

B'nai Abraham 100th Anniversary Rededication
July 10, 2010

D'var Torah
by Alan Milavetz

Shabbat Shalom

The Torah is traditionally read in portions each week. Each portion is called a parsha.

This week's parsha is unique. It is actually a double parsha; **Matot**, which tells of the laws for making vows and **Mas'ey** which translates to "journeys" or "marches", and records the names and locations of the newly freed Hebrew slaves in their journey or march from the time of the Exodus from Egypt through the 40 years of wandering in the desert. This portion concludes the **Book of Numbers**, which is one of the **5 Books of the Torah**, and in a scroll, is also at the beginning of the next Book. Today we said *Hazak, Hazak, V'nithazek* when we finished this Torah portion, which means "Be Strong, Be Strong and Let us be Strengthened."

Like Bnai Abraham ending this 100-year chapter in its history and beginning its new renewed and restored life, this parsha has special significance for us. I'd like to talk about that significance.

Mas'ey tells of the Hebrews, under Moses and Aaron, marching thru the desert. The soon to be Israelites began their Exodus from Egypt, as they left the border town of Ramses. They left behind 400 years of slavery. The text describes the Israelites leaving while the Egyptians were burying those who had been struck down by the 10 plagues. A long description follows of marches from encampment to encampment throughout the wandering in the desert; they encamped at Succoth, then Etham (on the edge of the wilderness). They made their way to the Sea of Reeds, and the

edge of the Sinai, thru the death of Aaron and up to the end of Moses life.

Clearly the creator of the Torah, believed it was important to list these journeys, and write them down, because he or she believed it was important to remember! While the list of places may be dry words of history as we hear them today, imagine back to the early generations that followed the Exodus, and consider the memories evoked from the mere mention of these places. Imagine the stories told by grandparents and parents to their children about their wandering in the desert.

Ultimately, the Hebrews arrive in the land of Israel and are told the boundaries of all sides of the land. God, through Moses, then gives instructions for how to live in the land, through laws about marriage and inheritance.

We are an old people and an old civilization. We have traveled on many marches and journeys, before and after the Exodus, and we are strong, *Hazak, Hazak, V'nithazek*. Are all of these journeys typical for a people who have been around a long time..... or are they a sign of a people who did not disappear into history; who in spite of moving, have with strength, held onto their communal memories, and the Torah and its teachings? Is this why we have remained Jews?

We know in retrospect that these soon to be Israelites who were about to enter the land of Israel, were to be expelled again from their land by King Nebuchadnezzar and the Persians in 586 BCE. They were allowed to go home 47 years later, and then again another expulsion, this time by the Romans 600 years later.

The Diaspora persisted through the middle ages and found Jews, our ancestors, living in the Russian empire. As conditions worsened for our parents, grandparents and great grandparents,

many continued the ancient journey by leaving for the new world. We've heard and remembered the stories of strength and courage, *Hazak, Hazak, V'nithazek*, of so many leaving their homes in the Kovno Gubernya...Wilkomir, Bollnik, Anikst, Perclee, Kavarskas, Dragetts, the Vilna Gubernya, Mariampole, Poland, Germany and Ukraine, crushed by taxes applied to Jews, poverty for many, family members killed in Pogroms, 25 year conscriptions into the Russian army, with drafting of boys as young as 12 or 13, often never to be heard from again.

So many of our ancestors from Northern Minnesota left Lithuania and the Kovno Gubernya, particularly, and made their way, often secretly and on foot, across northern Europe. Leaving Lithuanian and Polish shtetls, crossing over borders, to German ports like Hamburg. Some came as families, some as individuals, and some as young men one at a time, to find a foothold, and then send for their family. Some settled first in the twin ports of Duluth and Superior and some ultimately on the Iron Range.

It was our ancestors, like other immigrants seeking the greatness and promise of America, who went on these marches across continents, this time in the 1880's 1890's and 1900's...from towns and shtetls in the Kovno Gubernya to the port of Hamburg, through Ellis Island into New York, to Duluth to Virginia, Hibbing, Eveleth, and Chisholm. These are the people who organized B'nai Abraham and built this building. They became an important part of the Iron Range communities, and the Jewish community, culminating in the completion of this beautiful synagogue in 1910.

This building was our ancestors expression of their way to remember and stay connected, not only with their present community, but with a long line of sacred houses of prayer, and with their ancestors, with a long line of marches beginning with the retelling of this Torah portion 3,500 years ago, right up to our own families who came to Minnesota a hundred years ago, and on to

the present day. We have all come back to this origination point...this connection point where our ancestors settled at the end of their last great **Ma'sey** or journey.

We have all returned here, journeyed here on our own march to something older, something from our past...something special that reflects our family history, and our Jewish history, and speaks to all of us. Like today's torah portion, which lists the details of travel because it is important to remember, we too, remember the past as we sit in this beautiful building, the journeys, the lives and the marches of our parents, grandparents and great grandparents as they made their way to America. And just as our ancestors said *Hazak, Hazak, V'nithazek* when they finished each book of the Torah, remembering and drawing on their strength, today, we too say those same words and unite with our ancestors in strength, remembrance and celebration.

Shabbat Shalom