprise to realign our ways of thinking, to allow us shed our previous ideas to make way for the new, like when we need to take our old shoes off in order to try new ones on.

Sometimes habit trains us, like the journey to and from work. Whether long or short, that transition allows us to leave home behind and get in the frame of mind for work. As the journey home allows us to leave work behind and get in the frame of mind for home. And that unpressurised walk to shul on Friday afternoon allows us to leave the week behind and get in the frame of mind for Shabbat.