

Mattot Masei 5785

Ibn Ezra on Numbers 33:1

THESE ARE THE STAGES. Moses recorded all the journeys of the Israelites when the children of Israel camped in the plains of Moab and stayed there for a number of months, until the afore-mentioned cities were built. They did not move from there until Aaron died.

Ramban on Numbers 33:1

His intention in so doing was to inform [future generations] of the loving kindnesses of the Holy One, blessed be He, towards them, for even though He had decreed upon them that they had to move about and wander around in the wilderness, you should not think that they were continually wandering and moving around from place to place without any rest; for throughout all this long [period of] time they only went on forty-two journeys as the Rabbi — Rashi — wrote, [citing] the words of Rabbi Moshe the Preacher.

Rashi on Numbers 33:1

THESE ARE THE JOURNEYS (STAGES) [OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL] — Why are these stations recorded here? In order to make known the loving acts of the Omnipresent: that although He had decreed against them to make them move about and wander in the wilderness, you should not think that they wandered and moved about without cessation from one station to another station all the forty years, and that they had no rest, for you see that there are here only forty-two stages. Deduct from them fourteen, all of which were their stopping places in the first year after they left Egypt, before the decree was made, viz., from the time when they journeyed from Rameses until when they came to Rithmah whence the spies were sent out — as it is said. (Numbers 12:16): “And afterwards the people journeyed from Hazeroth, [and encamped in the wilderness of Paran], whereupon the Lord said unto Moses, (Numbers 13:2) “Send thee men [who may search out the land]”; and here (v. 18) it states, “and they journeyed from Hazeroth and they encamped in Rithmah”, so you learn that it (Rithmah) is in the wilderness of Paran. — Further deduct from them the eight stages which were after Aaron’s death viz., those from Mount Hor to the plains of Moab in the fortieth year (v. 38). It follows that during the whole of the thirty eight years they made only twenty journeys. This is excerpted from the work of R. Moses the Preacher. — R. Tanchuma gave another explanation of it (of the question why these stages are here recorded). A parable! It may be compared to the case of a king whose son was ill and

whom he took to a distant place to cure him. When they returned home the father began to enumerate all the stages, saying to him, "Here we slept, here we caught cold, here you had the head-ache, etc." (Midrash Tanchuma 4:10:3.

S.R. Hirsch on Numbers 33:1-2

There could be various reasons for the Torah's inclusion of this list of the journeys and stopovers in the wilderness. These journeys and stopovers were associated with a whole series of events and experiences which were worthy of being remembered by the kinsmen, the fellow tribesmen, and the descendants of those directly affected by them. However, these events- experienced by particular families and tribes- are not recorded in the Torah, which addresses the nation as a whole. The memory of these events was therefore preserved by oral tradition, and this list includes signposts and signals by which to remember that tradition. One can only surmise how many other traces of the wanderings and sojournings of our forefathers may have been preserved in these places in the wilderness for the immediate and more distant future, and what opportunities these could have offered to the children and the grandchildren of the generation of the wilderness to visit the places where G-d revealed Himself in His wondrous guidance. Visiting these places, future generations could contemplate the authenticity of G-d's presence on earth so eloquently expressed in the history of their forebears. The very barrenness and aridity of these localities in the wilderness, a desert so vast that even a caravan must carefully count the days in order to make its provisions hold out, a desert in which an entire people, at least two and a half million souls, lived for forty years- the very sight of these places in the wilderness (as the רמב"ם notes in Moreh Nevuchim [III:50] provides ample documentation of the Divine nature of the history of Israel's establishment!...

Rambam, Guide for the Perplexed, III:50

Of this kind is the enumeration of the stations [of the Israelites in the wilderness] (Num. xxxiii.). At first sight it appears to be entirely useless; but in order to obviate such a notion Scripture says, "And Moses wrote their goings out according to their journeys by the commandment of the Lord" (ibid. ver. 2). It was indeed most necessary that these should be written. For miracles are only convincing to those who witnessed them; whilst coming generations, who know them only from the account given by others, may consider them as untrue. But miracles cannot continue and last for all generations; it is even inconceivable [that they should be permanent]. Now the greatest of the miracles described in the Law is the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness for forty years, with a daily supply of manna. This wilderness, as described in Scripture, consisted of places "wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water"

(Deut. 8:115); places very remote from cultivated land, and naturally not adapted for the habitation of man, "It is no place of seed, or of figs, or of vines, or of pomegranates, neither is there any water to drink" (Num. 20:5); "A land that no man passed through, and where no man dwelt" (Jer. 2:6). [In reference to the stay of the Israelites in the wilderness], Scripture relates, "Ye have not eaten bread, neither have ye drunk wine or strong drink" (Deut. 19:5). All these miracles were wonderful, public, and witnessed by the people. But God knew that in future people might doubt the correctness of the account of these miracles. in the same manner as they doubt the accuracy of other narratives; they might think that the Israelites stayed in the wilderness in a place not far from inhabited land, where it was possible for man to live [in the ordinary way]; that it was like those deserts in which Arabs live at present; or that they dwelt in such places in which they could plow, sow, and reap, or live on some vegetable that was growing there; or that manna came always down in those places as an ordinary natural product; or that there were wells of water in those places. In order to remove all these doubts and to firmly establish the accuracy of the account of these miracles, Scripture enumerates all the stations, so that coming generations may see them, and learn the greatness of the miracle which enabled human beings to live in those places forty years.

Sforno on Numbers 33:2

ויכתוב משה, he wrote down the name of the places towards which they were setting out, as well as the name of the places from which they had started that particular journey. [this unusual sequence would justify the Torah mentioning first מסעיהם before מוצאיהם at the end of our verse. Ed.]

The reason why we find sometimes the objective mentioned first and other times the place of departure, is due to the fact that sometimes the people were glad to get away from a certain place where unpleasantness had occurred, whereas other times they were merely glad to arrive at a new destination hoping for a pleasant stay in their new encampment. One of the most vexing aspects of all these journeys was that the new objective had never been announced beforehand, so that the people were always in the dark about what the next day would bring. In spite of all these uncertainties they never refused to follow the cloud and break camp at a moment's notice when required. The reason that both the breaking of camp and the making of camp are mentioned separately is because both entailed a considerable amount of discomfort.