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 Parashat Matot-Masei (Numbers 30:2-36:13)
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Shabbat shalom!

Has anyone seen the Japanese film, *Departures*? If you want to learn about Japanese *tahara* and *hevra kadisha*, I recommend the film at that minimum. It also won the best foreign film Oscar in 2009. Basically, a failed cellist returns to his hometown from Tokyo and needs a job. Initially thinking that he is interviewing to be a travel agent, “assisting with departures,” he soon learns that he has become a *nōkanshi*, a participant in ritual burial. This is only the beginning of the story, and as you can imagine, it creates sufficient tension, angst, and drama to fill a full-length movie, albeit a subdued one.

I bring up this film because a scene from it immediately came to mind as I was reading Matot-Masei, and has helped me think about all that’s going on in this *parsha* (Torah portion). The main character in *Departures*, managing his emotions, expectations, and disappointments, and those of his family and friends, takes his cello to a remote hilltop and serenades nature. It is a stunning moment of peace and introspection, paused at the border, stillness amidst departures.

Today, I would like to talk about borders, boundaries, crossing overs. This *parsha* is full of them:

The reading begins with the rules of oaths and taking obligations. We get the most detailed account of releasing vows or holding someone to account when a woman transitions from one man’s household to another.

Next, *b’nai Yisrael* (the children of Israel, or Israelites) heads into battle against Midian. Not only does this affirm *b’nai Yisrael*’s difference from Midian after their close familial ties, but there is a striking shift in how the *sh’vatim* (tribes) are meant to comport themselves in battle. Where their usual practice is to attack the men and save the women and children, Moshe tells them to also slay the women, because “they are the very ones who, at the bidding of Balaam, induced the Israelites to trespass against Hashem in the matter of Peor, so that Hashem’s community was struck by the plague” (Numbers 31:16). Even if we might consider this a ‘good’ reason, we here cross a boundary into what was once considered inappropriate conduct in war.

This next is perhaps one of the best known moments of boundaries and (lack of) crossing over, when Gad, Reuven, and half of Menashe ask to stay on the east of the Jordan. I will come back around to this.

The beginning of Masei tells us of all the travels of *b’nai Yisrael* once they left Egypt – all the lands they crossed, the places they passed, the encampments made and left behind. In this wanderings, they received the *luhot* (Tablets of the Ten Commandments),¹ they said “נעשה ונשמעה”

¹ Exodus 20

na'ase v'nishma,² they made a golden calf,³ they suffered a plague and thousands died, Miriam died, Moses disobey and would not be let into the promised land. This is only suggested by the names of the places. But, when the list of places catches up with our narrative, we hear of another crossing over: Aaron goes up to *Hor haHar* (Mount Hor) and dies. And immediately in the *p'shat* (simple understanding of the Torah text), *b'nai* Yisrael continues traveling.

When they encamp at *arvot Moav* (steppes of Moab), Hashem tells Moshe of the borders of their new territory, and the men through which the land will be allotted.

Please bear with me through this abbreviated relay through the *parshyot*.

As land gets apportioned to the *levi'im* (priests from the tribe of Levi), their towns will comprise the cities of refuge: *arei miklat*. There's so much more to say about the *arei miklat* than I will get to today, but I want to draw your attention to the purpose of the cities to provide a berth for people running in fear, without shelter, between home and harm.

And lastly, we turn to some of my favorite women in all of *Tanah*⁴ – a quick return to *b'not* (the daughters of) Tzelofhad. Maḥla, Tirtza, Hogla, Milka, and Noa receive their inheritance... with a caveat. They can marry whomever they want as long as they marry within *shevet* (the tribe of) Menashe, so the land doesn't leave the tribe and reapportion the landholdings.

B'not Tzelofhad broke boundaries, but as they break them, they are also confined in the service of borders. Which at the level of tribal land negotiations makes sense, but if we think about what, and who, is property and how authority and capacity rest on property – land. *B'not* Tzelofhad force departures from previous rules about women in their community, as much as their execution of their new rights remain constrained by them.

Borders, boundaries, departures, transitions all over Matot-Masei.

There is a lot of acting upon in these – *b'nai* Yisrael being told what to do, how to act, their actions shaped by their conditions, their past, their tribal status, their gender.

Like *b'not* Tzelofhad in the previous *parsha*, Gad, Reuven, and *hetzi* (half of) Menashe (I'm lumping them in because they also stay on the east of the Jordan), ask to stay back for the lives and livelihood they want to pursue. The land in Gil'ad is better suited to raising cattle than in C'nan, and thus these *sh'vatim* want to stay.

² Exodus 24:7

³ Exodus 32

⁴ The Hebrew Bible contains the Five Books of Moses (Torah), the books of the Prophets (Nevi'im), and a collection called the Writings (Ketuvim). Torah: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy; Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi; Writings: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah, Chronicles. In Hebrew, the acronym is more apparent: TaNaḤ (תנ"ך) = תורה + נביאים + כתובים. *N.B.* the letter "כ" in Hebrew can be pronounced with a "k" sound or a "ḥ" sound.

They don't do what we've seen *b'nai Yisrael* do – act out. Like the very incident Moshe throws back at them, the failing of the spies, the *meraglim*.⁵ They ask, they negotiate, they take risks for what they want, they will act as army vanguards, not just infantry, in the battles to capture the land for the other tribes.

Ok ok ok, we know this. What's the point?

Well, there's a certain peace, or peacefulness with which Gad, Reuven, and *hetzi Menashe* go about this. There's a natural border, and they want to stay on one side, but this is not a border that they interpret as keeping them separate, as breaking their bonds of peoplehood, of responsibility to each other, or to following mitzvot, or to remembering the Exodus from Egypt.

These *sh'vatim* remind me of Daigo, the main character in *Departures*, playing his cello to the natural world as he seeks respite from his life of departures and also seeks stillness in motion.

We're in the middle of a transition now – it's *rosh hodesh* (the new month of) Av. The strictures of the Three Weeks mount. But it's also Shabbat, when we have our respite from those inflictions of mourning and loss.

Tisha b'Av is all wrenching, awful, forced departure. For me, the boundary between *shemona b'Av* (the eighth of Av) and Tisha b'Av is a struggling, tension-filled resistance.

We're also in a moment of extended, unclear border, between our pandemic lives and our possible post-pandemic lives. We entered our pandemic lives under certain conditions, and if your experience was anything like mine, those conditions were consistently changing while boredom, isolation, and loneliness were constant. We're returning to 'normal' – but it won't feel 'normal' because this, whatever this is, has become our new normal.

Just because we have all these moving borders around us, does not mean they have all the power, and can only act upon us. *Matot-Masei* indicates that we can also create the borders that we need, or to change the borders given to us – and if we follow Reuven and Gad, with care, peace, and negotiation, and a refusal to back away. Borders can be protective, sustaining, even creative; I hope as you face all these crossing overs on the horizon, you have peace and find ways to stay connected even as you negotiate your own boundaries.

⁵ Chapter 13:1-15:41