

preach jihad against us today? Does that place us too close to those whose ideology defined us as less than human and had no pangs of conscience when they sent our elders and small infants to the death camps?

As someone who considers himself a contemporary Reform Jew, and therefore, a “liberal,” I can’t help but pose the questions: When does it become ethnically incorrect to think of ourselves as “members of a tribe,” with hard, solid boundaries dividing “us” from “them”? When does it become religiously archaic to think of a fierce, demanding, and potentially wrathful God who is supremely “Other”? When, in liberal Reform circles, does it become politically incorrect to wonder aloud whether our interfaith marriage rate is somehow the result of our own failure to “man” the boundaries? Perhaps the “nice Jewish boy” model hasn’t served our community as well as we thought it would. Perhaps it is time for us to revisit our buried Jewish warrior spirit.

When we do so, let us also admit that it is time to open the gender gates. It is time for “Jewish warriors” to not only be *male* warriors. After all, is the warrior spirit—the basic instinct to defend what you love—only a masculine trait? Is the impetus to fight for what you believe is right and just only a masculine trait? Are traits such as bravery, duty, self-sacrifice, and discipline only reserved for men? If our community still admires and encourages those traits, then they must belong not only to our sons, but also to our daughters. I welcome opening a meaningful dialogue with my contemporary sisters and brothers to elicit what I am sure will be their varied responses.

*Mattot* is telling us that maintaining our covenant means ensuring our survival as a faithful religious community. That survival requires that we be ready to establish and defend our boundaries. Those who defend our boundaries and our community are Jewish warriors.

And sometimes, words are not sufficient.



מסעי

## Masei

### Resting Places on the Journey

RABBI ARTHUR GREEN

**These are the journeys of the children of Israel who went forth from Egypt in their multitudes, by the hand of Moses and Aaron. Moses wrote their goings forth to journey by the mouth of God; these are their journeys as they went forth.**

(Numbers 33:1–2 [my translation, here and in the rest of the commentary—AG])

If there is a new Kabbalah, or Jewish secret doctrine, to be revealed for our age, I have long suspected that its biblical basis will be this seemingly obscure portion, which contains a list of the various stopping places in the course of Israel’s forty-year journey through the wilderness. The Torah reading tradition, at least as practiced in the Ashkenazic synagogue, recognizes a mysterious quality in these place names, chanting them in a special lilting tune that is used only here and at the Song of the Sea.

**RABBI ARTHUR GREEN** is Irving Brudnick Professor of Jewish Philosophy and Religion and rector of the Rabbinical School at Hebrew College in Boston, Massachusetts. He is author or editor of many books, including *Tormented Master: The Life and Spiritual Quest of Rabbi Nahman of Bratslav*; *Seek My Face: A Jewish Mystical Theology*; and *Ehyeh: A Kabbalah for Tomorrow* (all Jewish Lights). His newest book is *Radical Judaism: Hasidism for a New Era*.

Imagine Moses writing them down as he completes the Torah, just before giving his great final speeches. He knows that he is not to enter the Promised Land, that he will have no part in the “glory of battle” that lies ahead. Instead, he chooses to leave his people with a list of all those places in which they had camped along the way, back when they were still just wanderers. But this record of travels, seemingly meaningless and perhaps confused meanderings around the desert wasteland, is not written down just as a memento for future generations. There is something sacred in the list of place names—a secret yet to be revealed.

They journeyed from Elim and camped at Yam-Suf. They journeyed from Yam-Suf and camped at Midbar Sin. They journeyed from Midbar Sin and camped at Dofkah. They journeyed from Dofkah and camped at Alush. They journeyed from Alush and camped at Rephidim, where there was no water for the people to drink. They journeyed from Rephidim and camped at Midbar Sinai. They journeyed from Midbar Sinai and camped at the Graves of Desire.... (Numbers 33: 10–16)

Journeys, wanderings. The reason we will write our own Kabbalah around them is because we, too, are wanderers. In the private religion of our own inner lives, we all have such sacred lists, all the important stopping places in our journeys. Our generation wanders as none before it, perhaps not since the days of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. After many centuries of relatively stable human settlement, created by agriculture and the deep bond it forged between men and soil, the twentieth century, with its great upheavals of population, broke that bond and set us loose. Born in places where our families had only the shallowest roots, we felt free to wander, to cover territory across the country and around the world, before settling down. The decision to stop wandering was a hard one; many of us never quite come to peace with it. When we do settle, it is often in yet newer places. Each generation, so it begins to seem, seeks out a new place to call home and make its nest.

They journeyed from the Graves of Desire and camped in Hazerot. They journeyed from Hazerot and camped in Rithmah. They journeyed from Rithmah and camped in Rimmon Parez. (Numbers 33:17–19)

Lay out your own family's journey this way, as much detail as you know of it. “They journeyed from Berditchev and camped in Hamburg. They sailed from Hamburg and landed in Ellis Island. They journeyed from Ellis Island and camped on Rivington Street. They journeyed from Rivington Street and camped in the Bronx, on the Grand Concourse. They journeyed from the Grand Concourse and settled in Teaneck.” Now your own travels, key stations along your road of life. “I journeyed from Teaneck and camped in West Philadelphia. I journeyed from West Philadelphia and backpacked in Europe. I journeyed from Europe and camped in Ann Arbor.” Go ahead, do your own. Write it down, just like Moses did. Once you have your list, try chanting it aloud.

There is something of the nesting instinct that belongs to our feminine side; the man-soul within us always struggles with the desire to keep wandering, to see life as an endless journey rather than as the history of a growing home. Even when settled and loving our families, there is something in us that still hankers for the open road. That's how Jack Kerouac became the hero of an entire male generation, his readers mostly guys who had long given up such travels but still wanted to hear and dream about them.

We even have a word for it, an English term derived from the old German—wanderlust. What is it in us men that still desires, against all reason, to cut loose from ties and hit the road? How many good relationships have we ended, how many hearts lie broken, because we just couldn't “stay put”? Perhaps it is that old tribal wanderer, the one who has not quite left behind the “hunter-gatherer” stage of human history, who remains alive somewhere deep within us.

The ancient memory is embedded in our lives as Jews. Look at two of our oldest rituals and ask where they really come from. On the spring full moon, we used to sacrifice a lamb and then, for a

week, eat only nomads' bread. We still eat that thin, crunchy stuff, bread like that which people made before we settled down, before we had ovens. The dough was carried on our backs, so we're told, baked only by the sun. At the fall full moon, we leave our houses and live in wanderers' huts for a week, covered with palm fronds or pine branches or whatever our climate provides. Only later did these rites come to be associated with one specific journey, that which took us out of Egypt. But their origins go back to the most ancient of human memories. What are they, if not nostalgia for the freedoms of that ancient age, passed by so many centuries ago, but not quite fully left behind?

Some of the old desert place names seem to have meaning, and might be translated that way: "They journeyed from Rissah and camped in Community. They journeyed from Community and camped at Mount Beauty. They journeyed from Mount Beauty and camped at Trembling. They journeyed from Trembling and camped at Choirs. They journeyed from Choirs and camped at the Bottom (or maybe at "Asshole"; anyway, it was a terrible place)." But we're not quite sure of those meanings. Perhaps we need another set of tools, not yet discovered, to really decipher them.

Here we are, still wandering through our wilderness, not knowing if we'll ever get to our Promised Land. Meanwhile we struggle with the meaning of all this travel, seeking to find out how each way station will reveal some holy secret. All we can do for now is write them all down. What they mean is something we'll figure out later, when we have time.



# *Devarim/* Deuteronomy

Also by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin from Jewish Lights

*A Dream of Zion*

*American Jews Reflect on Why Israel Matters to Them*

*Righteous Gentiles in the Hebrew Bible  
Ancient Role Models for Sacred Relationships*

*Being God's Partner*

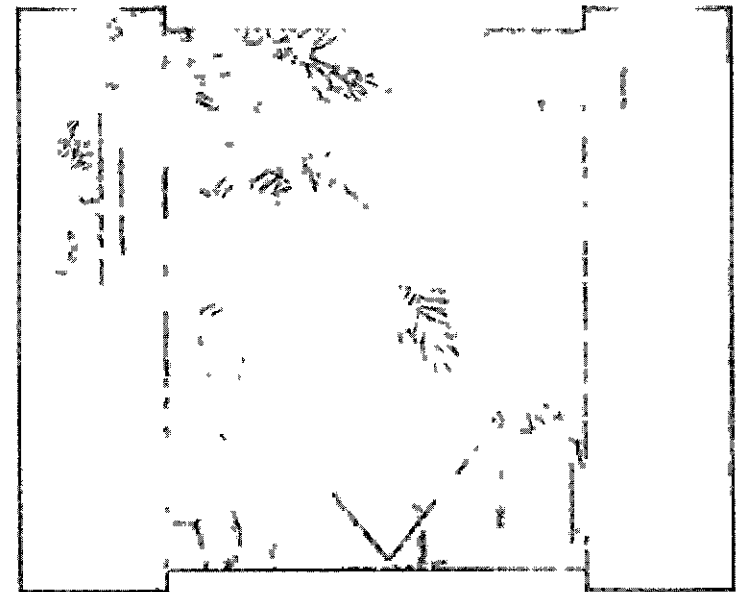
*How to Find the Hidden Link between Spirituality and Your Work*

*Putting God on the Guest List, 3rd Ed.  
How to Reclaim the Spiritual Meaning of  
Your Child's Bar or Bat Mitzvah*

*For Kids—Putting God on Your Guest List, 2nd Ed.  
How to Claim the Spiritual Meaning of Your Bar or Bat Mitzvah*

*The Bar/Bat Mitzvah Memory Book, 2nd Ed.  
An Album for Treasuring the Spiritual Celebration*

# The Modern Men's Torah Commentary



**New Insights from Jewish Men  
on the 54 Weekly Torah Portions**

Edited by Rabbi Jeffrey K. Salkin

*For People of All Faiths, All Backgrounds*

**JEWISH LIGHTS Publishing**

Woodstock, Vermont