

## **Sermon by Rabbi Eliezer Hirsch**

### **Matot-Masei 20 - “Meaningful Moments”**

Good Shabbos. Shabbat shalom. First, I'd like to acknowledge that this week's sermon is sponsored by Ellen & Sharon Geller, in commemoration of the yahrtzeit of their mother, Dorothy Geller (Devorah bat Yosef). May her memory be a blessing.

It happens that this week's double parsha, Matot-Masei, is my bar mitzvah parsha. Ever since I was a bar mitzvah boy, I've bragged about the fact that it's the longest possible Torah reading in the yearly cycle -- 240 verses -- and I did the entire thing myself. Of course, the people who attended my bar mitzvah didn't appreciate that so much, because bar mitzvah boys tend to lain very slowly, and with the longest parsha in the Torah, you sure don't have any chance of getting out of shul early. But one aspect of this double parsha actually made it easier than other parshiot. Much of it is just a long list of places, since it recounts every location where the Jewish people camped in the desert. So even though some of the names are difficult to pronounce, the cantillation, the trop, is relatively easy. On top of that, the verses are very short, so the total length is not as long as it seems.

So, our Sages ask, why **does** the Torah recap the location of every place the Jewish people camped? In response, Rashi brings the words of the midrash that compares the Torah's narrative to a story in which a king takes an arduous trip with his sickly son to consult a doctor. Following his son's recovery, he reminisces with him about all the difficult phases of their journey together. In the same way, God was reminiscing with the Jewish people about all the troubles they endured on their journey through the desert.

But that explanation still begs the question, what's the **purpose** of the reminiscence? Most of the events were negative, so why would God want to rehash them with us? I think it was because of a paradoxical truth about relationships – that our bonds deepen and grow the most when we are faced with difficulties and work through them together. But this occurs only if we choose to take a positive outlook. If we look at our experiences negatively, the stressful times will just lead to resentment and alienation.

This insight reminds me of a d'var Torah I heard from Rabbi Shimon Schwab zt'l, the chief rabbi of the German Jewish American community in Baltimore and Washington Heights.

In the summer shortly before he died, he visited Camp Moodis, where I was one of several Yeshiva students who served as tutors for the secular college students interested in learning more about Judaism. At the time, Rabbi Schwab was about to publish his now well-known work on the chumash, *Maayan Beit ha-Sho'eva*, and he told us his d'var Torah on Parshat Masei. He spoke about the story of the daughters of Tzafchad, who asked to inherit their father's share in the land of Israel, since he had no sons. God granted their request, but they were later asked to marry within their own tribe of Menashe, in order to prevent another tribe from receiving the inheritance. Rabbi Schwab asked, why were they **asked**? Why weren't they **commanded** to do so? Rabbi Schwab explained that you can't **command** someone to marry, because a relationship must be a **choice**. There can be no rulebook when it comes to relationships – and it's up to you to decide which way a relationship will go, positive or negative.

This week I heard a story about Rabbi Mordechai Gifter, the famed Rosh Yeshiva of the Telz Yeshiva in Cleveland, Ohio. He was staying in Monsey, NY and wasn't feeling well, so his host decided to make a minyan in the house where Rabbi Gifter was staying over Shabbat.

They brought in a Torah and asked a certain young man who was a ba'al koreh, a Torah reader, to laining. Ordinarily, he was adept at laining, but it happened that he was unfamiliar with the parsha that week, so he demurred, since he was reluctant to embarrass himself in front of Rabbi Gifter. However, when it became clear that no one else could laining, the young man agreed. He started out ok, but he totally blew the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the parsha, and he was mortified about the numerous mistakes he had made. A few months later, he attended a wedding and noticed Rabbi Gifter there, chatting with another famous Rabbi, Rav Avraham Pam, the Rosh Yeshiva of Torah Vodaas in Brooklyn. Still embarrassed about his laining, the young man tried to hide, but Rabbi Gifter called him over and said enthusiastically to Rabbi Pam, *I want to introduce you to my personal bal koreh.* The fellow commented later that Rabbi Gifter's kind words had made him feel validated and proud. This anecdote exemplifies the power of viewing a negative incident within the context of relationship and casting it in a positive light. Of course, Rabbi Gifter could not change the technical facts about their initial interaction, but with his warm, personal words, he transformed the lainer's embarrassment into a positive feeling.

We've all been going through a very complicated, difficult situation for several months now, which in many ways is beyond our control. Nonetheless, we do have choices. We can choose to dwell on the additional frustrations and stress we experience in our relationships during this period. Or instead, we could look on these times as a challenge that will, in the end, create memorable moments within our relationships. It is up to us to make that choice. If we do make that positive choice, we can deepen our bonds with one another and transform our hardships into meaningful moments that in the future will hopefully be worth reminiscing about. Shabbat Shalom.