

## Parshat Mas'ei: All the Details, Cities of Refuge and Eighth Grade Behavior

My father, *alav hashalom*, knew a lot of people in our community. It was not uncommon for him to bump into someone unexpectedly. At dinner, he might have said, "Guess who I had lunch with today... Sid Schwartz. I haven't seen him in years. When I went to the Diner for lunch he was there, so we ate together." His view was that when you tell a story you stick to the relevant and most important details. If we wanted any more details, we would ask and he would fill in the gaps.

My mother-in-law, *alah hashalom*, lived her entire life in New Haven, CT and worked for many years in retail sales. She also knew a lot of people and it was likewise not uncommon for her to see someone unexpectedly. Here is how she would tell a similar story: "The other day I went out shopping, but on the way, I realized that I needed to make a hair appointment for next week. So, I stopped at the hair dresser and made the appointment and found out that Gene... You know, Gene, who does my hair? His daughter Emily is pregnant and is expecting in June. So anyway, I made an appointment for next Tuesday at 10:00. Then I drove to Stop and Shop. My ankle was bothering me and I was hoping that I wouldn't have to walk far. I got a parking space right in the first row! I picked up some challah to make the stuffing for today and right next to the challah I saw fresh bagels, so I bought a half-dozen of them..."

At this point in the story my father-in-law, who had already heard this story, would say, "Vicki... bottom line!" at which point she would continue "...oh, right. Anyway, you'll never guess who I bumped into. Ernie! You know, Ernie from the pizza shop?" and so the story would continue.

Contained in her story were several things that she wanted to tell us, but they were organized chronologically rather than by topic. We got the information, but we didn't quite know where we would end up or when it would end.

The opening of *Parshat Mas'ei* tells the story of the Israelites' journey through the desert in much the same way as my mother-in-law would have. Starting with *Bamidbar* 33:5: The Israelites set out from *Ramses* and camped at *Sukkot*. Then they went from *Sukkot* to *Eitam* which is on the edge of the wilderness. They left *Eitam* and turned toward *Pi-Haḥirot*, which faces *Ba'al-Tzefon* and they camped before *Migdol*. And so on. Just as Vicki would have told the story.

We also find out, along this journey, that they camped at *Elim* because there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees. *Rephidim* on the other hand had no water, so I'm not sure why they stopped there, but Moses struck the rock and took care of that. In *Edom* Aaron ascended Mount *Hor* and died at the age of 123.

Bottom line: It took 40 years and 43 verses to go from *Ramses* to *Moav*.

Why all the detail? Isn't it enough to know that we wandered for 40 years in the desert?

*Rashi* tells us that knowing the details of the journey helped the People of Israel to appreciate God's kindness. It reinforces the fact that they weren't just dragged from place to place with no rest. Despite what they might think, they were being cared for lovingly. Yes, they had to wander for 40 years, but there was a plan.

*Midrash Tanhuma* has a different take on it, as told through this story<sup>1</sup>:

A man had a very sick son. He took him from one doctor to the next and from one hospital to another for treatments.

Gradually the son recovered.

When the father was finally able to take him home, he pointed out on the way home all the places where the boy had undergone treatments and operations.

"Remember," he asked, "when we stayed in this ward overnight?" As they passed another place he said, "Here you had the chills," and at another one, "Here you were plagued by a headache."

And perhaps, this story from *Midrash Tanhuma* is a metaphor for how the wandering restored the Jewish people to physical, emotional and spiritual health. At this point there were few if any people who had been in Egypt and many who had experienced only part of the journey having been born along the way. It was God's way of saying to those people, "This is what you and your parents have been through, here's how I helped them. And don't worry, I'll look after you too."

Next, the People of Israel are told that when they enter the land of Canaan they are to take full possession of the land, drive out the inhabitants, and destroy every single building and object that had anything to do with idolatry or cult practices. God warned that if they fail to do so, the people who remain will be like "stings in your eyes and thorns in your sides, and they shall harass you and the land in which you live" and, to paraphrase, God added, "I'll do to you what I told you to do to them."

Then, God gave us a geometry lesson detailing where the boundaries of their land would be. Within those boundaries would be 48 towns in which the *Levi'im* would live, six of which would be designated as *arei miklat*, cities of refuge which offered protection to people who were convicted of manslaughter, taking a life unintentionally.

Killing someone with an implement known to cause death, such as an iron or wooden tool indicates intent to kill as does pushing a person in hate, throwing something at someone, or hitting them with a hand. If a *beit din* rules a death to be murder, the closest blood relative

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Moshe Weissman, The Midrash Says: The Narrative of the Weekly Torah-portion in the Perspective of Our Sages © 1995.

becomes the *go-el hadam* (blood-avenger) and takes responsibility for putting the murderer to death when they next meet, even if the murderer is in a city of refuge. If there is no closest relative, a *go-el hadam* is appointed by the *beit din*.

If a person pushes someone inadvertently or drops a stone on them causing death and the killer is not an enemy of the victim, the death is ruled as manslaughter. One convicted of manslaughter may live in the city of refuge rent free and is protected from his *go-el hadam* until the death of the Kohen Gadol.

Living in a city of refuge specifically with the Levi'im was seen as a way of providing role models of holiness and opportunities for repentance and spiritual recovery for the inadvertent killer. Rather than punish people convicted of manslaughter by making them suffer in prison, we create an environment in which they can rehabilitate body and soul. We learn later in *D'varim* that if a person was studying with a *rebbe* at the time of the killing, the *rebbe* is also exiled with him to the *ir miklat*. If a *rosh yeshiva* goes to a city of refuge, so does the rest of his *yeshiva*.

Several people asked me at *Kiddush* last week what I would be talking about this week in addition to the *parsha*. I had ideas of relating the journey from Egypt to Canaan to my journey into teaching, and to talk about what it's like to be a teacher. I also thought about telling a few funny stories, teaching some math, or talking about math education. Try as I might, anything I thought about was either boring, not funny, or both. Instead, I'm going to relate *arei miklat* to the principles that I try to follow when dealing with eighth grade behavior.

In my dealings with my students I am guided by these principles: Maybe it's my fault. Seek first to understand, then to be understood. Eighth graders aren't grown-ups yet.

**Maybe it's my fault.** I have days when behavior in my class is, shall we say, non-optimal. Students aren't paying attention. Students call out. They interrupt. They ask irrelevant questions. They talk to each other. They make too much noise. They don't do their work. They walk around the room. They ask to get drinks or go to the bathroom.

It is easy in these situations to get angry, to demand a stop to the behavior, to send students to the office, write notes home to parents, take away privileges. After all, students should respect their teachers and within reason do whatever they ask. Case closed.

But it is not case closed; it's not even open yet. If class is not going well on a particular day, maybe it's my fault. So I always start there. I reflect: Was I really prepared for the lesson? Do the students know the point of the lesson? Are the problems too easy or too difficult or too boring? Am I going too slowly or too quickly? Were my directions and expectations clear?

Next, depending on the situation, I might check in with students, asking them some of the same questions I asked myself. Then I reset, perhaps change the plan, apologize if necessary, and move ahead.

It's not always my fault. I can still expect good behavior and hold students accountable. But I also want them to see me as someone who is fallible, and who takes responsibility for his actions. I want them to have a model for what to do when things don't go as expected.

**Seek first to understand, then to be understood.** Those of you who are familiar with the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People know this as Habit #5. Here is how this plays out.

A student is not thriving or seems not to be engaged in learning. She is not behaving well, she flunked a quiz, or she seems not to be progressing. What to do next?

I try my best to start by getting the student's point of view. I want to know if the student has a sense of what the problem is or what might be causing the bad behavior. I want to open the door for the student to be honest with me, and even give them permission to say something that they think might hurt my feelings. I might ask, are you having trouble because of who you're sitting next to? Or where you are sitting in the classroom? Is the class too easy or too hard? Is my teaching style making it hard for you to learn? Is something else going on?

I do my best to let students know that they can speak freely even if they need to criticize me. As I listen, I reflect back what I heard to make sure that I have it right. Then, once we both feel that I understand what's going on, I ask for ideas on how to proceed.

From time to time students do poorly on tests. When that happens, I ask the student to take the test home and do their best to find correct solutions to the problems they missed and to write down the reason for missing the problem. Then we meet, and I have the student talk about each problem and the reasons for the mistakes so that we can figure out the best way to prepare for a make-up.

Another student once asked to talk to me about difficulties he was having with one of his teachers. It was a long discussion, and it seemed like the teacher was making the student feel miserable, and that we needed to get this fixed. But when I asked what he wanted me to do, he just said, "Nothing right now. I just wanted someone to listen."

**Eighth graders aren't grown-ups yet.** A few years ago, our school nurse told me that eighth graders were being rude to her. They would walk into her office, sometimes oblivious to the fact that she was with another student, and demand a Band-Aid, ice, Advil or a snack. No please, no thank you.

I calmly shared the nurse's feelings, and mine, and then demonstrated a polite way of asking for a Band-Aid: "Excuse me," wait for permission to speak, then ask, "Please, may I have..." We practiced. A student asked, "Mr. Srebnick, what if two teachers are talking to each other and we want to ask one of them a question? What's the polite way to interrupt?" And I demonstrated that: "Excuse me," wait, then ask the question.

You might be thinking, REALLY? Eighth graders need to be told to be polite? They don't know any better?

If you observe the way teens interact with each other, they are not always acting in a way that we as adults would consider as polite. It doesn't really bother them, and frankly they aren't about to say to a friend, "You didn't say please."

It's likely that if you asked a teenager how to be polite you would get a reasonable answer. The issue is that good behavior hasn't yet become a habit, and some of us (myself included) tolerate impolite behavior because it's "the way eighth graders are."

So yes, they need to be told, in a polite way, to be polite. And while they may know better, we as teachers need to demand it of them. More importantly, teachers need to show the same courtesy to students, saying "excuse me," "please," "thank you," and sometimes, "I'm sorry."

**How does this relate to *Arei Miklat*?** The *ir miklat* is a model for handling those who make mistakes unintentionally. If convicted of manslaughter, yes, there are consequences, but the criminal is placed in an environment that encourages repentance and in which there are teachers and role models to help criminals recover and become better people.

Teens will make mistakes, sometimes despite their best efforts. The way we as teachers treat students should be a model of how we want our students to treat others. When they make mistakes, we need to let them know that they are not bad people. Rather, they are good people who made a mistake. For serious mistakes, we need to help them recover, to learn, to grow and to become better people.

**A final word.** Be very careful of what you say, because you never know what students will remember. I have been working with teenagers for over 40 years, long enough to have reconnected and to find out what they remembered.

I've got some good stories there too, but those will have to wait for Kiddush.

Shabbat Shalom

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