

## **Mattot-Masei 5781** **Logging our lives**

This week we reach the end of the Torah.

Wait, what? But there is still a whole other book to go!

Well, yes, there is. But that book, as its Greek-into-English name suggests, is a re-versioning of what has gone before (deutero + nomos = second law). Moses gives a three-month monologue to the people as they stand gathered on the plains of Moab. And while there are a number of new laws in this section, the Torah's geographical journeys have come to an end at this point.

Parashat Mas'ei is named for these journeys. A record of them is recited. Translated into English, they sound a lot like the kind of endless song my sister Judith used to share from the back seat of the car when she was very little:

*First we were at home  
and now we're in the car  
and the sky is blue  
and we're going to Grandma's for lunch  
and Mummy is here...*

...you get the idea.

In a similar way, some traditions sing the record of the journeys to a special tune. Known as the 'traveling tune,' it's also sometimes used for the passages of the Song at the Sea - the first journey - that mention the Holy One by name. By singing the landmarks we reconstruct the journey.

But there's an important difference between the way the Torah narrates the journey and the way my sister did it. The Torah puts the journey in the past, while Judith was narrating the present.

Things happen when we put a journey into the past. One of those things is that our perspectives on it alter. Linking places together changes and blurs the relationship between them. We've seen that especially over the past year in the way that time has shot by for us, like passing exits on the freeway.

But by contrast, if we take the trouble to narrate a journey in the present, it can be very revealing.

When I was a lawyer, I carried a blue hardback notebook everywhere with me. In it I recorded everything I did as a series of six-minute units, ten to an hour, so that I could create accurate time sheets for the billing at the end of the month. But even without that incentive, there's a contemporary practice called 'logging our lives' that can be very interesting. It's not complicated. It simply involves writing down everything - *everything* - that we do in a day for a day or two or three and then looking back on it.

Back in the 1920s, experimenters from Harvard wanted to boost productivity at a factory in Chicago. They changed the lighting, the temperature, the duration of breaks and other factors. Productivity improved; but changing things back again gave rise to the same results. It appeared that just the fact of being observed was enough to make people behave differently.

And while the study itself - it came to be known as the Hawthorne effect - fell into disrepute, it turns out that placing ourselves, individually, under close observation does seem to change our behavior. In contrast to the journeys of the Torah - place after place slipping by to the same tune with only a little detail every now and then - if we slow down and log our lives, action by action and fact by fact, we are able to notice both our productive and our unproductive behaviors.

And of course Judaism has had this idea already. Today is Rosh Hodesh Av and we read the second of the 'haftarot of retribution' - one more, and we will be at Tisha B'Av, which Rabbi Alan Lew taught is the true start of the High Holydays. One more after that and we will be at the beginning of the haftarot of comfort. Six more, and we'll be at Rosh Hashanah. Already the calendar is calling to us to attention.

So let me put out there that as preparation for the season of *teshuvah* this year - and perhaps also as an antidote to the way that last year slipped or drifted or crawled by - we might want to start logging our lives. Just to pay attention for a day or two to our journey as it's happening. Just to be able to notice patterns and themes.

Because noting the present is one way that we can change the future.

Shabbat shalom.