

MATOS (NUMBERS 30:2-36:13)

One Small Step for a Man...

2002 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

I drove to Montreal last week. First, I pulled out of my driveway. Then I went to the bottom of Dolson Road and turned right on College. After a left on Highview, I turned right and drove north on the New York Thruway...

Are you bored yet? Could you care less about each of the turns I made on my way to Montreal? Would you like to know where I stopped for gas and coffee?

No one is interested in hearing the unimportant details of another person's life. If I wanted to talk about my trip, I would be more likely to focus on the purpose of my trip, and what I did at my destination.

The commentaries are troubled by the Torah's verbosity in describing the 40-year itinerary of the Israelites in the desert. The trip, which should have taken eleven days (Deut. 1:2) was extended to forty years as a punishment to the Israelites for not wanting to enter the Land. (See "I'm Gonna Do What You Want ... Whether You Like It or Not!") And so, they meandered around:

"These are the journeys of the Israelites...These were their stops along the way...The Israelites left Ramses and camped in Sukkos. They left Sukkos and camped in Esam at the edge of the desert..."
(Numbers, 33:1-2, 5-6)

The Torah goes on to give us a stop-by-stop detail of the trip. While there are a few historical details, such as *"They left Alush and camped in Rephidim, where there was no water for the people to drink,"* (verse 14) most of the verses simply tell us, *"They left...and camped in..."*

Why does the Torah go into such minute detail? Do we really care where they stopped along the way to the Land of Canaan?

Rashi explains that the Torah is showing us that even the 40-year punishment was meted out with compassion. We envision the poor Israelites, shlepping from place to place with all their worldly possessions, never having a chance to rest and catch their breaths. Actually, they didn't move all that often. The Torah tells us about 42 moves during those 40 years. Additionally, says Rashi, in view of the

fact that they moved fourteen times in the first year, and eight times in the last year, they actually only moved 20 times in 38 years. (I moved 11 times in the first 16 years after I got married. They had a better ratio than I did!)

I would like to suggest another answer. From the moment we are born until the time we draw our final breath, we are exposed to life's experiences. Everything we see, everywhere we go, changes us forever, for good or for bad.

If I were to try to figure out how many coincidences led to my meeting my wife, I would never succeed. Who could have predicted that I would HAPPEN to be in a certain place, and meet a certain person who recommended I study in a certain Yeshiva where a certain person would mention a certain young lady to someone else who would mention her to me? I have a wonderful job, working with the elderly in a [retirement home](<http://fountainviewshul>).

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