

The Forty Two Journeys in the Desert

At the start of the sedra we read a list of the forty two places the Jews camped on their journey out of Egypt. But what do we learn practically from this list? What was the point in the Torah listing each place?

Let us first examine a different topic. According to many sources, there is a prohibition for Jews to live in Egypt.¹ This begs the question of how Jews (including illustrious ones such as the Rambam himself, the Radvaz and Rav Ovadiah Yosef) permitted themselves to live in Egypt. Much has been written on this topic, including a fascinating report that the Rambam occasionally signed his letters "Moshe Ben Maimon, who transgresses 3 prohibitions every day".²

One approach is of the Sefer Yereim³, who holds that *it is only forbidden to travel to Egypt from Israel*, reversing the journey the Jews made from Egypt to Israel. There is no problem with living in Egypt itself, as long as one travels there in a permitted way.

Rabbi Yosef Shaul Natanson (Rabbi of Lvov, 1808-1875, in his sefer Divrei Shaul) extends this further, to answer our original question. Why does the Torah find it necessary to list all the places the Jews camped? Well, according to the Yereim it is only forbidden to travel on exactly the same route the Jews took – we therefore need to know the route they took, so we can avoid transgressing the aveira of returning to Egypt. This is why all forty two places are listed.



An approximation of the route taken by the Jews. From the sefer *Eleh Masei* by Rabbi Don Schwartz, Jerusalem

Returning to Egypt by sea

In the Tochacha in Parshas Ki Sovo (28:60), one of the curses is that the Jews will be forced to transgress the prohibition to return to Egypt – the Torah says, "He will return you to Egypt *in ships*". We see that it is even forbidden to travel to Egypt by sea. This seems to be a question on the Yereim, who holds that it is only forbidden to return to Egypt along the route of the exodus.

But I once heard it suggested that even according to the Yereim, ships were indeed necessary – for if they were returning exactly on the route of the exodus – well, that route took them through the Yam Suf. So in order to reverse the route of the exodus, they would need a way to travel across the Yam Suf – in ships!

In freedom and in exile

At this time of year it is appropriate to mention another reason to justify how the Rambam and other Jews could live in Egypt. The Ritva⁴ writes that it is only forbidden to live in Egypt at a time when the Jews are an independent nation living in their homeland, Israel. At a time of exile however, there is no problem with living in Egypt.

We hope soon to see the day when all Jews will return to Israel to live there in peace.

¹ Mechilta Shemos 13:14; Rambam Melochim 5:7

² Kaftor Vaferach, a geography of Israel, written in 1322

³ 12th century. Quoted by the Ritva, Yuma 38a

⁴ Yuma 38a