The Past as Prelude:Thoughts for Matot-Masei

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Angel for Shabbat, Matot Masei

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It is said that when Alexander the Great reached the peak of his career by conquering the entire known world—he broke down and cried.

One explanation for his crying is that he realized that there were no more battles for him to undertake. His best achievements were in the past. He had climbed to the top and had nowhere else to go. He cried in frustration.

Another explanation is that he realized that his tremendous accomplishment really amounted to very little. Earth is a speck in the universe; even if one were to rule the entire earth, there was a vast universe over which he did not rule. Moreover, humans are mortal; whatever we accomplish, however impressive, is short lived. In a thousand years or a million years—who will know or care what we've done? What difference will it have made? Thus, Alexander cried at the sheer vanity of life, the ultimate emptiness of his life's deeds.

How can we live happy and productive lives—and not break down crying like Alexander did? This week's Torah portion offers some guidance.

Parashat Masei records each of the stopping places of the Israelites during their 40 year trek in the wilderness. The Midrash explains that this detailed account reflects God's loving concern for the children of Israel. It is compared to a king who had taken his ailing child to a distant place in order to be cured. On the return journey, the king would stop at each resting place and remind his child: this is where we found shelter; this is where we cooled off at an oasis; this is where you had a head ache. Each place evoked memories and created a deeper bond between the king and his child.

But the recounting of past stopping places was not a mere experience of nostalgia. Rather, it was coupled with the knowledge that we are now going home, that we are looking forward to a bright future with new challenges and

opportunities.

The Israelites, in meticulously reviewing their past travels, were also anticipating their entry into the Promised Land.

Jewish tradition teaches us to review our past and to recount our historical achievements: but it teaches us to do so without breaking down and crying as did Alexander the Great. Judaism imbues us with a sense that every day has meaning, that we can grow and attain something new and better. Life is not a rut or a routine; we are not trapped or locked in one place. No matter how much we have accomplished, we have not reached the end of our possibilities. There is a Promised Land ahead.

We do not succumb to the frustration or despair that confronted Alexander the Great, because we have a different orientation to the meaning of life. We are not here to achieve egotistical goals such as fame and power, but to serve God and humanity. Greatness is not measured by the number of lines one receives in history books, but by the myriad small deeds of kindness and charity and goodness that we have performed, by our positive impact on family, friends, and society.

The detailed description of the Israelites' travels in the wilderness reminds us of the importance of the past stages of our lives. It also serves to call our attention to the future, to the Promised Land, to the goals not yet attained. Just as we are strengthened by our past, we are energized by the hopes for our future.

Angel for Shabbat