

# BREAD OF LIFE TORAH STUDIES

*"I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger ..." John 6:35*

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## NUMBERS 33-36

### CHAPTER 33 - Recounting the Journey

1. *These are the journeys of the children of Israel, who went out of the land of Egypt by their armies under the hand of Moses and Aaron.* This chapter begins the final portion in the Torah reading cycle for the Book of Numbers—*Massei*, "Journeys".

*Moses wrote their goings forth according to their journeys at the word of the LORD.* It is rare that the Torah emphasizes that a passage was *written* by Moses, rather than publicly announced to the people. From the time they left Egypt, they journeyed and camped at forty-two named locations,<sup>1</sup> encompassing many highs and lows, challenges and victories as they learned to rely on the goodness of God, often through the misfortunes they had to suffer. The journey began *on the fifteenth day of the first month*—on the day Passover is celebrated—and is to be personalised in the life of every Jew in perpetuity. What is the significance of 'these journeys'? Why is 'journeys' in the plural? (3 times in the first 2 verses)

Firstly, their journeys had a goal. Much of the Torah has been pointing us to the importance of the Land—Abram was led to leave his home and travel to a "land I will show you". At the burning bush, God told Moses that He would "deliver [His people] out of the hand of the Egyptians and . . . bring them . . . to a land good and spacious, to a land flowing with milk and honey." This land contrasts markedly with Egypt—*Mitzrayim*, meaning "confinement". So they were travelling from a narrow, confined space to a wide and spacious place. Psalm 18:19 says "He brought me into a spacious place, he rescued me because he delighted in me." And Psalm 31:8 says, "You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place."

These concepts of confinement and spaciousness have a spiritual sense: "Out of my confinement I called upon the L-rd. The L-rd answered me with enlargement." As a Jew moves towards his spiritual goal, he passes from the straits of inner conflict to the open spaces of serenity, from the narrow path through secular distractions to the broad plain of unity with G-d. Every stage he reaches is spacious in relation to the level he has left, and restricted in relation to the level he is heading towards, until he reaches the final open space, the Messianic Age, with the crossing of the Jordan that marks the divide between journeying and arriving.

That is why with all 42 journeys, not merely the first, were a 'going forth out of the land of Egypt.' For every journey that brought them nearer to the land of Israel and their destiny made the previous stopping point seem like a confinement, another Egypt. Each stage was a new Exodus. They had already left the physical Egypt. But they still had to pass beyond the Egypt, the narrowness of the soul.<sup>2</sup>

This mirrors the life journey of each and every Christian as we recognize that it is the hand of the LORD that guides our path toward a destiny. Each of us has gone through highs and lows in our faith walk. Whatever the challenges and disappointments we have encountered, we find the life force within to move forward and rise to the next challenge. It is fruitful to look back and have a clear idea of where we have come from and the events and circumstances along the way which have shaped us—opened us up more and more to spiritual freedom, as we leave behind our slavery to the world. We might also be reminded that "all things work together for good to those who love God and who are called according

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<sup>1</sup> 42 is an extremely significant number in the Torah; Related to Creation and to the process of spiritual ascent back to man's state in the Garden of Eden. There are forty-two lines in each column of Torah text. The great name of HaShem is said to contain 42 letters, etc. (<http://www.betemunah.org/fortytwo.html>) Forty two months (3 1/2 yrs.) also features strongly in Revelation.

<sup>2</sup> *Torah Studies*, Based on excerpts of talks by Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, p.276.

to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). Apostle Paul expresses it this way: “I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

The journey from slavery to freedom is long and there are many stopping points along the way. It needs not just miracles from God but also self-transformation by human beings. This writing by Moses will be a way of reminding every generation *how long it takes to reach the Promised Land*. It has nothing to do with distance on the map and everything to do with our spiritual journey, as Apostle Paul expresses Philippians 3:12-15: “Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me... Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. All of us who are mature should take such a view of things”

The sparse, repetitious account of their journeys includes one significant event: the death of Aaron (v.38), specifying that it was at the command of the Lord, and also the exact date— *in the fortieth year after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt, on the first day of the fifth month*. It was then that Moses removed Aaron’s priestly robes and put them on Eleazar (Num. 20:28).<sup>3</sup>

You might like to pause here and reflect on the journey of your own faith life and how it has been guided by the hand of God to this point—where it began, and the vital role of the indwelling Spirit of God (Eleazer) who enables us to reach our own ‘Promised Land’.

## When you cross the Jordan

**Read 33: 50-56** *Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho, saying, “Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: ‘When you have crossed the Jordan into the land of Canaan, ‘then you shall drive out all the inhabitants of the land from before you, destroy all their engraved stones, destroy all their molded images, and demolish all their high places; ‘you shall **dispossess** the inhabitants of the land and dwell in it, for I have given you the land to **possess**.*

You shall dispossess in order to take possession. Hebrew uses the same word, *yarash*, to express these two opposite words – which is also translated as “inherit”. This verse has been interpreted as a conditional statement: ‘If you drive out the inhabitants, then you will dwell in the Land ... and if you do not, then you will not be able to dwell there.’

To possess the inheritance means the land must be seized from the people that already live there. “*But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then it shall be that those whom you let remain shall be irritants in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you in the land where you dwell. Moreover it shall be that I will do to you as I thought to do to them.*”

How can it be called their ‘inheritance’ if it was already occupied? Couldn’t the LORD have arranged for them to settle in an unpopulated land? Why couldn’t they settle amongst those already there?

Firstly, who owns the Land? According to Scripture this is God’s own Land (Joel 2:18; Joel 3:2; Jer. 2:7). Secondly, Israel is His firstborn (Ex. 4:22). This is about redemption and inheritance.

On a deeper level we read in the NT that the end of our faith—the goal of our faith—is the salvation of our souls (1 Peter 1:9).

**Discuss the relevance of this in relation to our study.**

**What are the “inhabitants of the land” that need to be dispossessed?**

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<sup>3</sup> The fifth month is the month of Av (meaning “Father”), includes *Tisha B’Av* – the 9th of Av – which is traditionally regarded as the most tragic day in the Jewish calendar; many major calamities are attributed to this time. According to Jewish Tradition, the Messiah is born on Tisha B’Av.

## CHAPTER 34 – The appointed boundaries of Canaan

Eleazar the priest and Joshua the son of Nun were appointed to divide the land for the inheritance. Something to take note of for future reference is that the half-tribe of Manasseh (firstborn son of Joseph) received an inheritance “across from Jericho eastward, toward the sunrise”.

Numbers 32:39-40 describe the reason for this: “And the children of Machir the son of Manasseh went to Gilead and took it, and dispossessed the Amorites who were in it. So Moses gave Gilead to Machir the son of Manasseh, and he dwelt in it.”

The total extent of the land promised to Israel in this chapter is somewhat unclear but certainly the borders of the Land do not correspond with the reality of any historical settlement of Israel. Certain parts of Lebanon and Syria were never possessed, even during the reign of Solomon, so full possession of the land by Israel is yet to be fulfilled.

## CHAPTER 35 - Cities for the Levites

*Command the Children of Israel that they shall give to the Levites from the heritage of their possession, cities of dwelling...*

The Levites were apportioned no territories in the Promised Land, because they were kept apart to serve the LORD in the Tabernacle. Instead, they were given 48 separate cities throughout every tribal area – each having an open area of 2000 cubits<sup>4</sup> all around. “Each shall give some of its cities to the Levites, in proportion to the inheritance that each receives.” (v.8)

The cities of the priests and Levites were not only to accommodate them, but to place them, as religious teachers, in several parts of the land. For though the typical service of the tabernacle or temple was only in one place, the preaching of the word of God, and prayer and praise, were not thus confined. These cities were to be given out of each tribe. Each thus made a grateful acknowledgement to God. Each tribe had the benefit of the Levites dwelling amongst them, to teach them the knowledge of the Lord; thus no parts of the country were left to sit in darkness.<sup>5</sup>

**Discuss in your group how this has been brought into the NT, and how it has played out in the Christian world.**

### Cities of Refuge

What stands out as the central theme of this chapter is attention to the cities of refuge. Six of the forty eight Levite cities were to be cities of refuge, ‘to which a manslayer may flee’.

#### Points concerning the unintentional killer

- Innocent shed blood cries out from the land for vengeance and must be atoned for by the blood of the one who shed it.
- The unintentional killer shall be rescued from the hand of the ‘redeemer of blood’ and ushered into a city of refuge.<sup>6</sup>
- If the murderer ever leaves the border of the city of refuge, the redeemer of blood can kill him, and would incur no blood guilt himself. (v.27)
- He must dwell in his city of refuge until the death of the High Priest who was anointed with the holy oil (v.25, 28).
- After the death of the High Priest he shall return to the land of his possession.

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<sup>4</sup> About half a mile – a ‘Sabbath Days’ journey

<sup>5</sup> Matthew Henry commentary.

<sup>6</sup> He is ‘exiled’. The Hebrew word translated ‘refuge’ here means *taking in as a receptacle*.

All other instances of the word ‘refuge’ in the Bible use a distinctly different word meaning *shelter, hope*

We first see blood ‘crying out from the ground’ after the very first homicide—when Cain killed Abel—and it cried out to God.<sup>7</sup> We might also recall God’s covenant with Noah: “Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed; For in the image of God He made man.” The shedding of innocent blood defiles the land.

The city was a refuge for all: “*These six cities shall be for refuge for the children of Israel, for the stranger, and for the sojourner among them, that anyone who kills a person accidentally may flee there.*” An intentional murderer “shall surely be put to death” (repeated V.16,17,18), and the fate of anyone who kills a person accidentally would suffer the same fate if he did not flee to a city of refuge—he would be killed: if the avenger of blood “finds him outside the limits of his city of refuge, and the avenger of blood kills the manslayer, he shall not be guilty of blood.” This figure is mentioned five times in verses 19,21,24,25,27, so let’s look more closely at this “avenger of blood”.

The term “avenger of blood” needs clarification, as the word “avenger” does not do justice to the term. The word translated “avenger” is *ga’al*, which means “redeemer”.<sup>8</sup> The word is used to describe one who “redeems” justice and restores to the owner what is rightfully his—most notably used in the book of Ruth. It is the title of the next of kin who is primarily responsible to represent the interests of an injured party and to see to it that justice and peace is established.

It is important to note that those who cause death without murderous intent nonetheless have a debt to pay. 33 *So you shall not pollute the land where you are; for blood defiles the land, and no atonement can be made for the land, for the blood that is shed on it, **except by the blood of him who shed it.*** Freedom is restored only by the death of a substitute—the High Priest

The concept of forgiving and protecting the one who killed without intent is consistent with the LORD’s quality of mercy, and we might simply see the laws regarding cities of refuge as an expression of a compassionate and just God – and that is true on a surface level. However, the repetition and details do raise some intriguing questions. Most notably: Why is the duration of the murderer’s exile linked to the death of the High Priest? What is the connection?

Jewish sages have put forward various disparate interpretations, all of which seem to be ‘clutching at straws’ to make sense of this conundrum. When we see so many differing reasons and opinions put forward, there is every reason to suspect the answer is only truly found in the Messiah of Israel. Could this be the case here?

Our High Priest is Jesus Christ; He is also our Kinsman-Redeemer. When He died on the cross, all who had fled to Him for refuge were released into their inheritance. This is another example of how the law prophesies of Christ, for His blood satisfied the law’s requirement and ended the manslayer’s imprisonment. St. Paul describes the strong consolation of fleeing for refuge to the hope set before us, in a passage traditionally applied to the appointment of the cities of refuge: Heb. 6:18 “...we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us.”

Clearly, this is a remarkable portrayal of the Messiah so let us look more closely:

- Whose was the most innocent blood shed on the Land of Israel?
- Who was responsible for his death?
- Who is His redeemer of blood?

Do you realize that all of us are unintentional killers? We might recall that beautiful song: “How Deep the Father’s Love for us,” which includes the words: *It was my sin that held Him there, until it was accomplished.* We are all under a sentence of death, *For all have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God.* We have all been disenfranchised from our inheritance due to sin, but the death of our High Priest paid the price and releases all to return to their inheritance—if they have first fled to him for refuge.

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<sup>7</sup> Genesis 4:8-15

<sup>8</sup> *Ga’al* is only ever translated as “avenger” in relation to this subject.

## Q. Consider what it means ultimately for to return to our inheritance?

Another question worth considering is: Why are there six cities of refuge – three in the Land and three on the other side of the Jordan, where there are just 2 1/2 tribes?

## CHAPTER 36

The final chapter of Numbers returns to the five daughters of Zelophehad (“firstborn”) who boldly asked for and received the inheritance of their father who left no sons (Num. 27). The elders from the same family line—sons of Machir, son of Manasseh, firstborn of Joseph— are concerned that they may marry outside the tribe: *And when the Jubilee of the children of Israel comes, then their inheritance will be added to the inheritance of the tribe into which they marry; so their inheritance will be taken away from the inheritance of the tribe of our fathers.*

Then Moses commanded the children of Israel according to the word of the LORD, saying: “What the tribe of the sons of Joseph speaks is right.” This mirrors God’s response to the daughters of Zelophehad in Numbers 27:7. These two passages are intimately related. Both Zelophehad’s daughters and the tribal leaders “draw near”; they use the same verb to describe their potential loss: *yigara*, “disadvantaged,” “diminished”; and God replies with the same words: “rightly do they speak”.

The ruling came down that *‘an inheritance ... shall not make rounds from tribe to tribe’*. Every man shall cleave to the inheritance of the tribe of his fathers. There was to be no inter-marrying between tribes. *So, to families of the children of Manasseh they became wives.*

The question arises: why was this not spoken of back in chapter 27? Why place it here at the very end of Numbers? Is the defeat of the Amorites and subsequent apportioning of land east of the Jordan relevant here?

In the earlier request, the women were invoking their rights as individuals; but society is not built on individuals in a vacuum. In this case, Israel is built on the twelve tribes as an organising principle and individuals need to consider the impact of their decisions upon the larger group of which they are a part. The Torah affirms both the individual and the group, because both are necessary in a free society. In bringing down rulings, God recognises the rights of each and brings a solution which is acceptable to both levels—and His rulings were received in peace with no disharmony. Was it important that these requests were separated so each could be dealt with on their own merit without arousing the ire of the other?

On a deeper level, we might also ask—who do these five women represent and why, in chapter 27, were the women all named? We know that the number five represents grace; now let’s look at the meaning behind the names:

Mahlah = "disease"

Noah = "motion" from root meaning ‘shake’, ‘move’ ‘promoted’

Hoglah = "partridge" “dancing” or “His dance”

Milcah = "queen"

Tirzah = "she is my delight", “favourable”.

We can clearly see an upward transition here – why would you call your daughter “disease”? And from there, there is a shaking, a promotion that brings about hopping and dancing, and ultimately a queen who is favoured and a delight. Wow! That is Grace! Does this add to our understanding of why this seemingly insignificant chapter is at the pinnacle of the Torah journey? Now perhaps we can begin to see why it is far from insignificant.

Manasseh, firstborn son of Joseph received a double inheritance. They had by far the largest geographical inheritance, and it was the only tribe to receive inheritance on both sides of the Jordan.

Because of their love for the Land, the LORD gave them the opportunity *not* to remain *only* on the eastern side—an area that would never have the holiness of the Promised Land—but to have inheritance on both sides of the Jordan.

**Discuss your thoughts on whom or what these five women might represent prophetically.**

This fourth book of the Torah essentially ends the journey to the Land — Deuteronomy essentially retells the story of the first four books.