

I can't claim to know much about country music, but have always had a certain fondness for Johnny Cash. One of my favorites is the song, *I've been Everywhere*, a catchy tune about a wanderer who has gone afield as far as Reno, Chicago, Fargo, Minnesota, Buffalo, Toronto, Winslow, Sarasota . . . and the names flow on and on. The charm of the song isn't the chorus, but the stanzas that pack an entire atlas of the U.S. into one three-minute song.

I won't make the claim that Johnny Cash was inspired by the opening section of this week's Torah reading, though, if nothing else, one could argue that *Sefer Bamidbar*, the *Book of Numbers*, anticipated Johnny Cash's song by a few thousand years. Turn to chapter 33 of *Parshat Masei*, and you'll see a listing of each place where the Israelites encamped. They journeyed from Ramses and stayed in Sukkot. They departed Sukkot and camped at Etam. They left Etam and stopped at Migdol and so on and so forth. In all, the Torah lists 42 different places to which our ancestors traveled. Read the text and it's easy to understand why someone coined the phrase, "Wandering Jews."

The question is why would Scripture bother with giving us the Israelites desert itinerary in the first place. It appears to serve no purpose, this empty travelogue listing zip codes, if you will, with little or no explanation of what made these temporary addresses significant. So what if they traveled from the wilderness of Sin and camped at Dafka, or departed Dafka and stayed in Alush?

This question did not escape the rabbis, who offered multiple reasons for including the lengthy geographical listing in the narrative of the Torah. One source, *Midrash Hagadol*, suggests that its inclusion was intended to show the Israelites were not constantly on the move. With the exception of their first and last year in the desert, they averaged nearly two years at each encampment. The narrative, therefore, underscores God's empathy and compassion for the people's need to rest and recuperate in-between their travels.

But the explanation I find most intriguing is the one offered by the medieval commenator, ibn Ezra. His comment attaches itself to the verse, “**ויכתב משה את מוצאיהם**,” **למסעיהם על פי ה'** Lord” (*Numbers* 33:2). The simple meaning of the verse? God commanded Moshe to keep track of all the places the Israelites stopped. But ibn Ezra understands the text differently, suggesting that God’s commandment was not that Moses record the journey, but that journey itself, stage by stage, was planned and directed by the Almighty Himself. Our ancestors were not wandering Jews at all; whether or not they were aware of the larger picture or understood its implications, each place they went and every place they stopped served a purpose and was part of a cosmic plan. God was, quite literally, in their journey.

It is hard for us to conceive what our ancestors endured during their desert travels. We lead fairly sedentary lives, ensconced in our comfortable homes -- how could we ever truly relate to the comings and goings of a nomadic society?

But perhaps we have more in common with the ancient Israelites than we realize. No, we don’t live in goat skin tents pitched on a desert landscape, yet there are many more wanderers today than ever before in history. Some are emotional nomads, who wend their way through relationship after relationship, unwilling or unable to commit, or finding that after having committed their relationships are no longer tenable. Indeed, the numbers of third and fourth marriages have reached an all-time high.

Others are nomadic in their professional lives. Once upon a time, a person finished high school or college, took a job, and then stayed put for many years, even a lifetime. Today, the individual who remains in the same workplace for his entire career is increasingly a rarity. Mid-life job changes are common; studies show that the average person will change jobs at least five times in her life.

Still others are spiritual nomads. Never have Americans changed their religions more readily than in this day and age. For some, it is a matter of throwing overboard the organized

religion with which they were raised; for others, it's discovering a spiritual practice for the very first time as adults. For a third group, it is a matter of substituting one religious tradition for another. Often enough, spiritual seekers will undergo multiple religious transformations as they travel from synagogue to ashram to church, and sometimes back to synagogue.

And, of course, there is far more demographic mobility today than fifty years ago. A century ago, the odds were pretty good that most Americans would be born, grow up, live and die in the same community; in our time, however, it is no longer the norm. Even here in Jacksonville, we can witness a difference between two generations ago and today. One can make the argument that, in some dramatic ways, ours is truly a far more nomadic and uprooted society than at any other time in history.

But if we resemble our ancestors in that we, too, are wanderers of a certain kind, who is it that directs our journey? Judaism strongly believes in the notion of *b'hira hofsheet*, free will. We choose when to take the path less traveled, when and where to turn; for better or for worse, the career we train for or abandon, the spouse we marry or divorce, the religion we reject or embrace . . . these are all our decisions. And while the concept of predestination has its attractions, the real truth is that no one ever says something was *b'shert* -- until it has worked out after the fact.

The Kotzker Rebbe, a great Hasidic master of the mid-19th century, once remarked that God is found only in those places where He is invited in. The statement is not one of human arrogance, but profound truth. God can direct our journeys in life, if we consciously allow God to be a traveling companion; if we allow godliness and sanctity guide our hands, our thoughts and our decisions when we reach the innumerable forks in life's road sd invariably we do time and time again.

Many of our Christian friends will talk about prayer as a prelude to decision-making of every kind. I wish that Jews were more comfortable with the idea. Not that I believe our prayers will necessarily result in a providential oracle, a divine sign to tell us whether or not to buy Exxon or sell Yahoo stock. But what if we were to pray for the strength and wisdom to be an

agent for goodness and godliness in whatever choices we make, to lead life in such a way that we worry less about where we're going, (because in the end we all get to the same place), and focus far more on how we're traveling.

Perhaps that is the ultimate lesson of this week's *sedra* and its lengthy listing of all the places where our ancestors sojourned. They traveled with faith in a God who had blessed them with a sense of covenantal responsibility and mission, a God who guided their travels neither by oracle nor divine GPS, but because they believed they could make a difference in the world, that their decisions about life and how to live truly mattered.

There are those who journey to the realm of the Infinite without ever leaving the town they were born in. There are those who travel to the far ends of the earth, yet stand still without moving an inch in any direction. Where we want to go is a question of some human importance; How we choose to get there is the question of Ultimate significance.