

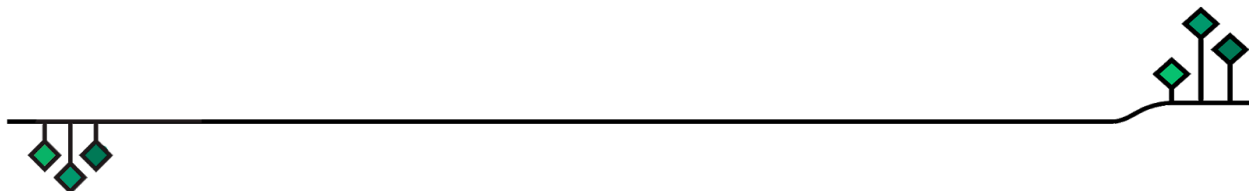
Not the Vision, but the Journey

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Parashat Mattot-Mas'ei 5781

The second of our two *parashiyot* includes a roll call of all the stops and starts of the Israelites through the desert (Numbers 33). This list appears to offer no new information—no unreported events or overlooked stops. Furthermore, the whole desert trek apparently was an abject failure: The purpose was for the freed slaves to settle in the Land of Canaan, but the Exodus generation could not muster enough courage and energy to conquer it. The end result was that an entire generation (but a handful) were denied admission to their homeland (14:28-35). What then is the purpose of reporting all the points along this journey to futility? Looking back at the high hopes of the Exodus generation¹—the expectations of becoming a free people, joining a covenant of final redemption, and a final triumphant conquest of Canaan—were it not better to draw a curtain of silence and oblivion over all the stops along the way that ended with nothing?

¹ “The children of Israel went out [of Egypt] with a high hand” (Exodus 14:8). For more on the dashed hopes of the Exodus generation, see my essay on Parashat Bemidbar, “The Limits of Numbers,” available here: <https://www.hadar.org/torah-resource/limits-numbers>.

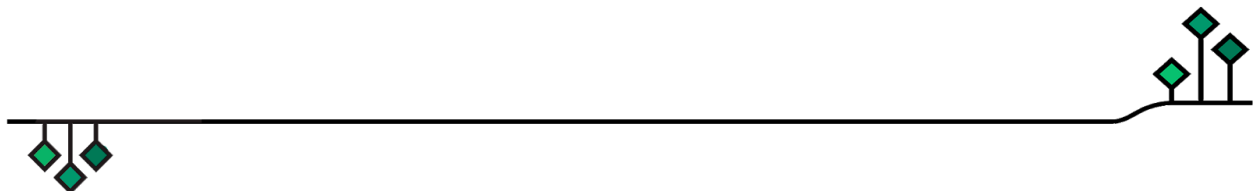


The answer is that this account is needed to balance the Torah's exceptionally inspiring final vision. After all, the promise of the Jewish tradition is that the human project will end with a final total repair of the world, the earth turned into a paradise. Poverty, hunger, injustice, oppression, and discrimination will be overcome. War will be ended. Sickness—in every form that harms and hobbles humans—will be cured. Accomplishing this vision is a worthy cause for all nations and religions to join in and accomplish the goal.

At the same time, the Torah calls on us not to dismiss the present reality as a broken world which we must go through as an obstacle course—but to approach it as an experience to be lived deeply. Life is precious. The experiences of friendship, love, joy, celebration, growing up, overcoming setbacks, just plain living are the warp and woof of our lives. They should be pursued in depth and savored as daily pleasures. The journey through life—even with its present flaws and injustices—is what our lives are about.

Part of living on the side of life is this attitude to life experience. We do not delay gratification and live only for the final accomplishment. The daily experience of family, of loving relationships, of Shabbat celebration, of being—these give meaning to the everyday and make up a good part of the sum of our life. We learn to live in the moment and be grateful for a sunrise, or an imaginative experience, or a dream realized along the way.

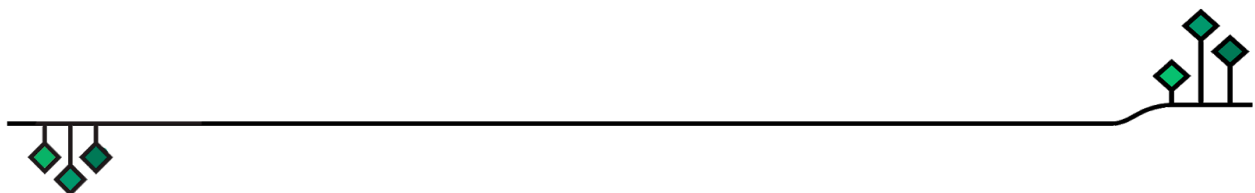
We learn to live on multiple levels. Part of our life journey is the journey of humanity toward a final *tikkun*. In some generations, there are major breakthroughs. In others, there is just marching in place—or even setbacks. It is all the more important to treasure the personal experiences which are valid in their own right—even if the collective regresses or the society deteriorates. If I have lived covenantally, I have done my share by living on the side of life.



The outcome of the global effort may go against me and against the Jewish dream. We leave some of that to God and to the leaders who may drive history for greater good (or for bad). The acts of loving kindness, the daily interactions, done right, the inspiring moments cannot be taken away. My life is not wasted, even if there is regression in the world or serious deterioration in climate or environment as in our time.

In listing all the stops on the desert journey, the Torah is telling us that the Exodus generation, with all its limitations, is worthy of note. When parents and families prepared three meals a day for 14,600 days, when they took care of each other and foraged for kindling to warm the nights, or collected the manna for daily bread sharing, or kissed good night, or consoled a weeping child, then the world was filled with life and care. Never mind that this generation could not rise to its greatest challenges. Its steadfastness, its pursuit of the endless journey, its falling and rising again, was worth living. If it accomplished nothing else, it raised the generation which did find the strength and leadership to conquer a homeland and begin to build the model society which Judaism calls for.

The list of stages then is a celebration of not losing our purpose and meaning in life despite the absence of decisive breakthroughs. The willingness to move again and again—the roundabout movement to evade conflict as was done with Edom (Numbers 20:14-21), the confrontation and decisive victory with Sihon and Og when that became necessary (21:21-35), the maintenance of family and covenant values through ups and downs, through crises and failures—these make the journey one of redemption, even while the fulfillment did not come until a generation later.



In short, Mas'ei is telling us that we do not live just for the final accomplishments. Nor do we judge our lives to be failures or successes by the immediate results in our lifetime. The journey of our lives is our calling and our fulfillment. If we keep our eyes on the path of life and solidarity and kindness, then we have lived a life well-lived. Our personal path also links up to the intergenerational Jewish way (really: humanity's way) to the final redemption in which the whole world will share. If we choose life along the way, if we maximize life for others in our lives, we have been true partners in the covenant. This gives us fulfillment now in the present—and the assurance that the final goal will also be achieved.

