

“The End of Endings” – Sermon for Parshat Mattot-Massei
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Does Big G have free will? If we’re created in Big G’s image, does that mean Big G is just as screwed up as we are? Is the real question not whether we can prove something we have faith in, but whether we *should* prove it? That proving it removes the need for, and yes the benefits of, having faith in something? Will we ever be able to *comprehend* what existed before the beginning, or comprehend how the universe exists without beginning and, presumably, without ending?

These are big, cosmic questions, to be considered and answered by the greatest minds of our generation. Of course, that means I’ll address none of them today.

As I learned from the one book in high school that I ever read all the way through, things have endings. And they’re important, at least for passing exams. Sometimes they’re bad, like the finale of “Lost.” Sometimes they’re good, like suddenly and unexpectedly waking up next to Suzanne Pleshette. Some are inevitable, such as the Mets’ season effectively ending on April 20th. So, what about today’s ending? I don’t mean sundown in a few hours, I mean the Torah reading.

Today we finished reading from the book of B’midbar, or in Hebrew, Numbers. That’s the fourth book of the Torah. Now, for five points, how many books are there in the Torah? < > But were there always?

For the moment, let’s put aside any debate about Torah authorship, timing, and all that. The Torah as we know it ends with Deuteronomy, which consists largely of Moses getting the last word in for thirty-three chapters. If he weren’t “slow of speech and tongue” it probably would’ve been forty chapters. The Moses-inspired greeting “may you live to be 120” would have really meant “so you can get through everything he said.”

The first thirty chapters of Devarim basically consist of three long speeches by Moses to the Israelites. The first recapped their forty years in the desert. The second recaps the laws to follow so they can keep their promised land. The third reassures that even if they stray, repentance can lead to things working out.

Then there’s the song of Moses, his blessing, handing the keys to the desert over to Joshua, and Moses walking off into the sunset one last time. (Well, technically he couldn’t really be walking into the sunset. The sun sets in the west. The Promised Land he wasn’t allowed to enter was to the west. So, maybe he walked off toward the sunset and after crossing out of sight over a ridge bounced off an almighty forcefield and headed north or something.)

That’s all a rather nice culmination. Lots of final speeches, dramatic declarations, and a transition that makes a good segue into the Book of Joshua. Before I digress into how

Devarim illustrates the importance of succession planning – a lesson lost on too many Jewish institutions, not to mention Silicon Valley companies – let’s consider instead what it would be like if the Torah ended after B’midbar. After what we read today. How does it compare as an ending?

The first aliyah in this double parshah talks about vows or promises, and that despite what modern society might indicate, people are required to keep them. Perhaps if the Torah ended there, political campaigns would look very different.

Then again, the next thing was to go and attack Midian. Pinchas – the man who last week reminded us that sometimes you just have to put a stake in the ground – led over 10,000 Israelites to battle, to avenge the Midianites attempting to seduce the Israeli men in a recent episode that amazingly hasn’t been made into any TV movies. They killed all the Midianite men and rulers, and brought back the women, children, and their valuables.

A strong, dramatic final event? Sure. However, perhaps not the note upon which to end the best-selling scroll in the history of parchment.

Fortunately, there’s another aliyah. It starts with Moses angry. Why, I hear you ask. Because they attacked the Midianites, wiping out the population? No. He was mad they spared the women. After all, they’re the ones who did the actual seducing. Gender disparities notwithstanding, time is taken to divide the spoils of war between the soldiers, the general populace, and the Levites. Turns out that not a single soldier was lost in the battle. The officers, in thanks for this miracle, donated all the gold they’d gotten to the tabernacle.

So, perhaps this is a chance to end on a more cautionary tale that ended with a nice touch? And even a precedent for synagogue donations when good things happen.

Then comes the third aliyah, the beginning of what we actually read today. After forty years, the Israelites found someone who would give them directions. They’re now on the cusp of entering the Promised Land. Then, without warning, the tribes of Reuben and Gad say “wait a minute.” They like it where they are. They’ve got livestock. They want to settle right where they are, on the eastern bank of the Jordan River.

Moses got angry. Again. He accused them of being afraid, and not wanting to join their brethren in the struggle to settle the Promised Land. Thankfully, nothing about bone spurs or the National Guard came into the conversation. Before that could happen, the two tribes happily offered to send their men along with the other tribes across the river, if they could first just settle their wives, children, their children’s children, their livestock, and their livestock’s livestock.

So, a nice moment of camaraderie and brotherhood. A good place to end? Sure, except now Moses has been angry twice. Is that the last we should hear of him? And, he hasn’t actually accepted the offer from the two tribes yet.

Thankfully, here comes the fourth aliyah. Moses accepts their offer. You know all this, of course, because you were listening with rapt attention just a few minutes ago. Somehow, half the tribe of Menasheh ends up as part of the deal, too. The two-and-a-half tribes settle on the eastern bank, apparently very quickly. Then there's a recap of the 42 legs of the journey the Israelites took through the desert, all the way from Egypt to where they were that day.

Great place to end? A recap of an epic forty-year journey that would be recounted throughout history even more times than people throughout history have wanted election recounts. And, it's where our triennial reading today concluded, and I didn't hear any of you asking for more.

But wait, there is more. In the fifth aliyah, Big G gives the Israelites instructions for what to do as they inhabit the land after crossing the Jordan. Destroying idols, settling lands, dividing the land among the nine-and-a-half tribes that weren't moving back to the upper east side once they were done. The borders of Israel are detailed so clearly and distinctly that in the thousands of years since, nobody has ever debated them.

Alright, so now we have a conclusion that gives some foreshadowing that sets up a sequel. Hollywood loves its sequels, Hollywood is made up mostly of people, people are made in the image of...

The sixth aliyah saves us from that cosmic digression. After all, the land was divided so far among only the tribes. So, Big G appointed a member of each tribe to divide the land of each tribe among its members. While they were at it, they were supposed to designate 48 cities for the Levites who, after all, didn't get their own land like the "normal" tribes. However, six of those 48 cities were to be special, as detailed in...

The seventh aliyah. Those six cities are to be cities of refuge. Ostensibly, anyone who inadvertently kills someone could flee to one of those cities and be protected from the icy revenge of the victim's family. After that, the Israelites are told to not take money from criminals for lighter sentences; in essence, not letting someone's status stand in the way of justice. Finally, the aliyah, parshah, and book all end with a visit back to the daughters of Tzelafchad.

A couple weeks ago, Tzelafchad passed away, as he does around that time every year. He had no sons, so his daughters pleaded with Moses – successfully – to inherit his portion. However, today it comes up that his grandsons could cause a problem. What if Tzelafchad's daughters marry men from other tribes? Their sons, from other tribes, could inherit from Tzelafchad's tribe, thus taking from one tribe and giving to another. The mathematical contortions to resolve all the possible permutations are daunting; daunting enough that Big G said simply for Tzelafchad's daughters to not marry outside of their own tribe. Done and done.

And that's it. That thud you heard is how B'midbar ends. If it weren't for Devarim being tacked on, that's how the entire Torah would end. While that last aliyah was filled with

potentially politically charged tidbits, it's the least conclusive of all the aliyot in the parshah.

Which aliyah would've made for the best ending of the Torah? Each of them has pros and cons. Then again, some might say the same for Devarim. Why not? After all, where the Torah ends, the Bible immediately continues with Joshua.

Perhaps the lesson here is that there are no endings. Certainly not absolute ones. Does every book have a last page? Yes. Does every film have a last scene? Yes. But do they end there? Sometimes there are sequels. Sometimes we think about them afterward. Sometimes we talk about them afterward. They go on, beyond what we'd typically call their endings.

Just like the Torah. After all, on Simchat Torah, we read the end and before we leave we start right back at the beginning again. It's the circle of leyn.

So, even though we hit the end of a book of the Torah, the beat goes on. Is that limited to coming back next Shabbat for another exciting episode? No. Even more, it's about taking it with us. Thinking about it. Talking about it. The last aliyah today had the weakest "ending" story-wise but again was one of the most politically charged. Maybe that is there to reinforce the non-closure of the end of the book. Of every book. Or every day, or every year. Or even every life.

Without being gratuitous, if you want to see another illustration of that... The legend of Robin Hood goes back over one thousand years. It's changed over time, adapting to the times. It gets told and retold, never quite the same way twice. If you want to see how I've told it – and how it ties into what I said here today – my newest play "The Hood of Sherwood" premieres in a couple weeks right here in Saratoga. You don't have to be biblical to survive for millennia. Just as you don't have to be secular to retain the interest of the masses for that long. The media calls it the second day story – where the story goes, on the day after the big splash of breaking news. Much like how one can wonder what it's really like the day after the movie ends, and they all wake up for the first time in whatever new world they found. There's no ending. Yes, there are closing credits and someone waiting to sweep up the popcorn, but there's also the drive home, and *us* waking up the next day, with remnants of each thing we encounter paying forward. We can learn that from the Torah and its lack of ending. And we can take something with us from it, every time.

But if that wasn't enough for you, I will now reveal the true answer to two of the cosmic questions I mentioned at the start. Does Big G have free will? And if we're created in Big G's image, does that mean Big G is just as screwed up as we are?

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Sorry. I'll have to end it here. Shabbat shalom.

(My past sermons are available at <http://brookwrite.com/sermon/>. You might also like my monthly Jewish humor column, Rear Pew Mirror, available at <http://brookwrite.com>, and on Facebook at <http://facebook.com/rearpewmirror>.)