



Leaving Egypt: Torah Reflections on *Parashat Mattot-Masei*

Numbers 30:2 – 36:13
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I am speaking with Nancy, a woman who about to end her chemotherapy treatment for breast cancer. Nancy is both extremely happy to be at the end of the treatment, and terrified that she will no longer be “fighting” this disease. After three years of surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation she could not trust that her cancer is fully eradicated, and could not believe that her doctor told her that all she has to do now is come in for mammograms every six months. Here she is being freed from all of these painful treatments, but she is not sure what it is she is free to do.

When the Israelites leave Egypt, they face a similar dilemma. They are freed from the oppression that they had known all of their lives, but once in the desert, they do not know how to trust Moses or God as their leaders. Like Nancy, they do not know what to do with their new found freedom.

As we read the Book of Numbers, we chart the Israelites’ journey from Sinai to Israel. Time and again, we hear the Israelites complaining about being in the desert. There is not enough water, not enough food. They rebel against God and Moses. They feel lost. But as their journey continues, the twelve tribes start to form their own identities. In the last two portions of the Book of Numbers, Mattot and Masei, the tribes realize that they are about to settle in their own land. Laws about how the land is to be passed from generation to generation are set up. Cities of refuge for people who accidentally kill someone else are established. Following the initiative of the daughters of Zelophehad, it is ruled that women can inherit land. Tribal identity and community begin to grow. Each person in each tribe begins to understand their role and importance in the greater Israelite community.

The book of Numbers ends with the proclamation, “These are the commandments and regulations that the Lord enjoined upon the Israelites, through Moses, on the steppes of Moab, at the Jordan near Jericho” (Numb. 36:13). After forty years in the desert, the wandering, landless people are about to enter their homeland. They now have a path and direction to follow. Moses is their accepted leader, and they are ready to enter the next phase of their lives.

Nancy is at a threshold. She is about to leave Egypt, but she is not sure where her homeland is. She realizes that she cannot return to her life “B.C.,” before cancer. Her experience over the past three years has changed her forever. This dilemma is faced by many cancer survivors, people with chronic illnesses, and those who have come through other life-transforming experiences. How do you continue on with your life in this new state?

Every individual will find his or her own answer to this question. The lesson to be learned in the Book of Numbers is in many ways a simple one: Life is a journey, but as long as you keep going you will, with Gods help, find your own identity, community and homeland. Though she is scared, Nancy is ready to enter this next phase of her life. Her encounter with death taught her what to prioritize in her life. She is planning her first family vacation in three years, and looks forward to spending special, playful time with her five year old son.

At the conclusion of reading a book of the Torah we say the words, “*Hazak, Hazak, v’Nit-hazek*” “Strength, Strength, May we continue in Strength.” I said these words to Nancy at the conclusion of her last treatment. May we all move forward in strength!

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This Torah Reflection was written by Rabbi Rebecca W. Sirbu, Director of Membership and Engagement at Hadassah. Gracious support is provided by the Jewish Community Federation and Endowment Fund. More information and healing-oriented resources can be found at www.JewishHealingCenter.org.