

Parashah One Hundred and Twenty-Three

Numbers 33:1–56; Isaiah 11:16–12:6; Ephesians 6:10–18

notes by Tim Hegg

Our *parashah* today is somewhat typical of *BeMidbar* (Numbers). It's a list of details that, at first sight, seems pretty unimportant to our modern way of thinking. Who cares what the itinerary was of Israel as they left Egypt and journeyed toward the Promised Land? What are we supposed to learn from this? Can this really be relevant to our own lives?!

What is difficult—nearly impossible—for us to appreciate, is a life which is lived entirely by the leading of Hashem. In one sense, the narrative before us is a picture of the nation of Israel living in just that way—going when HaShem said to go (by the moving of the *Shekinah* from the *Mishkan*) and stopping at His command. The exact route which was taken is not the important thing (for in reality we are not certain about a number of the place-names given, and as such cannot pinpoint the exact route) but rather the fact that in 42 instances HaShem said to go and stop, and Israel obeyed!

This may initially be illustrative of a major question in our own lives: how do we know when to “go” and when to “stop”? Can we live our lives according to the same principle that HaShem leads us each step of the way, and we follow His leading? Paul writes in Romans 8:14, “For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God.” Furthermore, we see an example of this in the life of Yeshua, as Matthew records: “Then Yeshua was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil” (Matt 4:1). How can we, in our modern world, be assured of the actual “leading of the Spirit”?

This question, I believe, is both important and troubling. Important because to be led by the Spirit in our lives is to follow the will of HaShem, and thus to be under His hand of blessing. But this question is also troublesome, because various and conflicting answers have been given in our day, and we therefore struggle to know which are right and which could actually lead us astray. In fact, the matter is a bit circular: can we be “led by the Spirit” to discover what the truth is about being “led by the Spirit”?

If we were to sum up various answers to the question of the leading of the Spirit in the life of an individual believer, we might be able to group them under three headings: Feelings, Circumstances, and the Bible.

Many test whether or not the Spirit is “leading them” according to how they feel. Commonly the phrase is heard “I just had real peace about it,” or “I don't feel peace about this so I've decided not to do it.”

Others “test the waters” on the basis of circumstances. Clichés like “it was clearly an open door” or “it was obviously a ‘God-thing’” are usually found in this scenario. If circumstances fall into place, then it is taken as the leading of the Spirit. If they don't, then the Spirit is not leading in that direction. In this perspective, the more the circumstances are out-of-the-ordinary, the more sure is the leading of the Spirit.

Still others rely almost entirely upon the principles of the Scriptures, believing that as long as one is obeying what HaShem has clearly revealed in the word of God, then one can expect that his or her life is one which is “led by the Spirit.”

How should we evaluate these three broad categories? Well, first of all, it seems obvious that no one category exists entirely separate from the others. How one “feels” will certainly be affected by one's “circumstances,” and whether or not one obeys Scripture will likewise affect one's decisions

and thus one's circumstances and feelings. So one category can not be entirely isolated from the others. What we must do, then, is ask whether or not one of the three categories should take priority. To this question there is a clear answer: the word of God must surely take top priority, for it is only through the word of God that we are able to correctly judge our circumstances, and control our feelings.

Our Torah text hints at this very thing. When the journey of Israel out of Egypt to Canaan is recorded, we are reminded of the earlier narrative which taught us that HaShem had revealed His will to the people, namely, that when the cloud/pillar moved they were to move, and when the cloud/pillar stood still, they were to stop. In other words, they heard the word of God and were required to obey it. As they obeyed the word of God, then and only then were they led by God on their journey. From this we may derive an enduring principle: only as we are obeying God's word may we be confident that we are following Him in our lives. The Spirit never will lead us contrary to the word that He inspired.

Secondly, our Torah passage ends with HaShem's admonition to Israel through Moses that they not tolerate idolatry, but that they rout out the Canaanites, clearing the idolatry before they settle into the Land HaShem had given for their inheritance. Nothing of the idolaters was to remain in the Land: their stones, molten images, high places/temples—all were to be destroyed. But why? Why was the entire Land to be cleared of idolatry? Would it not have been sufficient to make sure no idolatrous practice or items existed in places of worship, such as the Temple, and later synagogues? Rather, in this demand to do away with all aspects of idolatry throughout the Land, we understand that God viewed all of the Land as the sacred dwelling of His people. God was not merely to be worshipped in the Temple, or in designated houses of study. God was to be worshipped in every aspect of life. The Land was to be holy because the whole of Israel's life lived out there was to be unto Him. And the worship of HaShem cannot be mixed with idolatry—He simply will not receive any such mixture.

This gives us another hint at what is required to remain in a place where we can be led by the Spirit: we cannot participate in idolatry. But what exactly is "idolatry"? We may define it in a broad sense as anything less than giving 100% of our worship/service/loyalty to HaShem. If we revere anything or any one as being greater than or equal to HaShem, we have entered into idolatry. Moreover, looking at HaShem as though He were like the false gods, or acting toward Him in such a manner is likewise idolatry. For example, if we think that we are able to control HaShem through ritual or ceremony as the pagans believe they can control their "gods," then we have made HaShem out to be as any other false god and in so doing we have committed idolatry.

We may therefore postulate a second principle by way of application: if we want to be led by the Spirit in our lives, we must continually strive to reject that which is profane, and cling to that which is holy. "You shall follow the LORD your God and fear Him; and you shall keep His commandments, listen to His voice, serve Him, and cling to Him" (Deut 13:4)

But there is a third and obvious component in this whole issue of being led by the Spirit. If indeed the word of God is the lens through which our feelings and the circumstances of life must be interpreted, then it is obvious that we must know the word of God. Since we believe that God will never act contrary to His character, and since we know that the character of God is revealed to us in the Scriptures, we must be diligent in the study of God's word so that we might know Him and discern His leading. Consider by way of illustration the incident of Uzza as David begins to transport the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem. David's heart is right, his motivations good. The

circumstances are favorable (HaShem has given victory over the Philistines). Yet because David did not read and study the Scriptures He used an unbiblical method to transport the Ark (on a cart!) and as a result, the life of Uzza was taken when he tried to steady the Ark as it began to fall. Reading the “instructions” is always paramount to knowing the leading of the Spirit.

One of the instructions given to us in the Scriptures is that seeking and finding wisdom is an important part of knowing and following God’s leading in our lives. And one of the most important avenues for gaining wisdom is to seek counsel from others.

Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory.
(Prov 11:14)

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man is he who listens to counsel. (Prov 12:15)

Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed. (Prov 15:22)

Most often the reason we fail to seek counsel is because we do not want to give up the plans we’re making. But if we are being truly led by the Lord, then this will be confirmed, not overturned, by those from whom we seek counsel.

The *Haftarah* and Apostolic Scriptures also teach us lessons in this whole realm of HaShem’s leading. Isaiah indicates that just as sure as HaShem led Israel in the wilderness, so will He lead them to return to the Promised Land. Just as evidently as the cloud and pillar moved, so will He miraculously make a way (“a highway”) from the lands of the diaspora to the Land of Israel.

The Apostolic section reminds us that our enemy, Satan, would always try to move us away from the path of God’s direction. Indeed, the end of our Torah section, which deals with idolatry, is paralleled by our Apostolic section, for all idolatry has a connection to the world of demonic forces, and all activities of Satan and his workers in one way or another constitute idolatry. In fact, any detraction from God’s glory is a form of idolatry.

We may then make a fourth principle by way of application: if we are to be led by the Spirit in our lives, we must avail ourselves of the “armor of God” in order to withstand the attacks of Satan. We must engage the battle for personal righteousness if we expect to be able to actually follow where God is leading.

Here, then, is a summary of the principles we have discussed for being led by the Ruach:

1. Walk according to the ways of righteousness revealed to us in the Scriptures.
2. Make a clear distinction between what is holy and what is profane, and remain steadfast in clinging to that which sanctifies God’s Name and turning from that which does not.
3. Be a diligent student of the Scriptures, for it is by the Scriptures that we acquire righteous discernment. And in obedience to the Scriptures, seek counsel from others in order to confirm God’s leading.
4. Practice the disciplines of godliness: put on the whole armor of God in order to withstand the schemes of the evil one (Eph 6:10f).

Three proposed routes of the exodus and journey to the Land

