

“Journeys and Struggles towards Justice”

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Parashat Masei chronicles our journeys in at least two ways - it forms a bridge between the Israelites' trek across the wilderness into the Promised Land, and moves them from wanderers to settlers. Both transitions, of place and role, bear meaning for us today.

As descendants of Israel, Jacob who struggled with the divine and got renamed God-wrestler, we could say that struggle is both our right and our responsibility. Transitions challenge us - change can be a struggle. Moving from one place to another, as well as from one mode of behavior to another - in Masei the Israelites start both transitions - represent extreme upheavals in their existence.

Let's look at the issue of location for us - namely our ties to the Land of Israel.

Historically, we feel deeply tied to the Land of Israel. We grapple with this relationship. How can we support Israel as Jews in the Diaspora? Should we even try when Israel may not be the country we would prefer it to be?

Some more orthodox Jews object to Israel's secular government as not religious enough. Jews on different political parts of the spectrum object to Israel's policies as either too lax or too harsh, depending upon the issue and our different perspectives. Israeli Jews often dismiss our opinions because we have opted to not join them by living there and supporting the struggle alongside them.

In addition to the many trips I've taken there, Ginny and I have lived in Israel for more than three years as students. We embraced life in Israel as an education beyond the classes we took. As many of you know, Israel tends to grab us in ways that force us to learn as well. We walked the streets of downtown Jerusalem as Israelis cleaned it in the wake of a terror attack. We nervously rode buses to Hebrew University. We rented a car and braved Israeli traffic. We visited Palestinian refugee camps and endeavored to sympathize with a people not so unlike ours, still longing to be free in their homeland.

Israel became our home, and not our home. Israelis our fellow Jews, and also Jews of a different flavor. Our ties to the place, our sense of family, all of it, raises complications, and so we endeavor to support Israel even as we question its actions. In our support of Israel we wrestle with what's right and what we should do.

As the Israelites prepare to physically enter the land, Moses also works to educate them about life as responsible citizens. *Masei* concludes the Book of Numbers, *Bemidbar*, “in the wilderness” in Hebrew, and leads us to Deuteronomy, *Devarim*, “matters” or “words” . Moses

offers words of instruction about life as free people with individual and communal responsibility. Moses knows how much the Israelites struggled to be a people worthy of our contract with the divine that demands good behavior, and spends the last book of the Torah elaborating on the importance of that goal of ethical conduct. Moving from wanderers to a settled people, from slaves to free individuals - these transitions require great effort and negotiation.

We struggle with these questions still. The Jewish message starts with questions of good communal conduct, and we pursue these questions in every area of our lives. As individuals we think, feel, and pray on our decisions. As members of families we negotiate and wrestle with each other, often in joy as well as difficulty, in bringing productive harmony into our homes. And as participants in formal and informal communities we debate, vote, and compromise in committees, congregations and congresses for the sake of a world that might get better by our efforts.

The conclusion of our prayer service includes the *Aleinu*. In the *Aleinu* we outline our hope for a future that we may bring to the world together. *Aleinu* means “it is on us” - we assert that repairing the world, *tikkun olam*, comes from human efforts and declare ourselves responsible for making this change. We turn to the divine, to the mystery of the universe for assistance, for strength, for insight and lay the actions on ourselves.

The text of the *Aleinu* itself offers us struggle. A view of the world as we hope it will be when healed, and a bold claim of our uniqueness, our chosen-ness as descendants of Israel the God-wrestler. How can we set the highest goal as justice for all and still start with the notion that we are better in some way than all others?

In such a fundamental struggle we see the essence of Jewish thinking. Our liturgy, by prompting us to struggle, asks us to think. We may not agree with every statement in our prayers. Should our disagreement lead us to think more deeply about our striving to be better individuals and improve our communities in new ways, then perhaps that was the purpose of the prayer.

When we grapple with difficulties, we learn and offer our learning to others, only to strive again, grow again, evolve again, and learn again.

Tonight, Beth El offers us another opportunity to learn and grow about the topic of Israel - the Schloss Summer Lecture series brings us two fascinating speakers, Dr. Alexa Royden and Dr. Rafi Danziger, to further our understanding, and our striving.

Shabbat itself offers us a weekly opportunity to cease the everyday hustle and tussle, and raise our sights to loftier questions, deeper insights, and new opportunities to wrestle with the divine.

May our Shabbat be filled with fruitful, constructive, and reflective wrestling, Shabbat Shalom.