

These Are the Travels

Herb Levine

THE JOURNEY THROUGH THE WILDERNESS, WITH its many way-stations, is cantillated with a special trop, which marks the significance of this thirty-eight year passage in the history of the Jewish people. Yet even when sung with this trop, we hear it as an interminable list of places that we can't quite place, for they are lost in an unknown desert, covered over by millennia of sandstorms. But what if all these place names had significance? What if the Hebrew of the place names, like that of so many personal names, told a story? In that case, the *meturgaman*, the ritual translator who renders the ancient, foreign script into the listening audience's vernacular, might want to put the journey in something like the following words:

Eileh masei B'nai Yisrael — Parents and children, households, clans, tribes, walking with their sheep and goats, bearing the old and young in slow ox-carts, carrying at most a week's rations, also the gold and silver plunder of Mitzrayim, they set out from the storehouse city they had been building for Pharaoh Rameses and camped at a place covered with thickets, like booths, Sukkot;

from Thickets like Booths, they traveled and camped at the outer fortifications, Etom;

from Outer Fortifications, they traveled and camped at Pi Ha-Hirot, the Mouth of Burning Angers, *al tikri*, do not read, Pi Ha-Hirot, but Pi Ha-Herut, the Mouth of Freedom, which faced the mountain, Baal Tzafon, Master of the North, do not read, *Tzafon*, but *tzafun*, Hidden Master, whom you will know by the sign of Migdal, Tower;

they traveled from Mouth of Burning Tower Hiding Freedom and camped at Bitterness, Marah;

they traveled from Bitterness to Elim, did they see divine beings

there? Or was it the *elot*, the terebinth trees, or the seventy date palms fed by twelve springs, which made the place seem a garden of God?

From Elim, Divine Place of Lofty Trees, they traveled and camped at the Sea of Reeds, Yam Suf, do not read *suf* but *sof*, end, for they could easily have met their end were it not for their Deliverer at the Sea;

they traveled from the Sea Where They Could Easily Have Met Their End and camped at Midbar Sin, Wilderness of Clay and Mud, where they found manna when they walked out in the morning dew;

they traveled from Wilderness of Clay and Mud and camped at a place so beaten down and knocked about they called it Dofka;

from Beaten Down and Knocked About, they traveled and camped at Alush, unleashing *alot*, swears, curses, wailings, oaths;

from Swears, Curses, Wailings and Oaths, they traveled and camped at Refidim (plural of *refidah*, palanquin, a covered litter fit for a king) where there was no water, only complaints;

from Covered Litters Fit for a King, they traveled and camped at Midbar Sinai, where, from the burning thorn, *sneh*, the voice of Sinai first spoke, there indeed was *midbar midaber*, a Talking Wilderness to Moshe and *b'nei Yisrael*;

from Talking Wilderness of Thorn Bush Become Sinai, they traveled and camped and wanted meat so badly that the place became the grave of their appetite, Kivrot Ha-ta'avah;

from Graves of Appetite they traveled and camped at a caravanserai, an open courtyard, with buildings on four sides, Hatzerot;

from Caravanserai Suites they traveled and camped at Ritmah, where broom-plants gave the place its name;

from Broom-Plants they traveled and camped at Rimon Paretz, Burst Pomegranate (O for a bar serving fresh pomegranate drinks at a desert spa!);

from Burst Pomegranate, they traveled and camped at Livnah, read Levonah, where they found frankincense from the Arabian trade;

from Frankincense they traveled and camped at Reesah, read Rise-ah, sang Rise and shine and gave God the glory;

from Rise-ah they traveled and camped at Kehelata, they, the **kahal**, Moshe, their Kohelet, assembling them;

from Assembly they traveled and camped at Mountain of Beauty, Har Shefer, remembered Shifrah, looked into the future for Shapiros;

from Mountain of Beauty, they traveled and camped at Hareda, full of trembling, fear and anxiety;

from Trembling with Fear and Anxiety, they traveled and camped at Makhelot, where they sang like birds;

from bare, ruin'd Choirs, where late the sweet birds sang, they traveled and camped at Bottom, Tachat;

from Bottom they traveled up (how else?) and camped at Terach, ibex on the hill;

from Ibex Hill they traveled and camped at Sweetness, Mitkah, how *matok* was that spring;

from Sweetness, they traveled and camped at Oil Source, *shemen*, (the word is buried in Hashmonah — would that they had drilled for buried treasure there!);

from Oil Source, they traveled and camped at Ties that Bind, Moserot, where *meserot ha-berit*, traditions of the covenant, were remembered and arranged;

from Ties that Bind, they traveled and camped with their Edomite cousins, the Ya'akans, where family ties had all but unbound;

from the Ya'akans, they traveled and camped in Coriander Hollow, Chor ha-Gidgad;

from Coriander Hollow, remember that taste? they traveled and camped in a place so good that its name has *tov* in it, Yotvata, Pleasantness;

from Pleasantness they traveled to Avronah, where they camped and crossed over;

from Crossing Over, they traveled and camped in the Great Forest, Etzion Gaver, long gone from the shores of Elat, its trees felled to build Solomon's ships;

from Great Forest, they traveled through another Wilderness of Thorns, Midbar Tzin, read also *tzon*, where they grazed their flocks, camping at Qadesh, a sanctuary among springs, set apart for holiness and cleansing — *qadesh u'rehatz*;

from there, the spies left bravely and timidly returned; there, the people complained to Moshe for water; there, Moshe hit the rock and brought forth *mei merivah*, Waters of Quarrel; there, the people tried Moshe's patience while trying out God's laws;

from Qadesh, Place Set Apart for Holiness, they traveled and camped at

Hor ha-har, the Mountain Mountain, on the edge of Edom, where Aaron died;
 from Mountain Mountain, they traveled and camped at Tzalmonah,
 the shadow-maker;

from Shadow-Maker, they traveled and camped at Corners, so to
 speak, *panu l'pinah shel Punon*;

from Corners, they traveled and camped at Water-Skins (also
 witches), Ovot;

from Water-Skins or Witches, they traveled and camped at Foothills
 of Crossing, Iyyay ha-Avarim;

from Foothills of Crossing, they traveled and camped where
 Moabites, also cousins, from Lot and his daughters, celebrated their god of
 good fortune, Divon Gad;

from Their God of Good Fortune, they traveled and camped at the
 priestly city where Moab assembled, Almon d'Vlatayma;

from Priestly City of Assembly, they traveled and camped at the
 mountain of crossing, Har Ha-Avarim, do not read *avarim*, but *ivrim*,
 Hebrews, which was near Nevo, the mountain of God's *navi* (no prophet like
 him), which Moshe ascended to look out on the land he could never enter;

from Mountain of the Crossing Hebrews they traveled along the
 plains of Moab camped across from fragrant Yerecho, with its rose-gardens
 and balsam oil, walled city by the running-down river, Yarden, where they
 stretched twelve miles from House of Desolation, Bet Ha-Yeshimot, near the
 desolate Salt Sea, to the place of mourning — *avel* — or was it meadow —
avel — where acacias grow, Avel Shittim, that Shittim where their fathers
 frolicked with Moabite, or was it Midianite, whores? Perhaps it is also that Avel
 Mitzrayim, where their great-great grandfathers, coming back from Egypt to
 C'na'an, had mourned their father Ya'akov, two hundred and seventy years
 before. How fitting that they carry with them, to that place, the bones of his
 beloved Yosef.

HERB LEVINE offered this piece as a *d'var torah* at *Minyan Masorti* of the *Germantown Jewish Centre* in Northwest Philadelphia. He previously contributed to Kerem a piece co-authored with Ellen Frankel, "The Broken Tablets and the Whole."