



**Serving God in All We Do:  
Israel's Journeys and Resting-Places**

**Rabbi Shai Held**

Reading Numbers 33 can be a tedious undertaking. The chapter recounts the various stations on Israel's journey through the wilderness—all forty-two of them: "The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness. They set out from Etham and turned toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baal-zephon, and they encamped before Migdol" (Numbers 33:5-7).



And so it goes, for almost fifty verses. The question, of course, is why—why the painstaking, laborious enumeration of all of Israel's stopping places, even places where nothing of any significance seems to have taken place. As R. Abraham Saba (1440–1508) writes, "The reporting of these marches seems extraneous... There is nothing in the Torah that seems to be as superfluous as [the recording of] these marches" (Tzror Ha-Mor to Numbers 33:1). Yet traditional interpreters have been guided by the assumption, most forcefully articulated by Maimonides (Rambam, 1135-1204), that each and every story in the Torah serves a purpose,

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either to instill "opinions which are foundational to Torah" or to improve human behavior so that "interpersonal aggression and wrongdoing are eliminated" (Guide of the Perplexed, 3:50). What, then, can we make of

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this less-than-scintillating account of Israel's journeys and resting-places?

Commentators offer an array of interpretations. Maimonides explains that the Torah worried that over time people might doubt the miraculous nature of Israel's journey through the wilderness. "People would think that [the Israelites] sojourned in a desert that was near to cultivated land and in which people can live... or that it consisted of places in which it was possible to till and to reap or to feed on plants that were to be found there, or that there were wells of water in those places." In order to rebut such mistaken notions, the Torah carefully catalogues each place where Israel camped, thus repeatedly underscoring the miraculous dimensions of its sojourn in the wilderness (Guide of the Perplexed, 3:50).

Rashi (1040-1105), citing R. Moshe Ha-Darshan (11<sup>th</sup> century), argues that the text wishes to emphasize God's kindness, because even though God decreed that the people wander through the desert for forty years, in point of fact very little of that time was actually spent marching: When one considers that fourteen of the marches took place in the first year, before God's decree, and eight took place after Aaron's death, in the fortieth year, one realizes that the people marched a total of twenty times over thirty-eight years (comments to Numbers 33:1).

Where Maimonides finds a testament to God's providence, and Rashi sees proof of God's generosity, R. Obadiah Sforno (1475-1550) instead discerns evidence of Israel's loyalty and faithfulness to God. "God wanted Israel's marches to be recorded," he writes, "in order to make known Israel's merit, since 'they followed God through the wilderness, through a land

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not sown' (Jeremiah 2:2), and were thus worthy of entering the land" (comments to Numbers 33:1).<sup>1</sup>

R. Isaac Abravanel (1437-1508) adds another, very different possibility. These stops in Israel's past, he says, serve as hints about its future: Just as God once liberated Israel from Egypt and provided for its journey, so will God act again when Israel's exile finally comes to an end (comments to Numbers 33).

Let me offer a somewhat different (admittedly homiletical) interpretation: The text serves to remind us that even seemingly inconsequential stops on our journey can be powerful opportunities for serving God.

We are often tempted to think that one of the many things we do is "real life," while everything else represents a distraction or—at best—a means of facilitating the activities we really value: Our work is what's essential, and everything else is at best a diversion and at worst a distraction. Or our family is what's essential, and everything else is at best a diversion and at worst a distraction. Or any one of a thousand other things is what is significant; none of our other endeavors really matters—and certainly not in any ultimate way.

Jewish spirituality, too, can fall prey to *Even seemingly inconsequential*  
envisioning life in this way. When I was a *stops on our journey can be powerful*  
child in yeshiva, I was told countless times *opportunities for serving God.*

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<sup>1</sup> In light of the consistently unflattering portrayal of the Israelites in Numbers, Sforno's interpretation is more than a little jarring. In general, it is difficult to know (whether and) how to reconcile Jeremiah's romanticized recollection of Israel's journey through the desert with the sober, even depressing, picture painted by the Torah itself.

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that studying Torah is essential, while everything else constitutes *bittul zeman*, a waste of time, ideally to be avoided but in any case certainly never to be embraced. But must we really take hold of only one thing and push everything else aside? Is that really the way to live—or, in religious terms, is that really the way to serve God?

A Talmudic teaching suggests a different point of view: “Bar Kappara expounded: What short text is there upon which all the essential principles of the Torah depend? ‘In all your ways know God, and God will make your paths smooth’ (Proverbs 3:6)” (BT, Berakhot 63a).

***Other things we (have to) do can also have religious worth.***

Maimonides offers one possible interpretation of Bar Kappara’s words. On the one hand, he insists that the highest human ideal is

philosophical contemplation of God; ideally, we would spend the bulk of our time on earth exercising our rational faculties in thinking about God. And yet, attempting to follow Bar Kappara’s lead, Maimonides wants to affirm that the other things we (have to) do can also have religious worth. Accordingly, he instructs that “a person should direct his heart and intend every one of his actions exclusively toward knowing God. His sitting and rising, and his speech—everything should be dedicated towards this one goal.” We cannot reflect on the nature of God at all times but we can treat everything else we do as a means of making contemplation possible. “For example,” Maimonides avers, “when [a person] does business, or works for pay, his intent should be not only for the accumulation of money, but in order to find things that the body needs, from eating and drinking, to establishing a home, to marrying. So also, when a person does eat and drink and have sex, he should not intend to do these things for pleasure alone. Rather, a person should commit to eating and drinking

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only things that contribute to his health and well-being.” Why are health and well-being so important to Maimonides? Not because they are intrinsically valuable, but rather

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because of what they enable: “Let him intend for his body to be whole and strong, so as to endow his soul with the integrity to know God. For it is impossible to understand or to delve into fields of wisdom when a person is hungry, sick, or in pain... It emerges that a person who walks in this path serves God at all times, even when he is doing business and even while having sex, because in all this of this, his intent is to gather the resources necessary so that his body be whole and prepared for the service of God... This is what King Solomon<sup>2</sup> said, in his wisdom, ‘In all your ways, know God’” (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot De’ot 3:2-3).<sup>3</sup>

Note what Maimonides accomplishes here: If the only true human ideal is contemplating God, everything else we do—and there are obviously many, many things we have to do besides contemplating God—threatens to fade into insignificance, and worse. So Maimonides offers a brilliant solution, suggesting that many of our other, non-contemplative activities can constitute service of God, too. How? In that they enable us to proceed to contemplation.

Maimonides refuses to write off everything besides contemplation, as if none of it has any value. But does he go far enough? Maimonides does help his reader avoid resentment of the pedestrian activities of daily life. Going to work, buying groceries, and making dinner can

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<sup>2</sup> Tradition attributes the book of Proverbs to King Solomon.

<sup>3</sup> Translation adapted from David Hartman, *The God Who Hates Lies: Confronting and Rethinking Jewish Tradition* (2011) pp. 38-39.

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indeed be valuable, but—crucially—they matter only instrumentally. They matter, in other words, only because they enable us to contemplate God, the one intrinsically worthy activity.

***R. Kook puts forward a much more radical interpretation.***

Sensing that Bar Kappara has something deeper in mind, R. Abraham Isaac Kook (1865-1935) puts forward a much more

radical—and to my mind, a much more powerful—interpretation of what it means to know God in all our ways: “In all your ways know God’—one must seek the Blessed Holy One in the midst of the ways one acts.” Thus, when one prays one should be focused only on prayer; “one should not seek to know God through other matters, because since one is engaged in this service-worship (*avodah*), God is, as it were, present at one’s side in this mode of service specifically, and there one will find God—and not in some other place.” Similarly, when one is studying Torah, one’s attention should be entirely directed to study. During times of study, one should seek God only “in God’s Torah, and not in any other manner, because at that time God is revealed in that mode of service.” In the same vein, when one is engaged in acts of loving kindness, “one should seek the Blessed Holy One only through deeper thought on the way to benefit one’s friend in a great, upright, and enduring way.”<sup>4</sup>

But prayer, Torah study, and acts of loving kindness are the pillars of the world (Mishnah, Avot 1:2). What about the other things we do? Are they to be valued only as means to these more sacred ends? R. Kook insists that “the truth is that there is nothing in the world that is not for the honor of the Blessed Holy One, hence everything one does will be according to God’s commandment and will—and in each action one should search for God. When one

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<sup>4</sup> R. Abraham Isaac Kook. “Be-Khol Derakhekha Da’ehu,” in *Musar Avikha*, p. 30.

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strives with all one's intelligence and with all one's abilities to carry out every action with the summit of perfect wholeness in all its dimensions—then one will know the Blessed Holy One in every way [i.e. action].” We serve God, in other words, by *being fully present wherever we are*.

R. Kook's vision is dramatically different from Maimonides'. Kook starts by inviting us to focus—to really focus—on what we are doing, to avoid constantly thinking about the next thing, perhaps promising ourselves that then, unlike now, we will be truly present. Where is God to be found and served? When I am praying, only in prayer; when I am studying, only in study; and when I am engaged in acts of kindness, only in those very acts. But Kook goes further. My eating can be holy—and not just because it enables me to study or contemplate. Shopping for groceries, or talking to my children, or any one of a myriad other things I have to do in a given day—all of these activities can be holy, provided I am truly inside them, fully present as I do them. Returning to our verse from Proverbs, Kook emphasizes not just that we can know God in *all* our ways (*be-khol*), but that we can know God *in* (*be-khol*) all our ways. As he puts it, “the *bet* is a *bet* that means ‘within,’ that through the very essence of these ways one comes to know God.”<sup>5</sup>

There are two levels to Kook's teaching—one is about training our minds and our hearts to be fully present in the moment before us. This is what we nowadays refer to as mindfulness. But there is a second level, too, and it is about training our minds and our hearts to be fully present to the possibility of *serving God* in the present moment. The stunning innovation in

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<sup>5</sup> Kook, “*Be-Khol Derakhekha Da'ehu*,” pp. 30-31.

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Kook's words is that whether a given activity at a particular moment is holy depends not only on *what* we do, but also on *how* we do it—with what quality of awareness, presence, and availability.

Let's not misunderstand Kook's words. There are still better and worse things to do with our time, and better and worse things we can do with our lives; there are still, for those privileged to have such choices, better and worse career paths, and better and worse ways to spend our leisure time. Kook's point is about being present in whatever moment we find ourselves in, and knowing that it, too, can be elevated to the realm of divine service.

Numbers 33 lists forty-two places, some of them seemingly eminently forgettable, to teach a subtle but critical lesson: We can know God, and serve God, at every stop along our way.

Shabbat Shalom.

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