Masei: Bamidbar (Numbers)

What's it all about?

The 42 journeys and encampments of the Israelites in the desert are listed, the boundaries of the Promised Land are described, and the laws of the cities of refuge—safe havens for inadvertent murderers—are explained. The five daughters of Tzelafchad, who successfully petitioned to inherit their father in the absence of male heirs, marry within their own tribe so that their father's inheritance doesn't end up as the property of another tribe.

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"These are the journeys of the Israelites who left Egypt, organized by their troops, under the leadership of Moses and Aaron."

Take a deeper dive

As the book of Numbers draws to a close, the Torah chooses to take a strange detour, stopping the action of the Israelites preparing to enter the Promised Land to recall all of their sojourns—the word Masei means journeys—in the wilderness. The Israelites, we are told, went on 42 separate journeys in the desert. And 42, our parsha explains, is also the number of the cities of the Levites, the holy servants of God who, unlike all other tribes, do not receive their own portion of the land.

The repetition of this number is far from a coincidence. It's a reminder, and a sorely needed one, that life, to riff on that old cliché, is all about the journey, not the destination. Sure, the parsha is telling us, the Israelites are about to finally enter the Promised Land, after 40 years of arduous travel in the heat. But even once they inherit the land and settle down, their journey will be far from over, because **their journey is first and foremost a spiritual journey.** And if they continue on their spiritual journey, then the Promised Land, too, will continue to change and grow, fulfilling its inherent promise.

Here's how the great Rabbi Yaakov Moshe Charlap explained this idea. "Just as the Jews can never rest still but must always strive to transcend and go from strength to strength, so, too, does **the Land of Israel must always reveal new and divine light, because its very essence is to constantly renew itself. At every moment, it becomes some brand new land, a land no one has seen before…"** This is why, he concluded, if we live a life of constant spiritual seeking, every moment, for us, too, would be like that first and momentous moment of entering the Promised Land, shining new light on new possibilities and new ways of being in the world.

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