

Matot-Masei - A Literary Monument to the Journey and God's Relationship with Israel
 Rabbi Eliot Malomet July 11, 2026 26 Tammuz 5786



When we visit war monuments we often notice that they are inscribed with place names. For example, on the New Brunswick Civil War memorial¹ just a mile and a half from the shul (pictured here), you will see these places inscribed at the base:

**Williamsburg Antietam
 Fredericksburg New Bern Atlanta
 Gettysburg Winchester Appomattox**

The significance of these names, and the stories connected with them, would have been obvious to any resident of New Brunswick in the 1890s. But to all of us, living 160 years later they are not. For example, most of us would have to look up "Williamsburg" on the internet to discover that it refers to the Battle of Williamsburg (VA) that took place on May 5, 1862. That it was one of the great battles of the war involving 73,000 Union and Confederate troops and that it resulted in over 4000 casualties. And that while its outcome was inconclusive, it affected the trajectory of the war. For veterans, just the name Williamsburg would have been enough to conjure recollections of the battle, memory of lost comrades, and take them back to that fateful spring. Listing place names of battles is a common feature of war monuments. With that in mind, let us turn to the opening verses in the second of our two parashas, Masei.

אלה מסעי בני ישראל אשר יצאו מארץ מצרים לעבדתם ביד משה ואהרן. וכתב משה את מוצאיהם למסעיהם על פי ה' ואלה מסעיהם למוצאיהם.

These are the marching-stages of the Children of Israel that they went on from the land of Egypt, by their forces, through the hand of Moses and Aaron. Moses wrote down their departures, by their marching-stages, by order of God. Now these are their marching-stages, by their departures...

¹ It was dedicated in 1893, during the third decade after the war, as Civil War veterans were aging and passing away. Among the thousands of Civil War monuments dedicated during this period, this one brought the memory of the fallen from the sphere of military cemetery into the civic square and became a focal point for pride in the victory and the preservation of the union. The complete inscription without the battles reads: **Erected by the people of New Brunswick in memory of the brave soldiers and sailors who fought in the defense of the Union during the War of the Rebellion. Erected 1893 by People of New Brunswick.** According to online sources it cost approximately \$28,000 then, the equivalent of approximately 1 million dollars today.

² Ancient Israel was probably averse to monuments not only because it was primarily an oral culture but because

According to a plain reading of this text, God orders Moses to write down the **marching-stages** - the names of all the places where Israel journeyed on its way to the promised land. God wants Moses to commemorate the journey with a text, to transform what was probably an oral rendition of the itinerary, into a written record. While not explicitly stated here, that written record was probably meant to sacralize the story of the journey through the desert for all generations to come. **The text therefore functions as a monument**, indeed a portable monument. **In cultures where the erection of monuments to historical events or personages play a major role, such as ancient Egypt or late 19th century America, the national narrative is communicated by pilgrimage to the monument. In oral cultures such as ancient Israel where monuments had no role whatsoever,**² **the national narrative is communicated by the recitation of a document.** When we see the Civil War monument listing the places where important battles were fought, we are struck by its grandeur, and we enter into a **visual dialogue** with it. **Who designed it? Who built it? What is it made of? Where did the materials come from? Where was it made? How did it get there? How much did it cost? What does it symbolize? How well does it do its job?** When we hear the text listing the journeys of the Israelites, we enter into an **exegetical dialogue** with it. As listeners and participants in its recitation, we are overtly or implicitly invited to join in and become part of the recitation, repeating it in unison perhaps, or committing to memory. **How do we experience the rhythm and music of the words? What do we think when we hear them? How do we interpret them and understand them?** The process of hearing this text with our minds and our hearts enables us to become a community that is shaped by it.³ The verses



monuments elicit idolatrous tendencies. They can become objects of worship and adoration.

³ Last week's commemoration 250th anniversary of America's independence in our shul, when we read the Declaration of Independence, provided us with a great example of the difference between **pilgrimage to a text** as opposed to **recitation of a text** as forms of engaging in national narrative. Many of us have **made pilgrimages** to the National Archives in Washington to see the **Charters of Freedom** in a magnificent hall. Seeing the **Declaration of Independence** in that setting we are struck by the awe and grandeur of the setting and enter into a visual dialogue with the monumental display of the document. In contrast, consider the experience we had in shul when several shul members came up to the Bima to read it out loud as the rest of the congregation followed along intently in their individual

above make reference to the *text that Moses wrote*, but we don't know what happened to that text, whether or not it was read on specific occasions, or whether it simply was enshrined as a relic like say, the jar of manna or the staff of Aaron that were kept near the Ark of the Covenant.⁴ And, unlike other Torah texts like the Song of the Sea, the Ten Commandments, the Akeda, the Sh'ma, the Mosaic text of journeys plays no role in later in Jewish liturgy.

But is the list of the journeys in Masei the text that Moses actually wrote? The more we look at the verses above that introduce this list, the more we are puzzled by them. It says: *וַיִּכְתֹּב מֹשֶׁה אֶת מוֹצְאֵיהֶם - Moses wrote their departures*, this gives us the impression that what Moses wrote was a series of *departures*; *לְמַסְעֵיהֶם - for their journeys*, and that each *departure* will be followed by *movement* from one place to the next. This would be like saying an NJT train ride from New Brunswick to New York City is really a series of *departures*, emphasizing that *the crucial experience of Journey is departure* from all the stations: New Brunswick, Edison, Metuchen, Metropark etc., all the way to New York City. In this framing, *The essence of the Journey is Departure; Journey is the sum of all the departures*. But in the very next phrase we read the opposite framing: *וַיֵּלֶךְ וַיִּסְעוּ - and these are their journeys*, - *לְמוֹצְאֵיהֶם - for their departures*. This emphasizes that *the crucial experience of Journey is journey between places, not Departure*. This would be like saying that the train ride from New Brunswick to New York City is not a series of *departures* but a series of smaller *journeys* between the departures. In that phrasing, *the essence of Journey is the journey between places; Journey is the sum of all the smaller constituent journeys*. This verse then invites us into a rich debate: when we are on a Journey, what is more important: all of the departures or all of the constituent journeys between places? *For some of us, Departure is the essence of our travel stories because it involves preparation, packing, and the stress of detaching from familiar surroundings as we embark to the unknown. For others, Journey, i.e. all of the constituent journeys, is the essence of our travel stories because of the experiences and discoveries that we have not connected to Departure*. The literary framing of this verse enables us to give a plausible interpretation that harmonizes both positions: *Travel consists of both Departure and Journey. Both Departure from point to point, and Journey between points are essential components of the travel story*. And that is abundantly true when it comes to telling the story of Israel's journey through the desert.

copies. It was a powerful and moving experience that invited everyone into an exegetical dialogue with the text. What did it mean then? What does it mean now? Have we lived up to its ideals? The shared communal experience of reading and listening brought the document to life and enlivened us all. It was an invitation for us to re-commit ourselves to its ideals and to join in the larger conversation of interpreting it and deriving meaning from it.

Israel's Journey is both a sum of departures and a sum of smaller journeys.

But once we start into the list of the places, the text is abundantly clear in emphasizing one more element: *Encampment*. The typical verse in the list reads, *וַיִּסְעוּ מִ... וַיַּחֲנּוּ בִּ... - they journeyed from ... and they encamped at ...*. Now we have a three-way debate. Is the Journey through the desert a series of *departures*, a series of smaller *journeys*, or a series of *encampments*? The easy answer is: all three. But why then does the list of all the march-stations shift from the language of *Departure*, expressed in the word *מוֹצְאֵיהֶם* (or *וַיֵּצְאוּ* with the root *י.צ.א.*) to the language of *Journey* and *Encampment*? *וַיִּסְעוּ וַיַּחֲנּוּ*? To answer this question, we have to summon an earlier text in the book of Numbers. Recall that on the day that the Sanctuary was finally consecrated, God's Cloud covered it.⁵ When the Cloud lifted that was the signal to the Israelites to move. And when the Cloud settled back onto the Sanctuary, that was the signal to encamp. *The people saw the movement of God's Cloud as communication from God*. Their response is summed up with this poetic refrain:

עַל פִּי ה' יִחַנּוּ וְעַל פִּי ה' יִסְעוּ
By order of God they would encamp,
and by order of God they would march on. (Num. 9:20, 23).
What this means is that the list of the journeys in Masei is not only intended to elicit many layers of responses - emotional, spiritual, intellectual - from the people. Rather it is also a reminder of all the times God spoke to them by means of the Cloud. When chanting these words as we do, with a special melody, we ought to also hear the refrain: *עַל פִּי ה' - at the order of God*.

By the order of God and they journeyed from _____
and at the order of God they encamped at _____.

We don't know what exactly was contained in the text that Moses wrote. But the text that ultimately ended up in the Torah not only functions as a literary monument to the Journey in the desert, but a commemoration of all the times God spoke to Israel by means of the lifting and settling of the Cloud. As such it is definitely a monument to the stories encoded by the names of all those places, but it is also a monument to the relationship between God and the people. Shabbat Shalom.

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⁴ Exod. 16:33-34. Moses tells Aaron to take a jar of manna and place it before God. Aaron does so and places it before the testimony. Num. 17:25, God tells Moses to retrieve Aaron's staff and place it before the testimony.

⁵ וּבָיִוִם הַקִּיָּים אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן כִּסָּה הָעֶנָן אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן לְאַהֲלֵה הָעֵדֻת (Num. 9:15).