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Angel for Shabbat—Matot/Masei

By Rabbi Marc D. Angel

In John Steinbeck's story, "The Leader of the People," an old man is fixated on his past role leading a wagon train across America in the 19th century. He endlessly repeats stories of his adventures, much to the annoyance of his son-in-law. His daughter is more sympathetic; she understands that the meaning of her father's life was bound to his journey across the country. His heart must have sunk when he first caught sight of the Pacific Ocean; the goal had been reached. There was nowhere further to go. The highlight of his life was in the past.

A lesson: the journey itself is ultimately more valuable—in certain ways—than achieving the goal. As long as the journey continues, there is excitement, anticipation, hope.

This week's Torah reading concludes the first four books of the Bible. Fittingly, the last parasha is entitled Masei—journeys. In a sense, the entire first four books of the Torah describe a journey, beginning with the history of humanity, the emergence of the People of Israel and its unique relationship with God, and the experiences from slavery to redemption to forty years wandering in the wilderness. With parashat Masei, they are reaching the conclusion of their journey as they ready themselves to enter the Promised Land. The last book of the Torah, Devarim, is essentially Moses's recap of the history and laws as recorded in the first four books.

It is noteworthy that the Torah is centered on the role of the journey; it does not include new chapters about the Israelites actually entering the Promised Land. In our religious tradition, we celebrate the redemption from Egypt on Pessah, the Revelation at Sinai on Shavuoth, and God's providence over Israel in the wilderness on Succoth. We don't have a festival celebrating the day Israel entered the Promised Land.

Tractate Berakhot ends with a passage declaring that Torah scholars have no peace, not in this world and not in the next world. They are constantly involved in facing new challenges; they go "mehayil el hayil," from one battle to the next, from strength to strength. They thrive because they stay in process, moving from one goal to the next. The message is true for all who wish to live productive forward-looking lives: keep moving, keep engaged. When you reach one goal, immediately set out on your way to a new goal.

The old man in Steinbeck's story hit a psychological block and couldn't get beyond it. He had achieved something great in the past but he didn't go "from strength to strength." The journey of his life was in the past, and now he was simply marking time remembering and retelling stories of the old times.

The Torah teaches us not to fall into that situation. We are to see life as a journey with an unfolding road ahead. When we reach one goal, we should then look ahead to our next goal. Once we stop this process, our lives stagnate and regress into the past.