Masei begins with a list of the forty-two stopping points of the Israelites on their forty-year journey through the wilderness, finishing with their stay on the plains of Moab, where they will remain until the death of Moses.

Their destination is now very close, so the parsha sets out the borders of the Promised Land, as well as specifying places that will become cities of refuge.

The parsha ends with a protest on the part of the leaders of the tribe of Menashe that the ruling in favour of the daughters of Tzelofochad (that they were entitled to inherit their late father’s share in the land) could mean that the land was lost to the tribe if any of the women married members of another tribe. A Divine ruling resolves the conflict: the daughters have a right to inherit the land but must marry within the tribe.

With this, the book of Bamidbar ends.

The long journey to Israel is almost over. The Jordan is nearly within sight. We have read the long list of stops along the way. Finally the list draws to a close, and God tells Moses: “Take possession of the land and settle in it, for I have given you the land to possess” (Bamidbar 33:53). This, according to Ramban, is the source of the command to dwell in the land of Israel and inherit it.

This brings us the question of the religious significance of the land of Israel. Israel is clearly central to Judaism. The overarching story told in Tanakh is the promise of and journey to the land. Jewish history begins with Abraham and Sarah’s journey to it. Shemot to Devarim are taken up with the second journey in the days of Moses. Tanach as a whole ends with Cyrus king of Persia granting permission to Jews, exiled in Babylon, to return to their land (II Chronicles 36:23).

The puzzle of Jewish history is that though the Holy Land is at its heart, Jews have spent more time in exile than in Israel; more time longing for it than dwelling in it; more time travelling than arriving. On the one hand, monotheism must understand God as non-territorial. The God of everywhere can be found anywhere. He is not limited to one people or one place – as pagans believed. He exercises His power even in Egypt. He sends a prophet, Jonah, to Nineveh in Assyria. He is with another prophet, Ezekiel, in Babylon. There is no place in the universe where He is not. On the other hand, it must be impossible to live fully as a Jew outside Israel, for if not, Jews would not have been commanded to go there initially, or to return subsequently. Why is the God beyond place to be found specifically in this place?

What is special about Israel? In The Kuzari, Judah Halevi says that different environments have different ecologies. Just as there are some countries, climates, and soils particularly suited to growing vines, so there is a country, Israel, particularly suited to growing prophets – indeed a whole divinely-inspired people. Ramban gives a different explanation. Though every land and nation is under the overarching sovereignty of God, only Israel is directly so. Others are ruled by intermediaries earthly and heavenly. Their fate is governed by other factors. Only in the Land and
People of Israel do we find a nation’s fortunes and misfortunes directly linked to their relationship with God. Yehudah Halevi and Ramban both describe what we might call mystical geography. The difference between them is that Yehudah Halevi looks to earth, Ramban to heaven. For Yehudah Halevi, what is special about the land of Israel is its soil, landscape, and climate. For Ramban, it is its direct governance by God. For both of them, religious experience is possible outside Israel, but it is a pale shadow of what it is in the land.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:
1. Do you think Judaism is different in Israel?
2. What is the difference between the approaches taken by Yehudah Halevi and Ramban to the unique nature of the land of Israel?
3. Have you been to Israel? Did you feel something special while you were there?

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

There once was an old man with many pains, who was prescribed goat’s milk to drink. He bought a goat so he could drink its milk every day and be healed. Soon the goat disappeared from the house, and could not be found anywhere nearby. Days later she returned all by herself, with her udder full of milk that tasted like it was from Eden itself. Many times the goat disappeared, and then returned with milk sweeter than honey. The old man dreamed of learning where his goat went, and so his granddaughter said she would follow the goat, so they could learn what was happening.

The next time the goat left, the young girl followed her until they arrived at a cave, into which the goat entered. With some hesitation the girl entered after her and continued to follow the goat until they emerged from the cave into a magnificent land of mountains and rivers, trees full of fruit, and fields of grain. The goat climbed up a tree and ate from the carobs that were dripping with honey, and then drank from a clear spring of water.

When some people passed by, the girl asked them the name of the place they had arrived at, and they replied “You are in the Land of Israel!” She kissed the soil and blessed God for bringing her to this place, and sat down under the tree.

As she was sitting and eating from the fruits of the land of Israel, she planned to return home, but then she heard a voice proclaiming: “Come, let us go out to greet the Shabbat Queen.” It was too late to get home before Shabbat arrived, so she took a piece of paper and wrote a letter to her grandfather explaining where she was, and telling him to simply follow the goat the next time, and he would be able to join her in the Land of Israel. She rolled up the note and placed it in the goat’s ear, because she knew that when the goat returned to her grandfather, he would pet her, and she would flick her ear, and the note would fall out. Then she sent the goat back to her grandfather.

The goat returned to the old man, but she did not flick her ears, and the note did not fall. When the old man saw that the goat had returned without his granddaughter, he cried a bitter cry for his beloved was missing. He wept and mourned for his granddaughter, and whenever he saw the goat, he was reminded of his grief. So he sent for the butcher to slaughter the goat. As they were skinning her, the note fell out of her ear. As he read the note he wept and was inconsolable, for his lost granddaughter, and the missed opportunity to reach the Land of Israel.

Since that time the mouth of the cave has been hidden from the eye, and there is no longer a short way to reach the Land of Israel.

Adapted from The Fable of the Goat, by S.Y. Agnon

QUESTIONS TO PONDER:
1. How does this story describe the unique nature of the land of Israel? How does this compare to the explanations found in The Core Idea and Thinking More Deeply?
2. What do you think the message of the story is?

THINKING MORE DEEPLY

The Torah is not merely a code of personal perfection. It is the framework for the construction of a society, a nation, a culture. It contains welfare legislation, civil law, rules governing employer-employee relationships, environmental provisions, rules of animal welfare, public health, and governmental and judicial systems. The Torah stands at the opposite end of the spectrum from Gnosticism and other world-denying philosophies that see religion as an ascent of the soul to ethereal...
realms of the spirit. For Judaism, God lives here, on earth, in human lives, interactions, and associations. The Torah is terrestrial because God seeks to dwell on earth. Thus the Jewish task is to create a society with the Divine Presence in its midst.

What was and is unique about Israel is that it is the sole place on earth where Jews have had the chance to create an entire society on Jewish lines. It is possible to live a Jewish life in Manchester or Monsey, Madrid or Minsk. But it is always an abridged experience. Only in Israel do Jews conduct their lives in the language of the Bible, within time defined by the Jewish calendar and space saturated in Jewish history. Only there do they form a majority. Only there are they able to construct a political system, an economy, and an environment on the template of Jewish values. There alone can Judaism be what it is meant to be — not just a code of conduct for individuals, but also and essentially the architectonics of a society.

Hence there must be some space on earth where Jews practise self-government under divine sovereignty. But why Israel, specifically? Because it was and is a key strategic location where three continents — Europe, Africa, and Asia — meet. Lacking the extended flat and fertile space of the Nile Delta or the Tigris-Euphrates valley (or today, the oil fields of Arabia), it could never be the base of an empire, but because of its location it was always sought after by empires. So it was politically vulnerable.

It was and is ecologically vulnerable, because its water resources are dependent on rain, which in that part of the world is never predictable (hence the frequent famines mentioned in Bereishit). Its existence could never, therefore, be taken for granted. Time and again its people, surviving challenges, would experience this as a miracle. Small geographically and demographically, it would depend on outstanding achievement — political, military, and economic — on the part of its people. This would depend, in turn, on their morale and sense of mission. Thus the Prophets knew, naturally as well as supernaturally, that without social justice and a sense of divine vocation, the nation would eventually fall and suffer exile again.

There is a directness, a naturalness, of Jewish experience in Israel that can be found nowhere else. Only in Israel is God so close that you can feel Him in the sun and wind, sense Him just beyond the hills, hear Him in the inflections of everyday speech, breathe His presence in the early morning air and live, dangerously but confidently, under the shadow of His wings.

Because the terrain of Israel is such that it cannot become the base of an empire, it will constantly be at threat from larger and stronger neighbouring powers. Israel will always find itself outnumbered. It will need to rely on exceptional courage from its soldiers, and ingenuity in battle. That will take high national morale, which in turn will require from the people a sense of belonging to a just and inclusive society.

Commitment will be needed from every individual. They will need to feel that their cause is justified and that they are fighting for something worth preserving. So the entire configuration of the Torah’s social ethics, whose guardians were the Prophets, is already implicit in the kind of geopolitical entity Israel is and will be. It would always be a small and highly vulnerable country, set in a strategic location at the junction of three continents, Europe, Africa and Asia... as with its agriculture, so with its battles: Israel is a people that must lift its eyes to heaven.

**Future Tense, pp139-140**

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

1. According to the description here of the Land of Israel, is it a good land and an attractive place to live?
2. Does this idea, about the impact on the inhabitants of living in Israel apply equally to today?

**FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS**

...as with its agriculture, so with its battles: Israel is a people that must lift its eyes to heaven.

**QUESTIONS TO PONDER:**

1. Why is Israel central to Judaism?
2. How might the importance of Israel to Judaism seem to conflict with the monotheistic idea of a non-territorial God?
3. How might this idea be in tension with the path of Jewish history?
4. Why did God choose Israel to be the holy land?
5. Does this idea apply equally to the Israel of today?

**AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE**

1. Why is Israel central to Judaism?
2. How might the importance of Israel to Judaism seem to conflict with the monotheistic idea of a non-territorial God?
3. How might this idea be in tension with the path of Jewish history?
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5. Does this idea apply equally to the Israel of today?
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THE CORE IDEA

1. When it comes to personal Judaism, there is a wide range of opinions from Jewish thinkers on this. Ramban famously declared that Judaism in the diaspora is merely practice for when the Jewish people can return as a nation to their land in Messianic times. However, this is a minority opinion. On a national level, it is clear that Judaism has changed dramatically since exile has forced an evolution of Judaism to a personal religion of ritual practice rather than national temple worship. Rabbi Sacks has many times expressed that the national mission of the Jewish people is to create a society based on the values and principles of Torah, and that this can only truly happen in a Jewish state.

2. Yehudah HaLevi says that the physical land of Israel is the most conducive to developing a spiritual relationship with God, and Ramban says that God personally supervises the land of Israel (which is not the case for other lands). HaLevi says Israel is physically different form other lands and Ramban says it is spiritually different, and both agree that this has a spiritual impact on the inhabitants of the land.

3. Encourage this discussion to be honest and thoughtful.

IT ONCE HAPPENED...

1. The story describes in an almost mystical way the physical quality of the Land of Israel. It is a literary expression of the biblical description of Israel as a ‘land flowing with milk and honey’. However, it is possible to interpret Agnon’s fable in a spiritual way also, and in the original story the connection between the land and the spirituality of its participants as they welcome Shabbat is explored.

2. This story was originally published in 1925, at a time when there was no state of Israel but when Zionism as an aspirational political movement was increasing in strength. The British Mandate had recently been established and hopes of a Jewish state were looking increasingly possible. Agnon often wrote from a cultural perspective of his youth in the shtetl of Europe, and this story is an example of this. Agnon’s message is that we have yearned to return to the land of Israel for thousands of years, waiting for a mystical route back (perhaps through Mashiach) and now in our generation a route is appearing, and if we don’t take it now we may lose the opportunity for many generations.

FROM THE THOUGHT OF RABBI SACKS

1. Israel is described here as a difficult place to live due to its climate (and lack of precipitation) and geopolitical location (under continuous threat of attack). However, these factors cause a spiritual strength and refinement that make it an attractive place to live spiritually.

2. The argument can be made that this remains to be the case, both in terms of climate and geopolitics.

AROUND THE SHABBAT TABLE

1. Israel has always been the central focus of Judaism, from the ‘final destination’ in the biblical narrative, to the role Jerusalem and the Temple played in the service of God. During the period of exile, Israel became the focus of our daily prayer, and the place we longed to return to in Messianic times. It is even the direction to which Jews pray every day. There are many mitzvot that can only be done in the Land of Israel. Israel has a central role to play in the philosophy of Rabbi Sacks, as the only place where Jews can fulfill their destiny and national mission, creating a society based on the values of the Torah.

2. The pagans believed that each nation and each region have their own personal god watching over them in that place. Judaism’s revolutionary belief is that there is one God, who is concerned and cares for all people, nations, and regions, equally. The tension here is, if God is everywhere and cares for everyone, why might Israel be so important that He commanded Moses and Joshua to lead us there, to settle there, and build a society where Israel is the focus?

3. If Israel is so central to the Jewish national mission, the worship of God, and the narrative in Tanach, why has Jewish history found the Jewish people living in exile outside of the borders of Israel for more of its history than when it lived in the land?

4. According to Ramban and Yehudah HaLevi, there are spiritual and physical qualities that lead to spiritual development of the people that live in this land. According to Rabbi Sacks, it was chosen because it was and is a key strategic location where three continents meet, and because it lacks the necessary conditions to be the base of an empire, its occupants could never be imperial (antithetical to Torah values), and yet because of its location it has always been sought after by empires, leading to political and military vulnerability. It is also ecologically vulnerable, with scarce water resources and dependency on rain, in an arid region. All of this leads to the realisation of its inhabitants as to just how dependent they are on God, and this leads to an improved connection with God.

5. See From the Thought of Rabbi Sacks, answer 2.