

Love Records It All

Parshat Matot-Masei, July 10, 2026

Shabbat is a double parasha, matot masae, it's the parasha that ends the book of Bavi Mar, the book of Numbers. And the second of the two, masae, literally means masaut, or travels. And the parasha will begin with a verse that is itself, its own weird circularity.

The verse that starts the second of the two portions, the Shabbat, begins with a very strange locution, it's very strange, an odd way to say something. The Torah begins by saying, these are their masaut, their motsayhem, their masayhem, their goings out on their journeys at God's Word. And then almost immediately after that, the verse folds back on itself and says, and these were their journeys by their goings out, and ve'eila masayhem, their motsayhem.

Masayhem means their journeys, motsayhem, and in one verse the two words are placed in an odd way. These are their journeys and goings out, and these are their goings out and their journeys. Very strange.

Goings out, journey, journey going out. The sentence itself doesn't move forward, the way that a sentence is supposed to move forward. It sounds like someone who keeps returning to the same memory, turning it over, unable to say it once and then just let it go.

And then as if just to prove the point, the Torah gives us the list of their journeys, the actual places that they went. The Torah gives us 42 names, Ritma, Rimon Peretz, Livna, Risa. Most of these names don't appear anywhere else in the Torah.

We don't know where they happened at most of these places. Probably nothing, honestly. Not that we know of.

Nothing that would survive an editor looking to trim and keep things economical. But the Torah, which can of course compress an entire life in two verses, stops here and gives us all 42 on purpose. It could be, as the Ishmetzer Rebbe says, Meir Shilov says, that all 42 of these stops have mystical meanings.

We don't know them. He tries to give them over. Nobody understands exactly.

Connected to the 42 name of God, 42 letter name of God, could be. But maybe the reason Moshe records all 42 of these stations is that he knows that one day someone will forget them if he doesn't write them down. Maybe even the people who walked those roads themselves will forget them if they're not written down.

Covenantal memory was never meant to depend on perfect human memory. It depends on a people willing to keep telling a story over and over again. There's a teaching about that and what was happening in those places that I think touched my heart.

I hope it touches yours. It's from the Midrash Tanchuma. It's brought by Rashi, the great medieval exegete, the medieval commentator, Rashi.

In discussing each of these 42 names and why they have to appear here, first Rashi gives a very simple answer in order to teach us, right, that there were actual rest places. They weren't always on the move. Okay, that's the first answer that Rashi gives.

But the second one is, it's the second one. Mashal l'melech she'ya b'no choleh. There's a parable of a king with a sick son.

Veholichol l'makom rachok lirapotoh. And he took him on a long distance to find him Medicare, to find him medicine. Keivan she'yu chozmin, on the way back, hitchil l'aviv muneh kol ha-masahot.

His father, on the way back, started to count all of the stops that they had been at. And here's what he would say, Kan yashanu. Here's where we slept.

Kan hokarnu. Right over here, right, this is where you were cold. You caught a cold.

Kan chashashta et roshcha. Here is where your head ached. Here is where you smiled again.

It would be easy to hear that and think that the stations mattered because something big happened there. Big things happened in these places, in Ritmah. But that's not quite what Rashi's saying in the name of the Midrash, Midrash Shanchuma.

The Midrash Shanchuma is saying nothing big happened at most of these stops. The same way nothing big in the world's accounting happened at Ritmah or Rimon, Perez. What happened in the parable is that the child got hurt and the father was there.

The child got hurt and the father was there at that moment and then recounted it. And obviously in the parable we're the children and God is the parent, lovingly saying, over here at Ritmah is where you stubbed your toe. Over here is where we saw that beautiful sunset or maybe something painful happened.

The entire content of most of these place names has nothing to do with drama, just pain and witnessing. A parent's defining act of love turns out to be exactly this, not protecting the child from those pains, but refusing to let a single ordinary moment not be gathered in the child's story. Naming the unremarkable place where his head ached is how love proves it was paying attention the whole way through, even to the parts no one else would think to write down.

When I work with couples who are going to be married, I see a couple of them here that I've married. We talk about the eight powers of the wedding ceremony and one of the powers is the promise that the ketubah symbolizes, which I promise to record our stories. I promise to record our stories.

Because when you record a story, it says that was a significant moment. And not all of those moments are going to be like tonight at this wedding. Not all of them are going to be Mount Sinai.

Not all of them are going to be these things that are standing out like cairns, these pile of rocks in memory that we remember along the way. They were just Ritmah and Rimon Peretz. It was just Yosemite and Sinai standing by the water.

Or maybe the bubu. And the Torah goes out of its way now to teach us a simple but profound lesson about what love records. Love records it all.

The brushing of the teeth. Going to school in the morning. You know when you get those reels on Facebook and they say ten years ago and you think that wasn't that special.

I just have this thing in my hand that I can take a million pictures and I just snapped 52, 42 places. And there's the stop sign. And there it is.

This list of encampments is not an administrative moment. It is a parent who cannot stop naming the places where the child suffered or celebrated. Because naming is how parents, lovers, teachers hold what happens to the people that they love.

This week, someone I love very much turned 93, my father. My siblings and our children and the grandchildren, right, all of my dad's whole family gathered to celebrate him. And we laughed over all of these old stories, these vignettes, the 42 stations.

Remember that, dad? Remember? And he kept saying to each and every one of us, oh it's my favorite thing in the world, taking you to school. 42 stations, nothing special, just going to school. We reminded one another of our vacations and birthdays and family moments that we all carried.

And some of it, honestly, he remembered. But most of it, he didn't. A lot of it has already slipped past him and he has a hard time recalling it.

A fragment of a story he remembered, but then the rest of it, no. And we kept saying, do you remember? And he'd smile in a way that could have meant yes, and could have meant he simply loved being asked. We couldn't really tell which stories had landed and which didn't.

And there was, of course, something tender in that, and something heartbreaking in it, too. Memory becoming half of his to hold, and half for me to hold. And I realize at that moment that an occupational hazard of being a rabbi is even in moments like that, you're thinking about a sermon.

What's the Torah here in this moment? And I thought at that moment, okay, I get it now. I get the Torah's insistence that memory not belong only to the person that will live through the memory. The Torah insists that memory is not atomistic.

It's not yours or mine alone. It is ours to hold. We hold memory for our children, for our parents, for our country, for our communities, for our people.

Memory belongs to the people that inherit it. And our sacred work simply passes from one generation to the next, and even before it has to, even a little at a time. Maybe, I don't know, maybe that's why so early in the Torah, God tells Moshe, after the battle with Amalek, he says, Ketov zot zikaron b'sefer.

Write this as a memory in this book. This book. Because someday in the future, people will forget.

So all of us have to try to hold it. The command isn't simply to remember, it's to write it down, because the Torah assumes that memory fades. And so it places memory into words and rituals and communities that can carry it, when individuals can no longer do that.

Which is exactly what happens in this week's parasha. And it's exactly what happens in this week's parasha, because this parasha is always read during the three weeks known as the b'ein ha'mitzarim, in the three weeks that are between the narrow place, between the 70th day of the month of Tammuz, Shiva b'Tammuz, and Tisha b'Av, the 9th of the three weeks that move us into our collective memory of trauma and displacement and exile. It isn't a coincidence.

The Sfard of Emes, the great Ger Rebe writes, in his teachings about this week's parasha, that our ancestors could not skip a single encampment in the 40 years of wandering because every station held its own small tikkun, its own little repair that could only happen because they visited those places. It's another valence. He isn't saying that they weren't significant, he's saying that all of our detours and all of our destinations, all of them, little plug for my podcast, all of our detours and destinations, had something remarkable there, something tikkuni, something that could be fixed, something that could be a learning or a lesson.

The repair isn't in the naming, it's in the standing there in that moment, he says. But the Torah insists on both of these. It says we have to name and pass through each of these stations, and then we need people to tell us that we did it too.

We don't get to fast forward through the difficult things in the wilderness, and we don't get to pass through it without marking it. And here's what I came back to when I was sitting with my dad. The parable only works if the child can hear the father telling it back to him.

If there's someone on the other end to receive the record, but with my father, I couldn't always tell if it was true, if he was there, you know. We'd say, here is when you did this, Pop. Remember that time that you crashed the car in and you came and told us that the bridge moved to hit you, and it wasn't the bridge, it was you.

Here is where you carried us when we were kids. Remember that time when I fell and scraped my knee playing soccer? And my father would nod. Couldn't always tell if he received the way the child in the parable received from his father, if my own father could receive from his son.

And sometimes something in his face would catch, and sometimes it simply passed through him. But we told it anyway. We told it anyway.

And some of the record he's holding, I know, and some of it now, we are holding it for him. And that, too, is a kind of love. Not needing to know which is which in order to keep remembering together.

Not needing to know which is which in order to keep holding that together. But most of us, most of us, we do the opposite, let's just be honest. We compress an entire year, a diagnosis, a loss, a long stretch of not getting through something, and we compress it into a sentence.

It was a hard year. It was a hard year. No 42 stations.

It was a hard year. And there is grace in that, trust me. There is mercy in that compressing of that file.

There's great compassion in that. I'm not going to stand up here and tell you that you would have to relive each and every moment of a difficult year in forensic detail. But something is lost when the compression happens before the stations have been named.

So here's what Matod Masei gives us this Shabbos. As you leave here tonight and go to Shabbat meals, you lift up a kiosk for bracha, a blessing cup, name one place this week, not 42, not 24, one masa, one journey you took this week, this month, that you'd just like to name. No need to process it, unless you want to.

But one moment. Here is where I was afraid. Here is where I had a fight with my boss.

Here is where I was confused. Here is where I celebrated something. And then let Shabbat be a station for you.

Every week in the middle of whatever journey you're on, there's an account built into the calendar, it's a retreat, a place you're required to stop, whether or not you're ready, whether or not you feel like it, every Shabbat is one of those stations. You don't have to be finished with the whole journey. You just have to arrive.

So arrive. Arrive in Shabbat. These are their journeys that were goings-outs, and these are their goings-outs that were journeys, each one precious, each one a memory, each one needing to be named and marked, and you're not alone in doing it.

Someone, somewhere, watching, listening, insisting to you and to me and to all of us that it counted enough to write it down. Let's rise.