

Kol Rina
An Independent Minyan
Parashat Matot – Masei
July 30, 2022 *** Av 2, 5782

[Matot-Masei in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/2244/jewish/Matot-Massei-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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Moses conveys the laws governing the annulment of vows to the heads of the tribes of Israel. War is waged against Midian for their role in plotting the moral destruction of Israel, and the Torah gives a detailed account of the war spoils and how they were allocated amongst the people, the warriors, the Levites and the high priest.

The tribes of Reuben and Gad (later joined by half of the tribe of Manasseh) ask for the lands east of the Jordan as their portion in the Promised Land, these being prime pastureland for their cattle. Moses is initially angered by the request, but subsequently agrees on the condition that they first join, and lead, in Israel's conquest of the lands west of the Jordan.

The forty-two journeys and encampments of Israel are listed, from the Exodus to their encampment on the plains of Moab across the river from the land of Canaan. The boundaries of the Promised Land are given, and cities of refuge are designated as havens and places of exile for inadvertent murderers.

The daughters of Tzelafchad marry within their own tribe of Manasseh, so that the estate which they inherit from their father should not pass to the province of another tribe.

[Matot-Massei Haftorah in a Nutshell](https://www.chabad.org/parshah/article_cdo/aid/895320/jewish/Haftorah-in-a-Nutshell.htm)

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This week's haftorah is the second of a series of three "haftarot of affliction." These three haftarot are read during the Three Weeks of mourning for Jerusalem, between the fasts of 17 Tammuz and 9 Av.

The prophet Jeremiah transmits G-d's message to the Jewish people, in strong tones chastising all the sectors of the people, including the leadership, for their abandonment of G-d. "What wrong did your forefathers find in Me, that they distanced themselves from Me, and they went after futility and themselves became futile?" He reminds them of the kindness G-d did for them, taking them out of Egypt and leading them through the desert and settling them in the Promised Land, yet they repaid kindness with disloyalty. "For My people have committed two evils; they have forsaken Me, the spring of living waters, [and furthermore, this was

in order] to dig for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that do not hold water.” G-d asks them to view the actions of their neighboring nations, the Kittites and Kedarites, “and see whether there was any such thing, whether a nation exchanged a god, although they are not gods. Yet My nation exchanged their glory for what does not avail.”

Jeremiah then goes on to foretell the suffering the Jewish people will suffer at the hands of their enemies, and also their erstwhile allies: “Your evil will chastise you, and you will be rebuked for your backslidings; and you shall know and see that your forsaking the L-rd your G-d is evil and bitter.”

The haftorah ends on an encouraging note, assuring the people that if they return to G-d with sincerity, they will be restored to their full glory.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[Oaths and Vows: Matot by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/matot/oaths-and-vows/)

<https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/matot/oaths-and-vows/>

The parsha of Matot begins with a passage about vows and oaths and their annulment. It uses vocabulary that was later to be adopted and adapted for Kol Nidrei, the annulment of vows on the eve of Yom Kippur. Its position here, though – near the end of the book of Numbers – is strange.

The Torah has been describing the last stages in the Israelites’ journey to the Promised Land. The command has been given to divide the land by lot between the tribes. Moses has been told by God to prepare for his death. He asks God to appoint a successor, which He does. The role goes to Joshua, Moses’ apprentice for many years. The narrative then breaks off to make way for an extended account of the sacrifices to be brought on the various days of the year. Following that comes the section with which parshat Matot begins, about vows and oaths. Why is it here? There is a superficial answer. There is a verbal link with the penultimate verse of the previous parsha:

“These shall you offer to the Lord on your festivals, in addition to your vows and your freewill offerings.” Num. 29:39

Having mentioned vows, the Torah now states the laws that apply to them. That is one explanation.

However there is another answer, one that goes to the very heart of the project on which the Israelites were about to embark once they had crossed the Jordan and conquered the land. One problem, perhaps the problem, to which the Torah is an answer is: Can freedom and order coexist in the human sphere? Can there be a society which is both free and just at the same time? The Torah sets out for us the other alternatives. There can be freedom and chaos. That was the world full of violence before the Flood. And there can be order without freedom. That was the

Egypt from which the Israelites were liberated. Is there a third alternative? And if so, how is it created?

The answer the Torah gives has to do with language. Recall that it was with language that God created the world: “And God said, Let there be... and there was...” One of the first gifts God gave humanity was language. When the Torah says that “God formed man from the dust of the land and breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, and the man became a living being” ([Gen. 2:7](#)), the Targum translates the last phrase as “and man became a speaking being.” For Judaism, speaking is life itself.

However, Judaism is particularly interested in one unusual use of language. The Oxford philosopher J. L. Austin called it “performative utterance.”^[1] This happens when we use language not to describe something but to do something. So, for instance, when a groom says to his bride under the chupah, “Behold you are betrothed to me,” he is not describing a marriage, he is getting married. When in ancient times the Beit Din declared the New Moon, they were not making a statement of fact. They were creating a fact, they were turning the day into the New Moon.

The key example of a performative utterance is a promise. When I promise you that I will do something, I am creating something that did not exist before, namely an obligation. This fact, small though it might seem, is the foundation of Judaism. A mutual promise – X pledges himself to do certain things for Y, and Y commits himself to do other things for X – is called a covenant, and Judaism is based on covenant, specifically the covenant made between God and the Israelites at Mount Sinai, which bound them and still to this day binds us. In human history, it is the supreme case of a performative utterance.

Two philosophers understood the significance of the act of promising to the moral life. One was Nietzsche. This is what he said:

To breed an animal with the prerogative to promise – is that not precisely the paradoxical task which nature has set herself with regard to humankind? Is it not the real problem of humankind?... Man himself will really have to become reliable, regular, necessary, even in his own self-image, so that he, as someone making a promise is, is answerable to his own future! That is precisely what constitutes the long history of the origins of responsibility. [On the Genealogy of Morality](#)^[2]

The other was Hannah Arendt, who in essence explained what Nietzsche meant. Human affairs are fraught with unpredictability. That is because we are free. We do not know how other people will behave or how they will respond to an act of ours. So we can never be sure of the consequences of our own decisions. Freedom seems to rob the human world of order. We can tell how inanimate objects will behave under different conditions. We can be reasonably sure of how animals will behave. But we cannot tell in advance how humans will react. How then can we create an orderly society without taking away people’s freedom?

The answer is the act of promising. When I promise to do something, I am freely placing myself under an obligation to do something in the future. If I am the kind of person who is known to keep his word, I have removed one element of unpredictability from the human world. You can rely on me, since I have given my word. When I promise, I voluntarily bind myself. It is this ability of humans to voluntarily commit themselves to do, or refrain from doing, certain acts that generates order in the relations between human beings without the use of coercive force.[3]

“When a man makes a vow to the Lord or takes an oath binding himself to an obligation, he must not break his word; whatever he speaks, that he must fulfil” (Num. 30:3). It is no accident that this, the second verse of parshat Matot, is stated shortly before the Israelites approach the Promised Land. The institution of promising, of which vows and oaths to God are a supreme example, is essential to the existence of a free society. Freedom depends upon people keeping their word. One instance of how this plays out in real life appears later in the parsha. Two of the tribes, Reuben and Gad, decide that they would rather live to the east of the Jordan where the land is more suitable for their livestock. After a fraught conversation with Moses, who accuses them of shirking their responsibilities to the rest of the people, they agree to be on the front lines of the army until the conquest of the land is complete. Everything depends on their keeping their word.

All social institutions in a free society depend on trust, and trust means honouring our promises, doing what we say we will do. When this breaks down, the very future of freedom is at risk. There is a classic example of this in Tanach. It appears in the book of Jeremiah, where the Prophet is describing the society of his time, when people could no longer be trusted to keep their word:

They bend their tongues like bows;

They are valorous in the land for treachery, not for honesty;

They advance from evil to evil.

They do not heed Me – declares the Lord.

Beware of your friends;

Trust not even a brother,

For every one of them is a deceiver, and every friend a slanderer.

Friend deceives friend, and no one speaks the truth.

They have taught their tongues to lie; they weary themselves with sinning.

You live in the midst of deceit; in their deceit they refuse to heed Me – declares the Lord. Jer. 9:2–5

That was the condition of a society that was about to lose its freedom to the Babylonians. It never fully recovered.

If trust breaks down, social relationships break down. Society will then depend on law enforcement agencies or some other use of force. When force is widely used, society is no longer free. The only way free human beings can form collaborative

and cooperative relationships without recourse to force is by the use of verbal undertakings honoured by those who make them.

Freedom needs trust. Trust needs people to keep their word, and keeping your word means treating words as holy, vows and oaths as sacrosanct. Only under very special and precisely formulated circumstances can you be released from your undertakings. That is why, as the Israelites approached the Holy Land where they were to create a free society, they had to be reminded of the sacred character of vows and oaths.

The temptation to break your word when it is to your advantage to do so can sometimes be overwhelming. That is why belief in God – a God who oversees all we think, say, and do, and who holds us accountable to our commitments – is so fundamental. Although it sounds strange to us now, the father of toleration and liberalism, John Locke, held that citizenship should not be extended to atheists because, not believing in God, they could not be trusted to honour their word.^[4] Understanding this, we can now appreciate that the appearance of laws about vows and oaths at the end of the book of Numbers, as the Israelites are approaching the land of Israel, is no accident, and the moral is still relevant today. A free society depends on trust. Trust depends on keeping your word. That is how humans imitate God – by using language to create. Words create moral obligations, and moral obligations, undertaken responsibly and honoured faithfully, create the possibility of a free society. So never break a promise. Always do what you say you are going to do. If we fail to keep our word, eventually we will lose our freedom. [1] J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975). [2] Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, trans. Carol Diethe and ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 35–36. [3] Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 243–44. [4] John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689).

[Retribution and Revenge: Masei by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks z”l](https://www.rabbisacks.org/covenant-conversation/masei/retribution-and-revenge/)

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Near the end of the book of Bamidbar, we encounter the law of the cities of refuge: three cities to the east of the Jordan and, later, three more within the land of Israel itself. There, people who had committed homicide could flee and find protection until their case was heard by a court of law. If they were found guilty of murder, in biblical times, they were sentenced to death. If found innocent – if the death happened by accident or inadvertently, with neither deliberation nor malice – then they were to stay in a city of refuge “until the death of the High Priest.” (See Num. 35:28) By residing there, they were protected against revenge on the part of the goel ha-dam, the blood-redeemer, usually the closest relative of the person who had been killed.

Homicide is never less than serious in Jewish law. But there is a fundamental difference between murder – deliberate killing – and manslaughter, accidental death. To kill someone not guilty of murder as an act of revenge for an accidental death is not justice but further bloodshed; this must be prevented – hence the need for safe havens where people at risk from vigilantes.

The prevention of unjust violence is fundamental to the Torah. God's covenant with Noah and humankind after the Flood identifies murder as the ultimate crime:

“One who sheds the blood of man – by man shall his blood be shed, for in God's image man was made.” Gen. 9:6

Blood wrongly shed cries out to Heaven itself. After Cain had murdered Abel, God said to Cain,

“Your brother's blood is crying out to Me from the ground!” Gen. 4:10

Here in Bamidbar we hear a similar sentiment:

“You shall not pollute the land in which you live; blood pollutes the land, and the land can have no atonement for the blood that is shed in it – except through the blood of the one who shed it.” Num. 35:33

The verb ch-n-ph, which appears twice in this verse and nowhere else in the Mosaic books, means to pollute, to soil, to dirty, to defile. There is something fundamentally blemished about a world in which murder goes unpunished. Human life is sacred. Even justified acts of bloodshed, as in the case of war, still communicate impurity. A Kohen who has shed blood does not therefore bless the people.[1] David is told that he may not build the Temple “because you shed much blood.”[2] Death defiles. That is what lies behind the idea of revenge. And though the Torah rejects revenge except when commanded by God,[3] something of the idea survives in the concept of the goel ha-dam, wrongly translated as ‘blood-avenger.’ It means, in fact, ‘blood-redeemer.’

A redeemer is someone who rights an imbalance in the world, who rescues someone or something and restores it to its rightful place. Thus Boaz redeems land belonging to Naomi.[4] Redeemers are the ones who restore relatives to freedom after they have been forced to sell themselves into slavery.[5] God redeems His people from bondage in Egypt. A blood-redeemer is one who ensures that murder does not go unpunished.

However, not all acts of killing are murder. Some are bishgaggah, that is, unintentional, accidental, or inadvertent. These are the acts that lead to exile in the cities of refuge. Yet, there is an ambiguity about this law. Was exile to the cities of refuge considered a way of protecting the accidental killer, or was it a form of punishment – not the death sentence that would have applied to one guilty of murder, but punishment nonetheless? Recall that exile is a biblical form of punishment. Adam and Eve, after their sin, were exiled from Eden. Cain, after killing Abel, was told he would be “a restless wanderer on the face of the

earth.” (Gen. 4:12) We say in our prayers, “Because of our sins we were exiled from our land.”

In truth both elements are present. On the one hand, the Torah says that “the assembly must protect the one accused of murder from the redeemer of blood and send the accused back to the city of refuge to which they fled.” (Num. 35:25) Here the emphasis is on protection. But on the other hand, we read that if the exiled person “ever goes outside the limits of the city of refuge to which they fled and the redeemer of blood finds them outside the city, the redeemer of blood may kill the accused without being guilty of murder.” (Num. 35:26-27) Here an element of guilt is presumed; otherwise why would the blood-redeemer be innocent of murder?[6]

Let us examine how the Talmud and Maimonides explain the provision that those who are exiled must stay in the city of refuge until the death of the High Priest. What had the High Priest to do with accidental killing? According to the Talmud, the High Priest “should have asked for mercy [i.e. should have prayed that there be no accidental deaths among the people] and he did not do so.”[7] The assumption is that had the High Priest prayed more fervently, God would not have allowed this accident to happen. Whether or not there is moral guilt, something wrong has occurred and there is a need for atonement, achieved partly through exile and partly through the death of the High Priest. For the High Priest atoned for the people as a whole and, when he died, his death atoned for the death of those who were accidentally killed.

Maimonides, however, gives a completely different explanation in *The Guide for the Perplexed* (III:40). For him the issue at stake is not atonement but protection. The reason the man goes into exile in a city of refuge is to allow the passions of the relative of the victim, the blood-redeemer, to cool. The exile stays there until the death of the High Priest, because his death creates a mood of national mourning, which dissolves the longing for revenge – “for it is a natural phenomenon that we find consolation in our misfortune when the same misfortune or a greater one befalls another person. Amongst us no death causes more grief than that of the High Priest.”

The desire for revenge is basic. It exists in all societies. It led to cycles of retaliation – the Montagues against the Capulets in *Romeo and Juliet*, the Corleones and Tattaglias in *The Godfather* – that have no natural end. Wars of the clans were capable of destroying whole societies.[8]

The Torah, understanding that the desire for revenge as natural, tames it by translating it into something else altogether. It recognises the pain, the loss and moral indignation of the family of the victim. That is the meaning of the phrase *goel hadam*, the blood-redeemer, the figure who represents that instinct for revenge. The Torah legislates for people with all their passions, not for saints. It is a realistic code, not a utopian one.

Yet the Torah inserts one vital element between the killer and the victim's family: the principle of justice. There must be no direct act of revenge. The killer must be protected until his case has been heard in a court of law. If found guilty, he must pay the price. If found innocent, he must be given refuge. This single act turns revenge into retribution. This makes all the difference.

People often find it difficult to distinguish retribution and revenge, yet they are completely different concepts. Revenge is an I-Thou relationship. You killed a member of my family so I will kill you. It is intrinsically personal. Retribution, by contrast, is impersonal. It is no longer the Montagues against the Capulets but both under the impartial rule of law. Indeed the best definition of the society the Torah seeks to create is nomocracy: the rule of laws, not men.

Retribution is the principled rejection of revenge. It says that we are not free to take the law into our own hands. Passion may not override the due process of the law, for that is a sure route to anarchy and bloodshed. Wrong must be punished, but only after it has been established by a fair trial, and only on behalf, not just of the victim but of society as a whole. It was this principle that drove the work of the late Simon Wiesenthal in bringing Nazi war criminals to trial. He called his biography *Justice*, not *Vengeance*.^[9] The cities of refuge were part of this process by which vengeance was subordinated to, and replaced by, retributive justice.

This is not just ancient history. Almost as soon as the Berlin Wall fell and the Cold War came to an end in 1989, brutal ethnic war came to the former Yugoslavia, first in Bosnia then Kosovo. It has now spread to Iraq, Syria, and many other parts of the world. In his book *The Warrior's Honor*, Michael Ignatieff wondered how these regions descended so rapidly into chaos. This was his conclusion:

The chief moral obstacle in the path of reconciliation is the desire for revenge. Now, revenge is commonly regarded as a low and unworthy emotion, and because it is regarded as such, its deep moral hold on people is rarely understood. But revenge – morally considered – is a desire to keep faith with the dead, to honour their memory by taking up their cause where they left off. Revenge keeps faith between the generations; the violence it engenders is a ritual form of respect for the community's dead – therein lies its legitimacy. Reconciliation is difficult precisely because it must compete with the powerful alternative morality of violence. Political terror is tenacious because it is an ethical practice. It is a cult of the dead, a dire and absolute expression of respect.

Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honor: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, New York: Henry Holt, 2000. p. 188.

It is foolhardy to act as if the desire for revenge does not exist. It does. But given free rein, it will reduce societies to violence and bloodshed without end. The only alternative is to channel it through the operation of law, fair trial, and then either punishment or protection. That is what was introduced into civilisation by the law of

the cities of refuge, allowing retribution to take the place of revenge, and justice the place of retaliation. [1] Brachot 32b; Rambam, Hilchot Tefillah 15:3. [2] I Chronicles 22:8. [3] Only God, the Giver of life, can command us to take life, and then often only on the basis of facts known to God but not to us. [4] See Ruth, chapters 3-4. [5] See Lev. 25, where the verb appears 19 times. [6] See Amnon Bazak, 'Cities of Refuge and Cities of Flight,' in Torah MiEtzion, Devarim, Maggid, Jerusalem, 2012, pp. 229-236. [7] Makkot 11a. [8] See Rene Girard, Violence and the Sacred, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977. [9] New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1989.

[Turning our Backyards into Sanctuary Cities by Rabbi David Eber
https://truah.org/resources/parshat-matot-masei-david-eber-moraltorah/](https://truah.org/resources/parshat-matot-masei-david-eber-moraltorah/)

“Tell Alderwoman Maria Hadden That You Are Fed Up!” read the headline that accosted me on my morning walk in my neighborhood of Rogers Park on the northeastern edge of Chicago.

What should I be fed up with, I wondered? As I read on, it told me (anonymously with no citations) that a men’s shelter was coming to the neighborhood, and that it was going to bring “crime,” “drugs,” and “Uptown’s problems to Rogers Park” (all of which are dog whistles for racists). The flyer was a harmful piece of misinformation that embodied tropes of NIMBYism — “Not In My Backyard.”

Fortunately I had recently attended a public meeting regarding the shelter, so I was aware of the proposal and how the flyer was full of misinformation. The majority of people who attended spoke in support of the development and noted how it could help the growing homeless encampment down the block. This new shelter would provide 72 beds as emergency housing and a day-use space with showers and laundry, as well as providing case management services to assist in finding permanent supportive housing, along with access to integrated health services and more. The anonymous disinformation flyer neglected to mention any of this, nor did it mention that the organization that will run the shelter has already successfully rehoused 20 people living in the nearby homeless camp this past year alone.

One can acknowledge that, for the person or persons circulating this flyer, coming face to face with the appalling effects of systemic housing injustice, poverty, and more is difficult. The presence of people in communities who have unmet mental health needs due to lack of access to healthcare services, or people who may have substance use disorders and nowhere to turn, can be alarming and at times scary to some. The NIMBY instinct would have us believe that those systemic problems and “those people” will best be solved or helped by placing solutions elsewhere, or outside “our neighborhood.” The Torah portion this week, the double parshah Matot-Masei, provides a different model for how we in fact should incorporate places of refuge into even our most holy spaces.

Matot-Masei famously describes the *arei miklat*, the cities of refuge, which were cities designated as sanctuaries for those who had accidentally killed someone

and therefore needed to flee in order to protect themselves from those seeking revenge. These six cities were a subset of a larger set of towns that were set aside, four from each tribe, as dwelling-places for the Levites, the priestly class, who weren't apportioned their own land.

Furthermore, we learn these cities weren't randomly chosen but that there were specific criteria. Makkot 10a explains:

With regard to these cities of refuge, one does not establish them in small settlements or in large cities; rather, in intermediate-sized towns. And one establishes them only in a place where water is available... And one establishes them only in a place where there are markets, and one establishes them only in a populated place, where there are many people who regularly frequent the town.

What we see here in the Torah and Talmud is a different model than NIMBY. Each tribe had to designate cities for the priests to live on, spread throughout the land of Israel in order for them to instruct and demonstrate holiness to all inhabitants. Six of those cities were designated as sanctuary cities. The place of refuge for these people, who are vulnerable and perhaps even frightening, was precisely among the holy workers of the community and situated in "populated places" near "markets," which are heavily foot-trafficked. What we see therefore is that the Torah instructs that in the midst of our holiest cities and amongst people who do the work of God, that precisely there — in that place — are the vulnerable to take refuge. Right in our very backyards and city centers, and among important people. *(Rabbi David Eber is the assistant rabbi for education at the Jewish Reconstructionist Congregation in Evanston, IL.)*

Masei: A Lyric of Love by Ilana Kurshan

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1I7eD6drIfBD98P2zKeYbFC92FV5n_5bh/view

When my husband and I began dating, I took him to meet my family in the town where I was raised. One afternoon we went on a long run together around town, and I gave him a guided tour of my childhood: Here is where I went to high school. Here is where I fell off my bike in fifth grade. Here is where my best friend lived. I was reminded of this moment in our courtship when reading this week's parashah, Masei, with its focus on geography and its underlying theme of romantic reminiscence.

Parashat Masei opens with a long list of all the encampments of the Israelites in the wilderness, proceeds to delineate the borders of the land of Israel, and then mandates the allocation of specific cities for the Levites and, from among those holdings, the designation of cities of refuge. At first this focus on journeys, boundaries, and cities seems rather dull and prosaic; after all, does the Torah really need to recount for us every single one of the forty-two places in

the wilderness where the Israelites set up camp? Read with a more poetic sensibility, however, our parashah becomes a love letter to the Jewish people and to the land of Israel, expressing God's devotion in language less literal than lyrical. The opening verses of our parashah provide an itinerary of the wilderness journey, beginning with the departure from Rameses, Egypt on the fifteenth of Nisan, and culminating in the arrival at the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho, a full forty years (and forty-nine biblical verses) later. The midrash explains the purpose of this extensive itinerary by reference to a parable about a king whose son was ill. The king took his son on a journey to a distant place to heal him. When they were on their way back, the king began recounting the various stages of their journey: "Here we slept. Here we cooled off. Here you had a headache." The parable draws the analogy to God's instruction to Moshe to "recount to the Israelites all the places where they provoked me" (Tanchuma Numbers 33:1; Rashi on 33:1). In this parable, God is the king who brings the Israelites on a long journey to heal them from the wounds and traumas inflicted by slavery, transforming them into a mature people capable of bearing responsibility. As the many encampments suggest, it was a journey with many starts and stops, and many moments of rupture. But in spite of all the times the Israelites provoked God along the way—by complaining about the food, by speaking ill of their leaders, by constructing an idolatrous calf—God nonetheless stayed with them.

In the weekly synagogue Torah reading, it is customary to chant the forty-nine verses detailing the Israelites' itinerary to a special melody instead of the regular cantillations. This melody is very similar to the melody used to chant the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), originally recited when the Israelites first set out on their journey, suggesting that the itinerary of the "journeys" from which Parshat Masei takes its name is in fact a song of its own, parallel to the Song of the Sea. As such, we might think of the Song of the Sea and Masei as bookends, flanking the forty years of wandering in poetic chant. In the Song of the Sea, the people praise God for what He has pledged to do for them: "In Your love you lead the people You redeemed...Till your people cross over, O Lord" (Exodus 15:13, 16). In the lyrical itinerary of Masei, they attest that God has made good on that promise, standing by them through thick and then.

The period of wandering in the wilderness is analogized in the prophetic imagination to a time of young love between God and Israel: "I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown" (Jeremiah 2:2). God led the people day in and day out, by pillar of cloud and pillar of fire, through the seemingly endless sands of the wilderness; the people in turn followed God devotedly, trusting in God's love. In the book of Exodus, the final of the "four languages of redemption" used to describe God's pledge to the Israelites captures this exclusive bond: "And I will take you to be My people, and I will be Your God" (Exodus 7:7). The long

wilderness journey, in all its many stages, serves to seal this bond of love between God and the people of Israel, which will blossom into maturity once the people settle in the Promised Land.

The second half of the parashah, which focuses on the borders of the land of Israel and the designation of special cities within it, looks ahead to this period of more mature love, when God and Israel at last settle down with one another. The Torah sketches the boundaries of the land, moving from the tip of the Dead Sea in the south, to the shores of the Great Sea in the west, to the peak of Mount Hor in the north, to the slopes of the Kinneret in the east. These verses read less like a geography lesson than like a literary blazon cataloguing the physical features of a beloved subject, as in Spenser's marriage poem, Epithalamion: "Her goodly eyes like sapphires shining bright / Her forehead ivory white..." Indeed, throughout the classic biblical love poem, the Song of Songs, the female lover is described by invoking geographical sites and features of the land of Israel: "My beloved to me is a spray of henna blooms from the vineyards of Ein Gedi...Your hair is a flock of goats streaming down Mount Gilead... Your neck is like the Tower of David" (Songs 1:13, 4:1, 4:4). The midrash leaves no doubt that the land is an expression of God's love: "The Holy One Blessed Be He said to Israel: The land of Israel is beloved unto me, as it is written, 'the land the Lord your God cares for' (Deut. 11:12), and Israel is beloved to me, as it is written, 'for the Lord your God loves you' (Deut. 23:6). God said: I will enter the people of Israel, who are beloved to Me, into the land that is beloved to Me" (Tanchuma Buber, Masei, 5).

The prophets, too, describe the people's relationship to the land of Israel as a romantic bond. When the people of Israel leave the land, it becomes like a widow ("Alas! How lonely sits the city... She that was great among nations, is become like a widow" Lamentations 1:1); when they return to the land, it is like a wedding celebration ("Nevermore shall you be called abandoned. But you shall be called 'I desire her,' and your land 'mastered' (*be'ula*, from *ba'al*)... as a young man masters a maiden, and as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride," Isaiah 62:4-5). God's love for the people of Israel is consummated only when they settle within its borders, which God fervently desires. As Rabbi Yehuda Brandes notes in a Dvar Torah that inspired my own (also see the Tiferet Shlomo on Masei; quoted in *Torat Imecha*, vol. 2, p. 443, untranslated), the term used in our parashah to signify "draw a boundary line" (*t'tau*, 34:7; *v'hitavitem*, 34:10) comes from the same root as the Hebrew word for "desire" (*ta'ava*), suggesting that the demarcation of boundaries is not merely political or geographic, but is an expression of love and longing.

Our parashah, filled with place names and geographical features, is a mapping of the evolving romance between God and Israel, beginning with the young bride trailing after her groom through the wilderness and culminating in the couple building a home together in the Promised Land. From Rameses to Succot, from

Succot to Etam. From the Great Sea to Mount Hor, and from Mount Hor to Levo Hamat. Like the tour I gave my husband of my hometown, these litanies—read less literally—are a lyric of love. (*Ilana Kurshan is an American-Israeli author who lives in Jerusalem. She is best known for her memoir of Talmud study amidst life as a single woman, a married woman, and a mother, If All the Seas Were Ink.*)

The Boiling Point by Bex Stern Rosenblat

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1I7eD6drIfBD98P2zKeYbFC92FV5n_5bh/view

In the dead heat of summer, in these three weeks leading up to Tisha B'av and the recitation of the horrors of the burning of Jerusalem, we read the second chapter of Jeremiah, a passage overflowing with water imagery. The source of the water is God and the source of the conflict in the chapter is our failure to recognize the water God has given us.

The structure of the chapter is a *riv*, a legal argument made, in this case, by God, against us, accusing us of not recognizing God. God names Godself in verse thirteen, calling Godself “the source of living waters.” But we did not know it. Turning away from the source of living waters, we dug faulty wells, wells too broken to even hold water.

It is a heartbreaking image. In the shimmering heat of midsummer, we desperately seek the only thing that can save us, the water to cool us. But the more we seek it the further we find ourselves from it. We work hard building useless wells for water we no longer have and couldn't store if we did. The hard work tires us out, dehydrating us, causing us to need that water all the more. We work harder and harder at the wrong task, trying to achieve our goal in a way that can never work.

It gets worse. We do not learn. We do not stop and consider why we have yet to find relief. As the heat addles our brains, we double down on incorrect methods, blaming external forces rather than our own actions. We look for the waters of Egypt and Mesopotamia. We reach out to foreign nations for relief. But the water we find there is “bad and bitter.” The situation becomes even more desperate, even more humiliating. Where once we sought water and could not find it, now we find water but cannot drink it. We are tantalizingly close to the solution to our desperate thirst but as we approach it shifts, revealing itself as not ours, as poisonous to us.

In our agony, the world seems to have dried up. We reflect back on the source of it all. But even this we do incorrectly. We wonder why God has been a desert to us. We identify God as a desert, a dry place. God had identified Godself as the source of living waters. It is we, rather, who, having been planted in a place of abundance, having been given the ability to make the desert bloom, have instead made the garden wither. As we approach Tisha B'av this summer, we have to feel the heat. We are once more presented with the choice: continue digging useless wells, or

acknowledge where we have done wrong and return to the source. (*Bex teaches Hebrew Bible and bibliodrama. She's the Mid-Atlantic Faculty-in-Residence for The Conservative Yeshiva.*)

Yahrtzeits

Lisa Paley remembers her father Leon Lindenbaum on Wednesday Aug. 3 (Av 6).
Shari Mevorah remembers her mother Helen Kirstein on Thursday Aug. 4 (Av 7).