



Walking in the Footsteps of the Rearguard

Rabbi Avital Hochstein – hochstein@hadar.org

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The description of the structure of the way that Israel travelled in the wilderness presents a model of how a people should move, not just physically but also socially, intellectually, politically, and spiritually. The verses speak of a number of desirable or necessary components of what it takes to be a moral, responsible nation while in a dynamic state. A moving nation needs to have a group that is concerned with maintaining order even at times of change, needs to have a group that can defend itself against external threats, and needs to have an inclusive space, even for those for whom change is challenging.

Chapter ten of the book of BeMidbar describes the plans for the journeying. From the trumpets which announce the movement:

במדבר י, י'-ו'

וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר: עֲשֵׂה לָךְ, שְׁתֵּי תְצֹצֹצֹת כֶּסֶף--מִקְנָשָׁה, תַּעֲשֶׂה אֹתָם; וְהָיוּ לָךְ לְמִקְרָא הָעֵדָה, וּלְמִסַּע אֶת-הַמַּחֲנֹת: וְתִקְעוּ, בָּהֶן: ... וְתִקְעֶתֶם, תְּרוּעָה וְנִסְעוּ הַמַּחֲנֹת, הַחֲנִים, קִדְמָה: וְתִקְעֶתֶם תְּרוּעָה, שֵׁנִית וְנִסְעוּ הַמַּחֲנֹת, הַחֲנִים תִּמְנָה תְּרוּעָה וְתִקְעוּ, לְמַסְעֵיהֶם

BeMidbar 10:1-6

¹God spoke to Moshe, saying: ²Have two silver trumpets made; make them of hammered work. They shall serve you to summon the community and to set the divisions in motion.

³When both are blown in long blasts, the whole community shall assemble before you at

the entrance of the Tent of Meeting; ⁴and if only one is blown, the chieftains, heads of Israel's contingents, shall assemble before you. ⁵But when you sound short blasts, the divisions encamped on the east shall move forward; ⁶and when you sound short blasts a second time, those encamped on the south shall move forward.

To Moshe's announcement of the time to rest and set up camp:

במדבר י, ל"ו

וַיִּבְנֶחָה, יֹאמֶר: שׁוּבָה ה' רַבּוֹת אֵלַי יִשְׂרָאֵל

BeMidbar 10:36

And when it halted, he would say: Return, O God, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!

The tribe of Yehudah is the front of the formation:

במדבר י, י"ד

וַיֵּסַע דָּגֵל מַחֲנֵה בְנֵי-יְהוּדָה, בְּרֹאשׁוֹנָה--לְצִבְאוֹתָם; וְעַל-צִבְאוֹ--נְחֹשׁוֹן, בֶּן-עֲמִינָדָב

BeMidbar 10:14

The first standard to set out, troop by troop, was the division of Yehudah. In command of its troops was Nahshon son of Amminadab.

And the tribe of Dan brings up the rear:

במדבר י, כ"ה

וַיֵּסַע, דָּגֵל מַחֲנֵה בְנֵי-דָן--מֵאַסָּף לְכָל-הַמַּחֲנֹת, לְצִבְאוֹתָם; וְעַל-צִבְאוֹ--אַחִיעֶזֶר, בֶּן-עֲמִישַׁדַּי

BeMidbar 10:25

Then, as the rear guard of all the divisions, the *me'asef*, the standard of the division of Dan would set out, troop by troop. In command of its troop was Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.

I'd like to focus on the role of Dan, of those who form the back of the formation, the rearguard, the *me'asef* in the language of the verse (from the root פ.א.ס., meaning “to gather”), a meaningful role in the framework of any social or national movement.

1. Returning Lost Objects

In the Jerusalem Talmud, there is a dispute as to how exactly the camp of Israel was structured during their travels in the desert. The Rabbis disagree on whether the tribes were in a box formation, in a square, or whether they were in a beam formation, in a line:

תלמוד ירושלמי (ונציה) עירובין פרק ה הלכה א, דף כב עג.
כיצד היו ישראל מהלכין במדבר?
רבי חמא בר חנינה ורבי הושעיה: חד אמר כתיבה וחרנה אמר כקורה.
מאן דמר כתיבה "כאשר יחנו כן יסעו" (במדבר ב, י"ז). מאן דמר כקורה "מאסף לכל המחנות
לצבאותם" (שם, כ"ה).

Talmud Yerushalmi Eruvin 5:1 / 22c

How did Israel travel in the wilderness?

R. Hama b. Hanina and R. Hoshaya disagree: One said like a box and the other said like a beam.

The one who said that is was like a box bases himself on, “As they camp, so they shall march (BeMidbar 2:17).” The one who said that is was like a beam bases himself on, “as the rear guard of all the divisions” (BeMidbar 10:25).

As in the case of so many Talmudic discussions, the Talmud needs to contend with the path not chosen. Why did the opinion of Box reject the proof-text for the Beam-formation and vice versa? The one who holds that Israel marched like a beam—despite the fact that they were camped like a square—explains that the verse which suggests that they in fact did march as they camped, didn't refer to the formation but to the description: "Just as they camped according to Divine decree so too they journeyed according to Divine decree." On the other hand, how can the position which maintains that they journeyed in a box formation understand that Dan was the last tribe? If they are travelling in a box formation, then there should be three tribes in the back! He suggests an alternative understanding of what it means to say that Dan was the "collector" tribe, the *me'asef*—it meant that the tribe literally collected the lost objects! "Anyone who lost something [Dan] would return to him, as it says, "as the *me'asef* of all the divisions" (BeMidbar 10:25).

What are the assumptions and values that returning of lost objects illuminate? This type of activity obviously touched on principles regarding property and ownership, but it might also outline a general orientation, a desire to return. To return not only every object to its rightful owner but also every thing in the world to its rightful place. Moreover, it expresses that there is value to the way that things *were* ordered, that the past provides an anchor in reality, an anchor which is worth returning to. Returning lost objects is a restoring of past order.

We should remember that we are speaking about a time of change, when Israel is in a transition. When we articulate the value of restoring past order in this context, the message is complex. We're issuing a statement that there was real value to the way that things were, despite the present moment of change. A change by happenstance, which is the product of leaving behind, ignoring, or being mistaken, isn't something to take advantage of, we are insisting that there is something there that is worth restoring.

There is another value expressed in the act of returning objects: retaining, leaving what is inside, within. The tribe of Dan makes certain that anything, and maybe also anyone, that was inside, that formed part of the social fabric, will remain there even at the times of change. The tribe of Dan ensures that things should not be left behind or neglected, even by accident. The tribe of Dan is thus responsible for guarding the internal and its order.

As such Dan represents the view that even during times of change and transition, there is reason to value the past and to re-establish routines, reinstate old patterns, and return objects and values to their rightful place.

2. Defence

In his *Korban Ha'Edah* commentary to the Jerusalem Talmud, R. David b. Naftali Hirsch Frankel highlights another important function of the tribe of Dan:

קרבן העדה עירובין פרק ה הלכה א

לפי ששבטו של דן מרובה באוכלוסין... היה הוא הולך באחרונה שאם יבואו למלחמה מאחוריהן יעמדו הם (שבט דן) כנגדן.

Korban Ha'Edah on Eruvin Chapter 5, Halakha 1

Because the tribe of Dan had a large population... he would walk in the back so that if they should come to wage war from behind, [the tribe of Dan] would stand against them.

This interpretation suggests a different focus for the activities of the tribe of Dan as *me'asef*. They protect against external threats. Returning lost objects is internal to the members of the camp; it ensures that that which is lost will return and will remain inside. This type of protection adds and works not only to keep the inside in but also to keep the outside out; it

ensures that anything that does not have a place inside will not enter.

Of course, someone who is on the outskirts of the camp, and charged with security will logically have to engage in a process of selection and discrimination—she has to know who is coming towards her, who appeared on her path, and who is trying to enter from the outside, are they “for us or against us.” It is only after this investigation that one will be able to turn and fight against anything that is lying outside in wait. That is to say that the tribe of Dan, travelling along the farthest edges of the the camp is responsible for the interactions with the outside. Naturally, when a people faces a time of change, the definition of what is inside and what is outside is in constantly flux. In that context, there is a need to listen attentively, to see clearly and sharply, and to stand strong regarding all interactions with the outside.

3. Inclusion

An additional *midrash* in Pesikta Zutrata emphasizes another dimension of the role of the “collector,” the *me’asef*:

פסיקתא זוטריתא (לקח טוב) במדבר פרשת במדבר
"מאסף לכל המחנות" (במדבר י', כ"ה) שכל מי שנמשך אחריהן... היה נאסף אל מחנה דן לפי
שהיה אחרון

Pesikta Zutrata (Lekah Tov) BeMidbar

“As the rear guard of all the divisions” (BeMidbar 10:25)—That anyone who is lagging behind would be included in the camp of Dan because it was the final one.

This *midrash* adds a new dimension to what makes the tribe of Dan unique. Anyone, from any of the tribes, who found themselves falling behind because they were walking slowly for any reason, could join Dan who was bringing up the rear. Anyone who needed an

unplanned break, anyone who found themselves stopped for any reason—maybe the journey was too difficult and was beginning to wear them down—these people were collected and gathered by Dan, gathering into the formation with the tribe of Dan as Israel continued to travel.

So the space that Dan occupies is not occupied only by people of the tribe of Dan itself. It ends up being a place for everyone, where any member of any tribe might find themselves. Alongside the miraculous order in which *Benei Yisrael* marched and camped, there is also a bit of disorder according to the Pesikta Zutrata, as the tribe of Dan becomes an all inclusive space. We could imagine someone from the tribe of Yehudah, the head of the pack, who finds the travel difficult—physically or emotionally—and begins walking more and more slowly, even stumbling a little, until he finds himself traveling with the people of the back-most tribe, the *me'asef*, Dan. It's as if when Dan gathers up all of the people who are travelling, he creates and provides for them someplace to be held and protected from the hardships that they bear with difficulty. Dan would include everyone, those who started in the rear and those who ended up there haphazardly.

Conclusion

The Torah describes the travels of Israel in the wilderness. Through this description, different values can be seen and understood. Focusing on the tribe of Dan, the *me'asef*, the fact that one tribe was appointed to take up the rear, we asked: What does it say about a society when it chooses to appoint someone to the job of *me'asef*?

- The *me'asef* has the role of returning lost objects. Thus such a society announces that it sees something valuable in being anchored to past order and acknowledges the ability of that attachment to provide a sense of stability also in a wondering, changing, moving, present.

- In its place at the rear, the tribe of Dan is responsible for maintaining the boundary of the camp, for guarding its liminal space, the zone most fraught with tension, most apt for confusion. A society that decides that it needs to have a *me'usef*, to stand guard in the back, admits that it is vulnerable. It is aware that any changes, even those that seem purely internal, may end up with new contexts. These contexts and environments need to be evaluated, reacted to, understood and even rejected in favor of establishing strict boundaries, even as those boundaries maintain their dynamism.
- These boundaries that are the responsibility of the *me'usef*, exist not only for the sake of keeping foreignness out, but also for the sake of helping those who are internal to stay within. This kind of society presents us with someone who is tasked with creating a flexible and gentle space to accommodate those who are having difficulty with change. And it invites them both to find their home in the liminal space at the edge of the camp. There they will find a place that is inclusive, that has variety and complexity, that is both challenging and invigorating, open and alive to the difficulties of transition.