

Echoes of Eden

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Walking in Circles

There is something that may seem rather depressing about the start of the final parasha in the book of Bamidbar: The parasha begins with a retrospective of the various stops comprising the Israelites' forty-year ordeal in the desert. Knowing, as we do, that the original plan had been to leave Egypt, make a quick stop at Sinai, and commence their glorious march to Israel, the stark contrast with the reality of their long sojourn, punctuated by death and despair, is tragic. It is clear to us, as it must have been to them, that for the most part, they were not really going anywhere. They were, in a sense, walking in circles; the main objective was NOT arriving at their desired destination.

Generally, we view the world in a linear fashion: There is a clearly defined beginning, and a clear end. We have objectives, and we expend time and energy approaching our goals along a linear axis, with the objective serving as the terminal point. This is the way that most of us see our lives; we gauge success by the progress made along the path that leads to the fulfillment of our objectives.

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While Judaism does not reject this linear view of the world, it does have many cyclical elements as well. Our calendar marks the passing of days and years, and although each day is different and precious, every seventh day we return to the holy Sabbath. Likewise, we celebrate the appearance of the new moon, marking new months and holidays which return, like old friends or cherished family members, each year. The cyclical nature of the calendar makes many of the significant aspects of our lives more of a circle than a straight line.

The Jews traveling in the desert were not simply trying to get from point a to point b, from the land of Egypt to the Promised Land. Had that been the goal, we may safely say that the forty-year sojourn was a failure: A distance that could have been traversed in days took years. However, the desert experience went beyond the linear, goal-oriented view of history, incorporating the circular, cyclical approach in a very significant way.

The goal-oriented, linear mindset governs our daily life as we rush from place to place, even though we are capable of altering our own perceptions of time and progress: A small delay in the daily commute is enough to thoroughly shake us up, but our experience of the same travel time when we are on vacation is completely different. Our perceptions become completely altered by the smallest change in our

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linear approach to time. This was made clear to me some years ago, when my wife and I travelled to South Africa. While the main purpose of the trip was to teach, we were able to take some time to see the sights. Cape Town is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, and its citizens took great pride in

showing us around. Many things caught our eye, and I was particularly taken with one tree with beautiful lavender leaves. I snapped a few pictures to remember the beauty of this tree and to share it with my children. When we returned home, I was shocked to see the very same trees not only grow on the university campus where I have been teaching for twenty-five years, but also in the neighborhood in which we have lived for nearly thirty years! Even though I pass beneath these very same trees on my way to and from my daily endeavors, I had never noticed them. Only when traveling, when I had no particular goal in mind other than to appreciate my surroundings, did I notice something beautiful that had been in plain sight all along, but had eluded me.

Seeing the world in a cyclical way is not about being without a destination; rather, the objective is the journey itself. Thus, in our most

joyous celebrations, we dance in a circle. At weddings, and on Simchat Torah, we celebrate the circle of Jewish life, enjoying the journey and taking the time to see ourselves as part of that circle. Our sages explain that in the messianic future, the righteous will dance in a circle, and God Himself will stand at its center. Only then will we fully understand that the ultimate destination was the circle itself, and God is, and has always been, right there in the center, in our midst, all along.

Likewise, the weekly cycle that culminates in Shabbat is not meant to be destination-oriented. We are not meant to disregard the six days of the week that lead to Shabbat. Our goal should also include the six days between one Shabbat and the next, by allowing what we have gained on the seventh day – spiritually, emotionally, communally, intellectually – to energize and uplift each subsequent day of the week. By allowing some of the holiness of the Sabbath to “spill over” into our weekday consciousness, we begin to enjoy not only the destination – the holiness of Shabbat – but also the journey through our week that takes us there.

The story of the Israelites’ travels in the desert is the story of a nation that was not yet ready to enter the Promised Land. The forty-year delay was not simply a punishment. In order to be worthy of the Land of Israel, the Israelites had to experience a journey that would help them grow, help them achieve spiritual and national maturity. They needed the time and space to achieve new modes of thinking and new modes of experience. Circling the desert was a wonderful introduction to the cyclical experience of the Jewish calendar and Jewish history. It afforded an opportunity to do more than simply arrive at the destination; it taught them to see and appreciate the trees along the way.

For a more in-depth analysis see:

<http://arikahn.blogspot.co.il/2014/07/audio-and-essays-parshat-masei.html>