

JULY 25, 2011

Parashat Masei

The Power of the Past

These are the travels of the Children of Israel (Numbers 33:1) אלה מסעי בני ישראל (במדבר לג:א)

Numerous commentators analyze why the Torah painstakingly describes the 42 stops that the Israelites made during their travels in the desert. While some interpret the number of stops mystically (one of God's names is 42 letters long), Rambam, in his Guide to the Perplexed, explains that the locations are mentioned to give future generations confirmation of the nation's miraculous journey through the desert: "God knew that in the future people might doubt the correctness of the account of these miracles. In the same manner as they doubt the accuracy of other narratives...In order to remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of the account of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracle which enabled human beings to live in those places forty years" (Guide to the Perplexed, section 3, chapter 50).

By specifying the names of the stops along the nation's ancient journey, the Torah allows us to feel a genuine connection to Jewish history. Now, incredible archaeological finds give us that same sense of attachment and bond to our ancient homeland.

Nearly 2,000 years after the destruction of an independent Jewish commonwealth in the Holy Land, archaeologists in Israel have made numerous discoveries that have strengthened the Jewish people's historical ties to the Land. Most recently, archaeologists discovered evidence of not only a Jewish presence in Israel, but also of traditional Jewish custom and practice as well. [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported that, "An ancient rock inscription of the word 'Shabbat' was uncovered near Lake Kinneret...the first and only discovery of a stone Shabbat boundary in Hebrew." Mordechai Aviam, head of the Institute for Galilean Archeology at Kinneret College, said that "Jews living in the area in the Roman or Byzantine era (1st-7th centuries CE) likely used the stone to denote bounds within which Jews could travel on Shabbat. This represents a beautiful, fascinating link between our modern world and antiquity, both emotional and archeological. Certainly for those of us who are religiously observant, but also for the secular among us who enjoy a stroll on Shabbat to know that we're walking in places where Jewish history lived two thousand years ago."

While scientists have yet to identify the exact locations described in our *parashah*, Rambam reminds us that historical evidence provides a powerful link to the truths of our past. That link is exactly what we feel so connected to today as Jews continue to unearth incredible discoveries in our ancient homeland. ■

A Blanket of Security

And the Canaanite, the king of Arad heard (Numbers 33:40) וישמע הכנעני מלך ערד (במדבר לג:מ)

After the Torah describes the death of Aaron at Mount Hor, we read that "the Canaanite, the king of Arad, who dwelt in the south in the land of Canaan, heard of the coming of the Children of Israel" (33:40). Why does the Torah mention this seemingly irrelevant fact? The Talmud (Rosh Hashanah 3a) explains that this verse actually relates to the security of the Jewish nation in the desert. Following the death of Aaron, the Clouds of Glory, which had provided divine protection to the people throughout their 40 year sojourn, dissipated. When the king of Arad heard that the clouds had lifted, "he assumed that permission had been given to wage war against Israel."

According to the Torah, the Clouds of Glory protected the Jews in the desert from even the threat of potential attack. In our modern world, American support for the state of Israel helps provide a similarly powerful effect.

Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made an unscheduled stop in Israel on July 18th to attend a farewell dinner with the top officers of the Israel Defense Forces before he steps down in September, [The Jerusalem Post](#) reported. The visit highlighted the intimate relationship between the U.S. and Israeli militaries, and America's continued support for a strong Jewish state. American leaders have long recognized that deterring war, promoting stability and achieving peace is best realized when the United States stands strongly with Israel. Vice President Joseph Biden emphasized this idea during his 2010 visit to Israel, "Progress occurs in the Middle East when everyone knows there is simply no space between the United States and Israel." Historically, and to this day, American leaders understand that negotiations can only be successful when Israel feels secure that she has strong backing from the United States. American support paved the way for Israel's peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, and enabled Israel to make far-reaching offers to the Palestinians. Additionally, U.S. support for Israel tells the Palestinians and Arab states that they cannot reach their objectives through war or terror, and that the only way to achieve Arab-Israeli peace and a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute is by negotiating directly with Israel. For more information about the peace process, click [here](#).

The people of modern Israel may lack Clouds of Glory to deter their adversaries, but they can and do rely on the hard work that we do to ensure ongoing U.S. support for Israel. This powerful sense of security that America continues to provide has strengthened the state of Israel and made the prospect of a Middle East peace truly possible. ■

Defining Clear Borders

The land of Canaan according to her borders (Numbers 34:2)

ארץ כנען לגבולתיה (במדבר לד:ב)

Why does the Torah outline the border points of the future Land of Israel in such great detail? (see 34:1-12). Rashi (on 34:2) explains that the borders of the Land have great significance in Jewish law. "Because many commandments are practiced in the Land and are not practiced outside the Land, it was necessary to write the boundaries and borders." Ha'amek Davar adds that the language God uses in conveying the borders to Moses, "*command* the Children of Israel," is "a language of alacrity," emphasizing the fact that because the people would soon enter the Land, they needed to quickly define the boundaries of the territory.

Just as the Torah lays out the importance of defining the borders of the ancient Land of Israel, consideration of the modern maritime borders of the state of Israel also carries great significance.

Last December, Israel confirmed the discovery of the Leviathan natural gas field, which contains at least 16 trillion cubic feet of gas, likely at a market value of tens of trillions of dollars. According to [The New York Times](#), Israeli Minister of National Infrastructure Uzi Landau said that with the find, "Israel can enjoy not only the benefit of using the gas, but it can also turn into a gas supplier in the Mediterranean region." However, Lebanon, which has yet to invest in any gas exploration, now claims that the gas find lies within its territory and not within Israel's borders. [Ha'aretz](#) recently reported that Hizballah Deputy Secretary General Sheikh Naim Qassem, speaking about the Leviathan gas find, proclaimed that "Lebanon will not tolerate Israel seizing its oil, gas...[and] will stand guard in order to protect all its rights—no matter the cost." Yet, Lebanon's current claim contradicts an earlier maritime agreement that Lebanon itself made with Cyprus in 2007. Since the confusion, Israel's cabinet has approved defined border coordinates in the Mediterranean according to that 2007 agreement, and submitted its claim to the U.N.

The discovery of the Leviathan natural gas field presents real opportunities for the Jewish state. While the subsequent actions by Lebanon complicate the situation, God's message to Moses to quickly define the borders of the Land remains clear in our minds—as Israel has taken steps to define maritime borders and protect her national interests. ■