

**Parasha Masei (Journeys)**  
**August 6, 2005/1 Av 5765**

**Torah:** Num. 33:1-36:13

**Haftarah:** Jer. 2:4-29

**Brit Chadashah:** James 4:1-12 (L&F)

In this, the final Torah portion of the book of Numbers, Moses is commanded by G-d to record all of the journeys the Israelites took when they came out of Egypt. Chapter 33 lists these journeys, stage by stage. It ends with the Israelites camping along the Jordan, and getting ready to cross into Canaan. G-d has some specific instructions for Moses to tell the people:

Numbers 33:51 "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: `When you cross the Jordan into Canaan, <sup>52</sup> drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you. Destroy all their carved images and their cast idols, and demolish all their high places. <sup>53</sup> Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess. <sup>54</sup> Distribute the land by lot, according to your clans. To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one. Whatever falls to them by lot will be theirs. Distribute it according to your ancestral tribes.

33:55 " `But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live. <sup>56</sup> And then I will do to you what I plan to do to them.' " (NIV)

G-d wants to make sure that His people are not corrupted by the idolatry which they will find in this new land.

Chapter 34 discusses the boundaries of Canaan, which describes the borders of Biblical Israel. Chapter 35 talks about the Cities of Refuge, where those who accidentally kill someone can flee and be protected from being killed themselves. The portion ends with Chapter 36 which discusses the inheritance of Zelophehad's daughters, who were instructed to marry cousins on their father's side of the family in order to make sure their inheritance remained within their clan and tribe.

The prophetic portion in Jeremiah talks about the people of Israel turning away from G-d and falling into idolatry. G-d is asking them how they can do such a thing after all He has done for them:

Jeremiah 2:5 This is what the L-RD says:  
"What fault did your fathers find in me,

that they strayed so far from me?  
They followed worthless idols  
and became worthless themselves.

2:6 They did not ask, 'Where is the L-RD,  
who brought us up out of Egypt  
and led us through the barren wilderness,  
through a land of deserts and rifts,  
a land of drought and darkness,  
a land where no one travels and no one lives?'

2:7 I brought you into a fertile land  
to eat its fruit and rich produce.  
But you came and defiled my land  
and made my inheritance detestable. (NIV)

The idea of turning away from G-d comes to a head in the Brit Chadasha portion. The people are at once chastised for turning away from G-d and being double-minded, and told that turning back to G-d will be what protects them.

James 4:7 Submit yourselves, then, to G-d. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. <sup>8</sup> Come near to G-d and He will come near to you. Wash your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you double-minded. <sup>9</sup> Grieve, mourn and wail. Change your laughter to mourning and your joy to gloom. <sup>10</sup> Humble yourselves before the L-rd, and He will lift you up. (NIV)

How this Torah portion has a practical application to our lives is quite simple, but complicated at the same time: the journeys that we take are affected by the choices that we make. We are constantly faced with situations where we have a number of paths that we can choose, and that choice ultimately affects the next journey, with the next set of choices, and so on. Because G-d gave us free will, we're not little pawns on a spiritual chessboard. That's part of faith: bathing our lives and decisions in prayer and G-d's word, making the specific decision, and then dealing with the consequences. When we keep focused on G-d I honestly don't believe there are "right" and "wrong" decisions – G-d works with us in whatever circumstances He finds us in. It is when we start to veer away from judging our actions and decisions against G-d's standards in the Bible and not taking the time to pray things over, that things can start to get dicey. For example, being habitually angry, lying, cheating, stealing – these are all things that G-d warns us about. When we are living outside of G-d's design, we're sinning, and there are clear consequences for that – separation from G-d. The Israelites who fell into idolatry did not just do that by accident – they chose to, willfully. On the other hand, Zelophehad's daughters married according to G-d's wishes, and as a result their inheritance of land remained in their tribe.

“Oh, but I could not help myself.” “It was the other person’s fault” and other such excuses people make for their ungodly behaviour are common – but deceitful. Somewhere along the way, the person had to make a choice that led to the situation in which they found themselves. This also doesn’t mean that the results of every choice we make, even when prayed over and held up to G-d’s word, will necessarily be wonderful. We find ourselves faced with tough situations at times, and sometimes all of the available options are not palatable. But it is better to face the tough times with G-d than without Him.

In the New Covenant portion, it states that that “anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of G-d” (James 4:4, NIV). What does this mean? Again, it has to do with choices. Either we put G-d first in our lives, or something else becomes our G-d. I know people who are so into sports, or music, or movies, or some other kind of hobby, that it is practically all they talk about, think about, and do. For them, that object of their attention is their god. For us, we don’t necessarily have to give up the things we enjoy or the possessions we have – but our focus needs to be primarily on G-d.

There are also people who are quick to make everything spiritual. Of course, G-d cares about everything that we do; He knows the number of hairs upon our heads. But if you are praying about what breakfast cereal to eat, or which colour socks to wear, you might be taking things too far. These things are temporary and external and of no lasting significance.

Finally, even when we willfully sin, there is always room for repentance. We’re human, we make mistakes, and not one amongst us is perfect. There are going to be times when we are going to do something we shouldn’t do. And G-d’s attitude towards that is: fine. Do what you’re going to do. And when you realize the error of your ways, and decide to turn back towards Me, I’ll be there for you. But He is never going to force us to make the “right” choices, whatever those may be. Which is why how serious someone is about G-d is reflected in their lifestyle – which is all about choices.

*Chazak! Chazak! V’nit’chazek!*