



5 Memorable Places

The Jewish sages saw the recording of the marches of the Israelites as evidence of God's care for the chosen people in the wilderness. Sketch a timeline listing the important places where you have dwelt or visited in your life. Can you see God's hand at work as you retrace these journeys and 'stop-overs'?

1. A place of life. Recall a place where you loved and labored to bring life into the world. Perhaps physically. Perhaps spiritually. Perhaps artistically.

2. A place of struggle. Recall a place where you struggled with a challenging task. A building site. A place of study. A place where you faced conflict, illness, setback, disappointment.

3. A place of healing. Recall a place where you 'paused' in your life to seek healing, rest, comfort, hope, refueling, refreshment. A hospital. A retreat house. A holiday house. The home of a friend.

4. A place of joy. Recall a place where you laughed, partied, sang, celebrated and enjoyed special times. At this place did you praise God? Make new friends? Organize community functions?

5. A place of learning. Recall a place where you were taught something that shaped your life's direction. A place of formation. A classroom. A sporting field. A family home. A place where values were instilled, ideas formed, decisions were influenced.



Light of Torah
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Light of Torah

Ancient texts, through fresh eyes, alive for today.



Numbers 33:1—36:13

Masei: 'marches'

Why reflect on Torah?

"Jewish biblical scholarship in all its richness, from its origins in antiquity down to the present day, is an asset of the highest value for the exegesis of both Testaments, provided that it be used with discretion."

Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, 1993.

Torah, in its specific sense, refers to the first five books of the Bible. These ancient books, the fruit of the religious experience of the Jewish people, are sacred and foundational texts for Jews and Christians alike.

Christianity is rooted in Judaism as a plant is rooted in the earth; it cannot live apart from the soil in which it is planted. This weekly leaflet series, *Light of Torah*, offers a way for Christian grassroots audiences to read the Torah and to appreciate the Jewish roots of their faith. Each leaflet offers brief insights drawing on Jewish sources, plus suggestions for how these insights can enrich Christian faith and practice, especially in the home. One of the joys of this approach is that scripture passages which at first glance appear convoluted, repetitious or tedious, are now experienced as being alive with meaning! The Torah reflection in today's leaflet is a good example.



Torah Portion

From the Jewish calendar
of Torah readings:

Numbers 33:1—36:13

This week's Torah portion concludes the Book of Numbers. Our focus here is Numbers 33 which reviews the travels of the Israelites from their departure from Egypt to the steppes of Moab where they stand ready to enter the promised land. Commentators have long been fascinated by the detailed itinerary and apparent tedium of this text. What wells of refreshment are to be found hidden in the apparent 'dryness' of such a passage?

Tasting Torah

"These were the marches of the Israelites..."

Thus begins Numbers 33. With the Jewish sages of old, be patient as you read this long, repetitious passage. Relax. Read aloud, perhaps sharing the reading with a friend. Listen to the rhythm. Allow it 'inside' you, drawing you into the march. Observe how the text speaks to you through the litany of place-names.

Touching Torah

Said one parishioner who read this text:

"As I read along I found myself entering into the rhythm of the 'march'... drawing me into a kind of contemplative experience. For the Israelites this was an epic journey—to the promised land, no less—yet comprised of lots of little journeys. So much of life is like that! I have noble goals—to raise a family, to accomplish important things at work—yet living those goals involves numerous ordinary, tedious steps: I woke up at 6 o'clock, and changed my baby's diaper. After I changed his diaper I organized the kids for school. When the kids left for school, I drove to the shopping centre. There were no parking spaces left at the shopping centre. After leaving the shopping centre, I drove on to work... Tedious? Perhaps. But all very real in the fabric of life, and there is no greater project than life itself!"

And you? What reflections surfaced in your reading of the text? Did the rhythm of the Israelites' march resonate with the rhythms of your life?

Depthing Torah

Torah commentators who ponder this portion often note the value of reviewing our lives. In order to go forward we must have a clear idea of where we have come from and how life's events have shaped us. Our future depends on a well-understood past.

In the *midrash* (Jewish storytelling traditions) there is a poignant story about a king with an ill son who takes him to a distant place to be cured. On the return journey, the father recounts for his son each stage of their first journey: "Here we slept. Here we felt cold. Here you had a headache, etc."¹ Sometimes we only appreciate a stage of life with the help of someone who loves us and who has journeyed with us.

In another *midrash*² the desert places are seen to be holy because they welcomed the Israelites, and would one day be rewarded by God by becoming fertile and inhabited. Perhaps this story serves to remind us of places that have been blessed by our presence. Can we see this? Can we name such places and even identify some of the fruits already visible?

Doing Torah

Why do you think the Torah mentions that at each destination the Israelites both 'journeyed' and 'encamped' there. What is the significance of 'arrivals' and 'departures'?

Have you ever been on a pilgrimage? What was special for you about that journey?



Faith & Life

"I had taken the bus into town every week for twelve years; yet the day my six year old niece rode with me I saw the entire route for the first time. From start to finish she treated me to a steady stream of observations: 'What's that sign say?' 'Look at that big building over there...' 'Hey let's count the all the people on the bus with red hair...' 'I think God's getting the clouds ready to rain...' and so on."

Try it: trace a familiar journey and take in the sights and sounds with new eyes, ears and an open heart.

1. *Midrash Tanchuma*, 3.
2. *Midrash Rabbah*, xxiii, 4.
Bibliography: Eskenazi & Weiss, *The Torah: A Women's Commentary* (NY, 2008); *Midrash Rabbah: Numbers Vol.2* (London/NY: Soncino, 1983); Munk, *The Call of the Torah* (NY, 1993); *Rashi: Commentary on the Torah* (NY: Mesorah, 2001).