



Sermon Tidbits

AUGUST 1, 2016

Parashat Matot-Masei

Denying the Truths of History

These are the stages (Numbers 33:1)

אלה מסעי (במדבר לג:א)

In 1978, a 28-year-old man named [Benjamin Nitay](#) took part in a Boston television debate program called “[The Advocate](#),” which addressed whether the United States should play a role in the creation of a Palestinian State. Nitay, the nickname he gave himself while he was living in the United States, would become the Prime Minister of Israel, Benjamin Netanyahu. When asked whether he believed that the issue of self-determination was at the heart of the Middle East conflict, Netanyahu answered “No, I don’t believe it is. The real core of the conflict is the unfortunate Arab refusal to accept the state of Israel...For 20 years the Arabs had both the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and if self-determination, as they now say, is the core of the conflict, they could have easily established a Palestinian state, but they didn’t...What we’re talking about here is not the attempt to build the state but to destroy one.” Netanyahu argued that rather than trying to build their own state, the Palestinians were consumed with denying the historical right of the Jewish people to their own homeland.

History plays a primary role in Parashat Masei, for it chronicles the dozens of stops the nation made during their forty year sojourn through the desert. Much of this text presents a long list of locations that lack current meaning, so we have no means to determine their exact locations. The seeming anonymity of the locations caused many commentators to wonder why the Torah lists these stops; what is the benefit of knowing the names of anonymous desert locales? Nachmanides (on 33:1) quotes the suggestion of Maimonides, who in the Guide to the Perplexed (3:50) offered his own reasoning for the listing of the stops in the desert. “There was a very great necessity in mentioning the stages of the journeys. For although the miracles and wonders were recognized as true by all who saw them, in later times these events would be matters of hearsay, and those who hear about them then might deny them altogether...therefore in order to remove from people’s hearts all such thoughts and to firmly establish the truth of these miracles, God recorded them as a permanent memorial of the stages of their journeys in the wilderness, so that the future generations would see them and acknowledge the great wonders entailed in keeping people alive in such places for forty years.”

According to Maimonides, the locations listed in Parashat Masei serve as a testament to refute those who might try to deny historical truth. Today, the Jewish people find themselves in that very predicament, as the Palestinians deny the rights of the Jewish people to their historical homeland. Recently, the Palestinian Authority announced its intention to sue the United Kingdom in international court for the 1917 Balfour Declaration. In his famous letter, United Kingdom’s Foreign Secretary Arthur James Balfour expressed, “His Majesty’s Government view with favor the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people, and will use their best endeavors to facilitate the achievement of this object, it being clearly understood that nothing shall be done which may prejudice the civil and religious rights of existing non-Jewish communities in Palestine, or the rights and political status enjoyed by Jews in any other country.”

[According to the BBC](#), “Palestinian Foreign Affairs Minister Riad Malki said the document [the Balfour Declaration] led to mass Jewish immigration to British Mandate Palestine “at the expense of our Palestinian people... Nearly a century has passed since the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1917...And based on this ill-omened promise hundreds of thousands of Jews were moved from Europe and elsewhere to Palestine at the expense of our Palestinian

people whose parents and grandparents had lived for thousands of years on the soil of their homeland.” It is not surprising that Maliki made no mention of the Jews living on that very same land, nor of the millennia of Jewish history connecting the Jewish people to their homeland.

Commenting on the Palestinian lawsuit, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the move, “will fail, but this shines a light on the root of the conflict which is the [Palestinians’] refusal to recognize a Jewish state in any borders.” Echoing his own words from almost forty years ago, he noted that, “It was and remains the heart of this conflict.” As long as the Palestinians continue to deny the truth of history and the deep Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, they will never make the concessions critical to reaching a comprehensive peace agreement resulting in the establishment of an independent Palestinian state living side by side in peace and security with the Jewish state of Israel. ■

Dispelling Darkness with Light

And these are their stages at their goings forth (Numbers 33:2) ואלה מסעיהם למוצאיהם (במדבר לג:ב)

In Hasidic thought, the two words *motza'eihem* (literally “going out”) and *mas'eihem* (literally “their travels”) do not simply refer to literal travel in the desert. On a deeper level, they refer to two elements of an individual’s spiritual journey—*sur mei'ra va'asei tov* meaning “Depart from evil, and do good.” (Psalms 34: 15) Rabbi Sholom Noach Brozovsky, also known as the Admor of Slonim writes in his classic work *Netivot Shalom* (on 33:2) that the word *motza'eihem* refers to “departing from evil,” while *mas'eihem* alludes to “doing good,” or moving towards the good. Thus, this verse teaches us that the process of spiritual growth requires that first we must avoid sinfulness and afterwards we must do good, for “as long as the evil is found inside him, he cannot cling to the goodness.” *Netivot Shalom* explains that the righteous do not need to perform these acts separately, for one can turn away from evil by doing good, “for by doing good one will cling to holiness and the evil will naturally remove itself from him...”

Netivot Shalom teaches that sometimes the best way to counter the forces of darkness is to increase the good in one’s life. This makes intuitive spiritual sense: if we want our children not to waste their summers watching movies all day long, we cannot simply just take away the remote. Rather, if we involve them in positive activities—hiking, drawing, music, friends—there is no need for *sur mei'ra*. Our children will be too busy with *asei tov*.

Israel and its supporters around the world take precisely the same attitude towards those who wish to discredit her through the [Boycott, Divest and Sanction \(BDS\) movement](#). Since its founding in 1948, Israel’s enemies have repeatedly attempted to undermine and ultimately destroy the Jewish state through military assaults, terrorist attacks and actions at international organizations. More recently, the BDS campaign has emerged in an effort to stigmatize, delegitimize and isolate the state of Israel. Significant achievements in the fight against BDS have been made by countering divestment with investment—by dispelling wickedness with the power of goodness. In 2014, the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership Act (SPA) formally designated Israel as a “strategic partner” of the United States and established a legislative foundation upon which to grow the bilateral relationship in the areas of energy, water, homeland security, and food security. In state capitals across America, representatives are passing laws formally condemning BDS, requiring state pension funds to divest from companies that promote BDS, and preventing state governments from buying goods or services from them. Thankfully, Israel has seen the fruits of these labors. Today, American and Israeli entities work together in areas as diverse as energy development, cybersecurity and water technology, making Israel an important global player in key arenas highly desired by nations around the world, significantly increasing Israel’s standing in the international arena.

While we fight the BDS campaign on the front of *sur mei'ra*—removing the wickedness—and expose the campaign not as a righteous movement, but as a blatant effort to erode confidence in Israel’s legitimacy, we also recognize that our efforts at *asei tov*—building economic ties that strengthen the Jewish state—have had a powerful effect, significantly dampening the darkness of the BDS movement. ■

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