

Parshiot Mattot-Masei – Shabbat 06 August 2016

The second portion of our double Sedrah this week begins with the words “And these are the journeys of the children of Israel, who went forth from the Land of Egypt...” The Torah then goes on to catalogue the forty two stages of journey of the children of Israel from Egypt during their forty year sojourn in the wilderness.

However in reality there was only one journey from Egypt; the initial journey out of Egypt. Once the Children of Israel were outside Egypt it was no longer a journey from Egypt but from the next stage on the map. In which case why were they called journeys from Egypt, when in fact there was only one? Why also the seemingly redundant task of telling us all the staging posts of the Children of Israel of which we know about anyway from the different passages in the Torah as they happened?

R' Tanchumah says that it can be compared to a king who had a son who was ill, and together they journeyed to a health resort in a far away place. On the way back the king reminds his son of all the places where things had happened to them on their initial journey. “Here we slept. Here we felt cold, here you had a headache.” Likewise the Almighty reiterated to Israel all the events of the past forty years to remind them of His love for Israel and how He protected them in the wilderness.

The parable is an interesting one. It contrasts Israel to a son who is ill. Why the comparison? Perhaps I may suggest an answer by asking another question. Why did the children of Israel have to spend all those years locked up in a wilderness, whereas it could have taken just a few days to travel direct from Egypt to the land of Canaan?

The Torah in Shemot gives an answer to this. “G-d did not lead them the way of the Phillistines, for it was nearer, lest the people would become fearful when they encountered war, and they

would return to Egypt.” If Israel would stumble upon war on the way they would have become immediately disheartened and would return to Egypt dejected. He therefore led them in a circuitous route. However, this is difficult to understand because, on a number of occasions Israel ran into war in the desert, yet, even so they did not return to Egypt?

The answer to all the above is with the following statement. More than the Children of Israel had to leave Egypt, it was more important to get Egypt out of Israel. The Children of Israel at the time of the Exodus were not ready to go directly to Israel. If they had, they would have returned straight to Egypt. They were too unrefined, like the parable of the sick son, unable to see the spiritual fulfilment of the dream promised to their forefathers. The Almighty therefore led Israel through the desert for forty years in order to improve them and free them from the Egyptian ideology. Each stage of the journey was part of the journey away from Egypt.

We say in the Haggadah; “In every generation a person is obligated to look upon oneself as if one came out from Mitzrayim (Egypt)”

Mitzrayim comes from the root meitzarim which mean restraints or limitations. The message is as follows. We are always moving away from Egypt. Life and how we live it, is a constant stream of journeys and we have a duty to move forward and not to be held back from the next stage in our spiritual journey by our own imagined limitations.