

Mattot / Masei – 5783

This Shabbat, if we were following the traditional Torah reading annual cycle, we'd still be reading from the Torah at this time. We'd have to have read from Chapter 30, Verse 2 all the way to the end of the book of Bemidbar, Chapter 36, verse 13. I'll return to the length of the Torah reading each Shabbat and its significance in individual participation in the service over-all later, but it doesn't take much thinking to imagine how much Torah we would have read. One has to ask the question of why do we sometimes read a double parsha? Sometimes, it is to ensure we cover the full Five Books of Moses between Simchat Torah one year and the next. But sometimes, it is to ensure that we are at a particular place at a particular time and this week, that's the reason. We have to be at beginning of the Book of Devarim before Tisha B'Av. This week we say the appropriate prayer to announce the month of Av next week. So, mission accomplished.

We read Parshat Mattot and Parshat Masei this week. I have spoken from the pulpit before of the various ways the rabbis interpret scriptures. Sometimes it depends upon the plain meaning, which means what do the words actually say and sometimes it is about the words and where else they are used. When we apply the former interpretation on the names of the parshiot alone, Mattot which means tribes and Masei which means wanderings, we can easily see the connections. In Mattot we review the status of the tribes and where they are going to stake out their claims in the promised land, among other things. But in Masei we review the wanderings of Am Yisrael, the people of Israel, during their 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai. I wish to make some connections between the two parshiot from their names and how they might be related.

The names of the parshiot usually are found within the first verse that we read on a Shabbat morning and this week is no exception. Seldom do we have to go more

than two or three words into the reading before we are confronted by the actual name of the parsha and, in each and every case, there is significance to the content in the name. So Masei documents the wanderings to and fro in Sinai and often touches on places that have never been really covered elsewhere in the text. One of the rabbis whose commentary I consulted this week focusses on one of the place names, Macha'alot that is mentioned in the parsha. Rabbi Elie Kaufner points out that this word only appears a couple of times in the entire Torah but it we use it every Shabbat when we are finished with the Shema and just before we move from Psukei DeZimra to the Shacharit Service. In the Torah, the word is translated as to praise HaShem, but it is further embellished because of its use in the Torah to extend the meaning to include to praise HaShem with Joyous Spirit. We use this same word when reciting Nish mat Kol Chai. WE sing on Shabbat to Praise HaShem with a Joyous Spirit, in other words. Just before we begin our Shacharit service, at about 9:50.

Okay, so why am I focussing on this? And what does it have to do with the names of the Parshiot that we are reading? Mattot means tribes and in that parsha, we read about the request of the tribes of Menashe and Ephraim to claim the land just outside of the boundaries of the Holy Land and their promise to fight on behalf of the rest of the tribes to reclaim the land and resettle it as per the agreement with HaShem. This part of the parsha draws attention to the fact that, although we have been referring to the Children of Israel, or the People of Israel, they are actually a collection of twelve tribes and each of those tribes are very different in their needs and their expectations. Think about the blessing Jacob delivers on his deathbed to his twelve sons at the end of Exodus. We know in advance that each tribe is different.

In the legacy of divrei Torah that Rabbi Jonathan Saks left behind upon his death, in one of his commentaries for Mattot, he points out that today modern Israel and the Jews who live in the diaspora are all very different, one from the next. The composition and needs of the Jews of Canada is very different from those of the

United States and yet again different from the Jews of France or the U. K... We read daily in the Israeli press about the differences between the various communities in modern Israel, the North African versus the Ethiopian versus the French, or the English or the American. Every “tribe” is different, but at some point, the Torah teaches that we are all part of Am Yisrael. WE are supposed to think about Am Yisrael, not our tribe or our geopolitical roots.

This brings me back to the transition from Psukei DeZimra to Shochein Ad Marom VeKadosh Shemo. We are reminded in those transitional verses that we are to sing in one loud voice our praise of HaShem. When I thought about this, I thought about what it was like for me to come to shul as a young person and I bring this back to the reading of an overly double Parsha in shul on a Shabbat morning. The way in which our ancestors got through all of this was to go at it a double speed. I used to come to shul on Shabbat morning and feel left out of the davening because it was over before it was begun, and I never participated. I’d go to a Shiva house and what was said during prayers when right over the top of my head. I could say that back then we praised HaShem with one voice. I determined to make it different, and I continue to do that. The rabbis point out that we are meant to pray to Hashem to acknowledge his power over our lives. To acknowledge that we are NOT the centre of the world but owe our existence to HaShem. WE cannot pray about our role in the universe if we cannot participate in the prayers at all. So, I therefore have always done my best to facilitate participation. I could very easily ignore everyone else’s needs and zip through morning services in half the time that it takes. But what good will it do for you and what need does it fulfill. If we are going to make the effort to come to shul, we might as well all make sure our presence is known. We might as well sing in a joyous and fulsome voice that we understand we are not the centre around which all life centres but subject to the whims of fortune which HaShem has more control over us. I like to think that when we daven together, we are singing in

one fulsome voice and we are acknowledging that although we are all different, we are all the same in our devotion to our people and acknowledge the role of HaShem in our lives. I hope in this you agree with me. Shabbat Shalom.