

A Brief Note on Geography

This week we read *Parsha Matot* [1] and *Masei* [2], the concluding chapters of Sefer Bamidbar and the end of the longest narrative of the Torah – the story of Israel’s wilderness journey which took them from the slavery of Egypt to their camp by the Jordan River, poised to begin their battle for the conquest of the Promised Land.

At the beginning of *Parsha Masei* there is a description of the journeys of the Children of Israel since they were led out of Egypt. The narrative describes the forty-two encampments made by the Israelites over the forty-two years of their wandering. Several of the places mentioned in the itinerary are not found in the contemporaneous narratives that describe the original events. The places named are obscure, as possibly would be any desert locations that could appear and disappear with the winds. At best, we can only guess the actual route followed by the Children of Israel.

There are some very noticeable gaps in the descriptive narrative. For example, there is no reference to Mt. Sinai; perhaps the most important place visited by the Israelite. Also, like other of places named in the Torah, there remains controversy about its location. Once the short history of the Israelites had been recorded, the Torah proceeded to the political geography of the future Land of Israel. Unfortunately, the description is cryptic.

The original grant of a patrimony made by God to Abraham, at the beginning of the saga of the Children of Israel, was short on specifics; Abraham was simply commanded to go to a land that God would show him. [3] Abraham’s journey took him west from his homeland, probably on the higher reaches of the Euphrates River, and into the land of Canaan. Land is a grandiose description; Canaan at most sophisticated was a loose confederation of tribes ruled by petty chieftains. Later in the text, God ratified His covenant with Abraham; however this time the bequest of land appeared to be described with a certain measure of geographical certainty: “*To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates River*”. [4] To the modern day observer this may mean that the Promised Land was bordered by the Nile River in the west and the Euphrates, whose headwaters lie in Turkey and which runs 2700 kilometres south through present day Iraq to empty into the Persian Gulf, in the east.

The borders of the Promised Land are next referred to in *Parsha Mishpatim* where God promises to set Israel’s borders. There, the Land of Israel, *Eretz Yisrael*, is described by somewhat differently than He had told Abraham: “*from the Sea of Reeds to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the Wilderness until the River*”. [5]

This week’s *parsha* again delineates the boundaries of *Eretz Yisrael* and expands on the shortened description of *Mishpatim*. However, only few of the names used in the Torah were familiar even to the earliest commentators; for example, the Salt Sea would be the Dead Sea. The ascent of Akrabbim is familiar to travelers at the south end of the Dead Sea, and the twisting road to ascend up from modern day Sodom is still referred to as the Scorpion Pass. The western edge of Lake Kinnereth figured into the demarcation of the western border of *Eretz Yisrael*.

The identity of the stream or river of Egypt, which was the point at the south west edge of *Eretz Yisrael*, is a matter of some contention. Rashi was of the view that the river of

Egypt was the Nile River. Saadiah Gaon opined that the Torah was referring to Wadi El Arish, which lies between Port Said, Egypt and Gaza. His opinion is widely accepted.

Throughout its history the actual boundaries of *Eretz Yisrael* were constantly in flux. The lands captured by Joshua included land that lay to the east of the Jordan River, but not the lands of included in present day Lebanon, which the Torah appeared to include. During the reign of King David, the realm of *Eretz Yisrael* was at its most expansive and surpassed the borders described in the Torah. That realm, called by some “Greater Israel” extended in the east to an arc running between Damascus and Amman. The borders of *Eretz Yisrael* however contracted over time as the nation divided into the Kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and as powerful neighbors began to appreciate the trade routes that ran through it. Interestingly, the borders of *Eretz Yisrael* (and not the State of Israel) still remain uncertain.

Parsha Matot/Masei, Shabbath, July 22, 2006

1. Literally, *to the heads of the tribes.*
2. Literally, *the journeys*
3. Sefer Bereshit 12:1
4. Sefer Bereshit 15:18
5. Sefer Shemot 23:31