**Mattot & Masei – 5782**

This week, had we been following the traditions of old, established while in exile in Babylonia after the destruction of the first temple, we’d be reading two parshiot. To address the question, first of why we sometimes double up like that, remember that our Jewish calendar is based upon the phases of the moon and meant to coincide with the agricultural basis of life in the Holy Land in biblical times. However, as you might be aware already, that calendar is notoriously in conflict with that of the non-biblical cultures. The time when we observed the harvest festivals would be notoriously out of kilter. The same problem had to be dealt with by the other ancient cultures. The Moslems didn’t deal with it. Ramadan, their month of annual fasting by day and feasting by night, can occur at any time of the year. We Jews came up with a completely different solution. We added a whole extra month. The month of Adar is doubled up to become Adar Aleph and Bet, which we know makes it a leap year. This ought not to be confused with the concept of leap year we now regulate our lives to. Science has established that we need to add one day every four years to keep the natural cycles in synch with the seasons.

Once the leap month was established, the Babylonians and then the Israelites upon return to Jerusalem in freedom, had to figure out how to adjust the reading cycle of the Torah from year to year so it fit into some pattern and made sense religiously. I do not intend on expounding upon why the rabbis determined that we had to be at very particular spot in the Torah reading cycle before Tisha B’Av but that’s why these two parshiot are combined most often. Tisha B’Av is of course the fast day in which we remember the destruction of the first and second temples. It is the only summer observance of consequence, but it has to coincide with specific Haftorot as determined by the rabbis to drive home to mourning over the destruction of the temples and then the consolation of moving forward with our lives. So here we are reading the two of them together and you will note the Haftorot explain in their introductions their relationship to the arrival and departure of the fast.

The two parshiot bring us to the end of Bamidbar, the fourth book of the Torah, and the beginning of Devarim next week. Since the events covered by the chapters of the last book deal with the review by Moses of the laws and commandments which already, in the last Parsha, Pinchas, he passed over to Joshua, in Masei, Moshe reviews the years of wandering in the desert by the children of Israel. My wife always asks me where I get the ideas for my Divrei Torah, and I can’t honestly give a simple answer. This week, as I was thinking about what to write about, I was reminded almost immediately of a course I took in Modern English Literature in which the book Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad was included. I was not lucky enough to benefit from not one single teacher of English up to that point who loved the subject enough to actually know deeply what they were teaching. But when I took this course, it was the first time someone had drawn attention to the fact the good literature has to be studied on at least two levels. There is the story line which we read of and the themes of the writer that are explored in the pages of the book. It was a revelation to me when it was pointed out that the use of the ocean or a river in a novel or play is meant to conjur up the voyage we take as individuals through life. Lord Jim is all about a voyage on the ocean and, on the more profound level, the boat floating on water is meant to imply man floating through life. Same applies to images from The African Queen with Katherine Hepburn floating down the river with Humphrey Bogart. Or how about Peter O’Toole on his motorcycle at the beginning and the end of Lawrence of Arabia.

The mind works in strange ways, and I thought of these images as I envisaged Moses sitting the children of Israel down and reviewing with them their journey in very specific detail through the desert from Egypt to the Holy Land. One has to wonder where the names came from and how he did it without a map, but nevertheless, the rabbis drew this same analogy – the journey from slavery to freedom as a way of us conjuring up the memory of the times when HaShem was there for us and the times when we complained bitterly that we had been taken from slavery.

I admit to sometimes in days hopefully long past, when I was troubled by the events of the day, when I would review in my head the times when I felt that I had been uplifted by friendships and episodes that left me feeling good about myself. We each of us have our own ways of dealing with insomnia but I found reflecting on the things that I could be thankful about made the troubles before me seem more surmountable. I overcame this so I’ll be fine when I figure out how to overcome that. Or I dealt with that nonsense, so I’ll figure out how to deal with this too. Usually, this strategy helped me to fall asleep.

In a way, that is what Mattot is all about. The Children of Israel know that Moses is not crossing the Jordan with them. They know that Joshua is taking over the reins of leadership. At such times, no one would be surprised if there was disquiet and fear. But HaShem, through the words of Moshe, is showing the children of Israel all that they have experienced and all the lessons that they have learned will stand them in good stead as they finally do what they were meant to feel afraid of doing when the spies first returned with word of the dangers ahead when they went into the promised land. It is fitting then that when we finished today, we said Chazak, Chazak, Ve Nitchazeak. May we be strengthened by our reading of Torah and have confidence in the days ahead for HaShem is with us. Those are the same thoughts said at every funeral in our tradition. The Lord is my Shepherd, I Shall not want.