

The Wandering Jews ... why did it take so long.

Today's parasha begins with the taking of a census; Moses is directed to take a census of men over the age of 20, for the purpose of understanding how many able-bodied men there are to serve in an army. While it bothered me that only the men were counted, it made sense in the context of the times - 3000 years ago – when the notion of women serving in an army was unthinkable.

We learn that there are about 600,000 individuals who meet the qualifications to be included in the census. A quick estimate based on this number would, arguably, bring the total number of people following Moses to something in the range of at least 2.5 to 3 million people!

This led me to wonder what, exactly, the rest of this group was doing while the men were gearing up to do battle. And why on earth it took this group 40 years to travel a distance which, had they taken a direct route, could have been traversed in a matter of a few weeks or months at the outside.

Granted, moving 2.5 to 3 million people on foot, without the aid of modern technology ... no GPS or cell phones ... was a logistical challenge, but 40 years?

And granted, there were some significant events that needed to happen along the way ... like Moses receiving the 10 Commandments. But 40 years?

Had Moses simply asked G-d for directions, would they have been forthcoming? But then, again, we all know how reticent most men are to ask anyone for directions!

While some would and, in fact, have argued that it was necessary for time to pass for the old generation to die off so that a new generation devoid of the “slave mentality” could lead the charge into the Promised Land, I would argue that a direct route to the Promised Land would simply not have allowed time for the community to grow and coalesce as a group and for the experience to be as meaningful.

Somewhat like these wandering Jews, I reflect on the process that has gotten me to this point. Ironically, it has taken me something like 40 years as an individual to get here.

Growing up, I lived in a small town that was predominantly Jewish. We, like most of our neighbors, belonged to the Orthodox synagogue in the town.

My earliest memory of synagogue life is of attending services with my Grandfather, sitting next to him in the men's section and braiding the fringe on his talit. I also remember attending Hebrew School and, to this day, my mom tells me that I was so invested in the process that she thought I was destined to become a rebbitsin.

Whether it was the incident of the Hebrew school teacher who hit me over the head with a ruler - for what infraction, I cannot imagine, or the death of my Grandfather, and the absence of a driving force in our household to participate in synagogue activities, I do not know, but I do know that I turned off to participating, on a regular basis, in organized religious activities before I turned twelve.

Some say that religion takes on greater importance when you have children. And for me, this certainly is true. When my older daughter turned six and my best friend told me that if I didn't start

her religious education she would, by taking her to church, I was prompted to action – Jay and I joined Ohev Shalom and we started sending Andrea to Hebrew School.

As Andrea began to learn about our rituals and traditions, I came to understand how deficient I was in my own knowledge base and I began attending classes with Rabbi Robbins. I realized that understanding my Jewish heritage was important to me and I felt better about myself as I got a bit more involved.

More recently, under the patient guidance of our dear Rebbitsin, Amy Robbins, I began the process of relearning to read Hebrew. While I am still challenged to keep up with the congregation, I feel good that I no longer have to rely on the transliterations to follow and participate in services.

So maybe the reason it took 40 years for the Jews to reach the Promised Land are similar to the reason it took me 40 years to find my way back to more actively practicing my religion. Some things just can't be rushed.