



Parashat Masei
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Parashat Masei begins with a detailed list of the sites where *Benei Yisrael* encamped during their forty-year sojourn through the wilderness. This list traces their travels from the time of the Exodus until their arrival in the plains of Moav, their final encampment before crossing the Jordan River in the Land of Israel.

Maimonides, towards the end of his *Guide for the Perplexed* (3:50), explains the purpose underlying this presentation:

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. The wilderness, as described in Scripture, consisted of places “wherein were fiery serpents and scorpions, and drought, where there was no water” (Devarim 8:15); places very remote from cultivated land, and naturally not adapted for the habitation of man... All these miracles were wonderful, public and witnessed by the people. But God knew that in the 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.

By tracing *Benei Yisrael*'s route through the wilderness, the Torah confirms that they traveled through inhospitable desert lands, where survival is not possible except through God's miraculous intervention.

Along similar lines, we might suggest an additional element that necessitated this detailed record of the Israelites' encampment. That the nation traveled through remote, uninhabitable territory, distant from any towns or cities, proves not only the miraculous nature of this experience, but also *Benei Yisrael*'s cultural independence during this period. Throughout the forty years, they lived in virtual isolation, with hardly any contact with, or exposure to, other peoples or civilizations (at least until their conquest of the Emorite kingdoms in their final year of travel). Hence, the Torah that was transmitted to Moshe at Sinai and subsequently conveyed to the people during their years of travel could not be the product of foreign influence and other nations' religious creeds. The presentation of the Torah occurred as *Benei Yisrael* lived in remote isolation, thus confirming its authenticity and independence, that it is the true word of God, and not a

replica or imitation of other belief systems. (See the Netziv's *Ha'amek Davar* commentary to the beginning of Parashat Beshalach, where he similarly explains the significance of *Benei Yisrael's* traveling specifically through the wilderness.)

Thus, the names of sites listed in Parashat Masei verifies not only the miracles that enabled *Benei Yisrael* to survive during this period, but also the fact that the Torah received and transmitted during these years was original and authentic, and was not adopted from any other culture.