



SERMON RESOURCE FOR SHLUCHIM

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PARSHA:

MATOS - MASEI / מטות - מסעי

SERMON TITLE:

GROUNDING YOUR STAND

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In loving memory of

Emil W. Herman אה זייל ר' מנחם זאב בן פנחס זייל
who loved and supported Torah learning.

MATOS - MASEI

GROUNDING YOUR STAND

They say that in a particular neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan, the Jewish community moved to a new neighborhood, relocating their temple and selling the old temple building to a particular church, unfortunately enough.

Another 30 years went by and the neighborhood which once was new began to get old. So the Jews living there found themselves on the move again, relocating again to yet another new neighborhood.

Once again they decided to build a new temple and sell the current one to the same church to which they had sold their old temple building over 30 years ago.

But this time, the priest said that he wanted to provide input for the new building's design—because he knew it would eventually end up in his hands...

Ever since Abraham himself, the first Jew in history, the Jews have always wandered from place to place. Our saga truly begins in the Torah portion of Lech Lecha, which essentially means, "Go! Start walking!" So Avraham Avinu left his native land of what is today Iraq and migrated to the Land of Canaan. But once he arrived there, he ran smack into a famine. So he again migrated, this time to Egypt.

Our Patriarch Yaakov also was busy traveling. For starters, he fled the Land of Israel to Charan, which is today somewhere in northern Syria. Later in his life, when he was living in the Holy Land once again, there was yet another famine and he was forced to go down to Egypt.

This week we read the double portion of Matos and Masei. In the second half, the portion of Masei, the Torah describes the 42 journeys our ancestors took in the course of 40 years in the desert, between departing Egypt and arriving at the Holy Land.

In that 40-year period, there were times they camped in one place for 19 years and times they remained in one place for mere day or even just one night. They never knew how long they'd be in any one place. Moshe never told them in advance, simply because he didn't know either—as the verse states, "By G-d's word shall they camp and by G-d's word shall they travel."

G-d gave them this experience to prepare them for the times of exile, in which the Jews would always be wandering from place to place.

We're now in the period in the Jewish calendar that mourns the Destruction of the Temple.

In the Second Temple Era, there was a feud in Jerusalem between two camps. The Biryonim, as one group was called, argued that there is no negotiating over Jerusalem whatsoever: This is the place G-d chose to dwell, this is the most holy place to the Jewish People, and so we must fight to the last drop of blood. On the other hand, a second group was led by Rabbi Yochanan Ben-Zakkai. He argued that we must compromise Jerusalem—it's much more important to save the Jewish People itself, not the city.

However, the Biryonim were determined that no one leave Jerusalem alive while it was under siege by the Romans.

So, the Talmud tells us, Rabbi Yochanan had false information spread that he was sick—and then had false information spread that he had died. Then Rabbi Yochanan hid in a coffin, and two of his disciples, Rabbi Eliezer and Rabbi Yehoshua, carried the coffin outside the walls of Jerusalem, ostensibly to bury him. But really, Rabbi Yochanan wanted to meet with Aspianus, the general of the Roman army laying siege to Jerusalem.

When Rabbi Yochanan finally met with the general, he asked him for only one important thing: "Give me Yavneh and her scholars." Rabbi Yochanan wanted Aspianus to allow him to relocate to the new development of that time, the city of Yavneh. Indeed, Aspianus consented. And not only that, but he told Rabbi Yochanan that he could get any relatives out of Jerusalem too before the Romans would destroy it. So Rabbi Yochanan arranged for the escape of all the Sages from Jerusalem.

Tragically, Rabbi Yochanan never returned to Jerusalem. As the Temple was being destroyed, he waited outside the city. As the Midrash tells us, "Rabbi Yochanan sat and watched the walls of Jerusalem to see what would become of her... When Rabbi Yochanan saw that the Temple had been destroyed and that the Hall had been burned down, he stood and tore his clothes, removed his tefillin and sat and wept together with his students."

So we see that even while the Temple was being destroyed, Jerusalem was abandoned and Jews migrated to Yavneh. And it was the same thing, tragically, with

the Holocaust: Those Jews who abandoned Europe before the Holocaust and migrated to the U.S. or Israel were saved. Those who remained were trapped.

Now, all of this wandering is justifiable when it comes to life and death, whether the famine in the times of Avraham and Yaakov, or the Destruction of the Temple, or the Holocaust.

But it's interesting to point out Judaism's view on entire Jewish neighborhoods wandering from place to place without any life-threatening reason but rather, for convenience. Throughout the world, and especially in America, Jewish neighborhoods shift about every 30 or 40 years.

What does Judaism say about this?

In the year 1940, the Previous Lubavitcher Rebbe arrived on American shores. At that time, New York's biggest Jewish community was centered in the Lower East Side. Over 500,000 Jews lived there. It was America's largest Jewish community—and it seemed only natural that the Rebbe would establish his residence there among all the other immigrants from Europe.

But to everyone's astonishment, the Rebbe chose to establish his residence specifically in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Crown Heights, which at that time was a prosperous neighborhood where lived only rich Jews with the means to live in such an expensive area. Through the Forties and Fifties, it remained a wonderful neighborhood.

Then came the Sixties. The neighborhood began to change, and Jews began slowly "running away" from Crown Heights to other, more secure neighborhoods.

By the end of the decade, the trickle had become an epidemic. Residents practically gave away their homes for free as long as they could get out. And they all ran: Religious and secular, Rebbes and doctors. The only one who stayed was the Rebbe, who made it clear that he wasn't budging.

As a matter of fact, in the early 1970s, someone that I know bought a home in Crown Heights at the Rebbe's instruction. He paid \$27,000. By the 1990s, however, it was worth a half-million—and today, it's worth close to one million dollars.

So clearly, the Rebbe's vision paid off. But why? Why was the Rebbe so adamant, so insistent that Jews remain in Crown Heights?

Because Jewish law clearly states that if a Jew weakens a Jewish neighborhood by moving out, he is not allowed to move out. In turn, there are several reasons for that:

1. He hurts other Jews. There are always those who don't have the financial resources to move to a new neighborhood: The elderly, widows and widowers, and the poor. When everyone else moves out, these people are left alone in the old neighborhood.
2. When successful people leave the neighborhood, they hurt local businesses: The kosher bakery, food store, and so on. All these small businesses are built upon their Jewish customers—and when the Jewish customers leave for other neighborhoods, hundreds of Jewish businesses are destroyed.
3. Local synagogues. By Jewish law, it is forbidden to allow a synagogue to go to any other use. If a building is originally built for synagogue use, it is barred from being used for any other purpose. One may not turn it into a store or a private home—not even for the rabbi! It must remain a shul. That's why when people leave neighborhoods, they destroy the synagogues.

On top of all that, today's world has become a global village. Everything that happens in one place is instantly known about in every other place. So when Jews stay put in their same old neighborhood, not affected and not budging, it sends a message even to the Arabs who always hope that Israel returns yet another territory and yet another slice of land because they see that throughout the Jewish world Jews are dashing about, fleeing from place to place. So they think: "This approach works! So let's drive the spirit out of them here too until they abandon Israel."

But if they see that Jews don't abandon the neighborhood for any price, it sends a message even to those in the Middle East not to look forward to Jews handing over the land and fleeing somewhere else. And what's even more important is that fact that doing so lends morale to the Jews in the Holy Land to stand strong and not submit to any pressure whatsoever.

This does not mean that it is forbidden to move to another neighborhood. Certainly people move all the time for many reasons: Job, bigger house, kids, etc. What is a no-no, however, is to "run" from a neighborhood—meaning that if you're moving out not because you have to, but because you don't want to live there, that's not allowed.

Let us hope that we soon all move happily to the Land of Israel, with the coming of Moshiach, amen.

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