

Living in the Moment

Parshas Behaaloscha wraps up the story which began in Parshas Terumah with the commandment to build the Mishkan. We read the final details of the appointment of the Leviim to serve in the Mishkan and to transport it. Finally, a year and a month after the departure from Egypt, having received the Torah and built the Mishkan, the nation is ready to move forward through the desert to Eretz Yisroel, in formation, directed and guided by the Clouds of Glory.

Although we don't know how they traveled until they arrived at Sinai, the Torah gives us a lot of detail on how travel through the desert was done from here on. The twelve tribes had been assigned positions, three on each side with the Mishkan in the center. They were to travel, too, according to that formation. Moshe is instructed to have silver trumpets made, which are used to signal the beginning of travel. They know that it is time to travel when the cloud rises up from upon the Mishkan. They then follow the cloud until it stops, indicating the place of their next encampment. When the first of the tribes begins to move, the Mishkan is taken down and the Leviim set off, too. Upon arrival at their next encampment, the Mishkan is immediately erected. The Kehatiim (one of the three Levite families), carrying the Aron, the Shulchan, the Menorah, and the two Mizbeachs set out a bit later than the other Leviim, so that when they arrive the Mishkan is already set up.

The Torah goes into some detail on how frequently this might occur. It might be a long time between travels or a short time; it might be that they encamp overnight and move on the next morning, or they might stay in a place for the day and the following night and then move on, or two days, or a month, or a year. (From elsewhere in the Torah we know that the longest time they spent in a single place was 19 years.) They traveled when Hashem told them to (by raising the cloud up off of the Mishkan) and encamped when and where Hashem directed them.

Each time they camped the Mishkan was erected and everything was put into place. Even if they arrived in the evening and were to leave the following morning, they unloaded those heavy giant beams off the wagons, set them up and spread the coverings over them, put up the outer perimeter fence, and unpacked all the furnishings. This was a huge project. There was not much that could be done at night in



the Mishkan anyway, other than to let the lamps of the Menorah burn. In the morning it would have to be taken down and loaded back up on the wagons. But, for the moment, this is the place of encampment for the Jewish people and the Mishkan needs to be erected.

We have told stories in the past ([see Tazria-Metzora Speech](#)) of the escape of hundreds of Lubavitch families from the oppression of the Soviet Union in the aftermath of World War II by feigning Polish citizenship. From Poland they made their way to Western Europe and to the DP camps in the American zone of conquered Germany. They were thrilled to be free, and free to serve Hashem. Wherever they “landed,” they immediately set up Yeshivas for their children, shuls and all the other institutions of religious Jewish communal life. The DP camps were meant to house refugees until they were able to move on with their lives in a permanent way. This was a challenge for many of them as they had no proper papers and were stateless. Gaining entry and residency in the United States was not easy. Gradually, at the direction of the Previous Rebbe many of them found their way to new homes, in Israel where they founded Kfar Chabad, in the United States, and in other countries to which they were sent by the Previous Rebbe such as far off Australia. And, those who could not get through the bureaucratic mazes that quickly, also gradually relocated out of the DP camps in Paris and nearby suburbs. Wherever they “landed” they immediately set up Yeshivas etc.

In 1952, nearly six years after having left Russia, there were still many living their lives on hold, waiting in France for some permanent resolution for residence, employment and citizenship in some country. That year, after Pesach, the Rebbe wrote a letter to the young men in the Yeshiva on the outskirts of Paris. He writes that he hears that they are finding it difficult to focus on the studies because of the uncertainty of their future. The Rebbe cites a teaching of the Previous Rebbe on the travels of the Jewish people through the desert as we just described. Wherever a Jew finds himself, he knows that he is there because Hashem has put him there, just as the Jews in the desert who traveled and camped at Hashem’s explicit direction. And, wherever a person is for the moment, he must see that as a permanent, settled place and treat it as such, just as the Mishkan was set up even for a brief overnight stay. And, therefore, while their concern about their future is understandable, they have to be able to live in the moment, and as Yeshiva students they have to focus on their Torah studies without being distracted by thoughts of what their future might be.



Interestingly, in another related Sicha, the Rebbe references a Gemara which reinforces this insight. In tractate Eruvin there is discussion of the Techum Shabbos – the limit on how far a person may go on Shabbos (a “mil” - about a kilometer). If a person is in a city, then we begin measuring the distance from the outer perimeter of the city. If a person lives alone in the countryside then the measuring begins from the door of the house. If a person lives in a tent (a temporary structure), even if there is a whole tent city, the measuring is done from the individual tent and not from the end of the tent city.

The Gemara challenges this last rule from the Jews in the desert. The Gemara explains that the lavatories were located outside the camp at the rear. The entire length of camp was 12 “mil” so if someone at the head of the camp had to go to the lavatories he would have to go almost 13 “mil” – 12 for the length of the camp and then continue further to where the lavatories were situated. Now, they were living in tents, so the Techum should be measured from the entrance of each tent. If so, other than those who lived towards the very rear of the camp, no one should have been able to get to the lavatories on Shabbos? The Gemara responds, “You are talking about the tents of the Jews in the desert!? Since they camped on Hashem’s instructions they are considered permanent homes (and therefore form a city)!”

Actually, we need to be able to live in the moment even when we are actually in transit. I distinctly remember much of a farbrengen on Tuesday afternoon, January 27, 1970, when I was a young teen. Although I don’t remember in detail many of the Rebbe’s farbrengens at which I was present, this one was especially memorable. It was at an unusual time, midafternoon, on a day which was not normally an occasion for a farbrengen, 20th of Shevat. The Rebbe held the farbrengen to say farewell to the many Chasidim who had come to mark Yud Shvat ten days earlier and were now returning home. Many of them were departing that evening on an El Al flight to Israel. And, just before they left to the airport, the Rebbe called a surprise farbrengen to see them off.

During the course of that farbrengen, the Rebbe noted with a smile that people are looking at their watches concerned that the farbrengen will continue on too long and they will miss their flight. The people who are too polite to look at their watches are even more distracted, because, not knowing the time, they imagine it is later than it really is, so they are even more concerned about missing their flight. So, the Rebbe told a story:



This took place before the Previous Rebbe was arrested by the Soviets in 1927 and was subsequently forced out of the country. In the months and years leading up to that, he was under constant surveillance by the secret police. One night, he was supposed to travel to Moscow from Leningrad where he lived at the time. Travel then was fraught with danger, and his travel for “nefarious” purposes was even more dangerous. A short while before his departure to the train station, the Rebbe walked into the study of the Previous Rebbe, his father-in-law. He was surprised to see him deeply engrossed in a matter which required intense focus. He asked, “How can you do that at a time like this?”

The Previous Rebbe replied that there is a concept called “Hatzlacha b’zman” – “success with time.” It is impossible to create more time, but it is possible to be more successful with the time which one has. He cited the example of the Rashba (a noted 13th century scholar), who gave 3 lectures a day, wrote thousands of halachic responsa, practiced medicine and saw patients every day, and had time to go for a constitutional each day. How did he accomplish so much? Because, when he engaged in a task he was fully focused on the matter at hand, to the exclusion of anything else, no matter how important.

The Rebbe concluded that while at the farbrengen one has to be fully there, and flights and airplanes don’t exist at the moment. But, he added, since not everyone is capable of that, he assures them that he will conclude the farbrengen soon and they will have enough time to gather up their luggage and head to the airport,

Back when “stay-at-home” was novel it was relatively easy to temporarily shift into a new reality of life. But, now that it has dragged on for three months, with promises of easing in the near future (and even the beginning of a limited minyan) while at the same time there is also no definite end in sight, we may become impatient and unable to wait for the next phase to begin.

A message from this week’s Parsha is that wherever we are along this curve, we are precisely where Hashem wants us now, and we have to live in this moment as the only reality which exists for us at this moment. Through successfully making maximum use of this moment in the way that Hashem wants of us, we will merit to move on to the next moment and the next phase and the next stage with the coming of Moshiach NOW!

