



### FIRMNESS AND MOVEMENT

**I**N AN IDEAL WORLD WE WOULD ALWAYS BE MOVING FORWARD, ASPIRING to ever higher goals. We would never rest, because we would feel that every step opens up new vistas of opportunity. The direction would always be 'up'!

In fact our lives are more complicated than that. There are many downs as well as ups, and we often have to spend time and effort consolidating our position. Only when we have built some sort of firm structure, as a base, are we able to go forward and upwards with a measure of confidence. Nonetheless, even when we are focusing on establishing this firm structure, seemingly not moving at all, we are also conscious that our real direction is positive movement both forwards and upwards.

The double Sedra<sup>1</sup> this week provides an insight into this process, by virtue of the *name* of each Sedra<sup>2</sup>. In Chassidic thinking, a name is very significant. The Baal Shem Tov taught that the name of anything whatsoever is the key to its spiritual nature. So, clearly, the name of a Sedra in the Torah, which itself is sacred, must be of particular significance.

The first Sedra is called *Mattot*, the plural of *matteh*, meaning a 'staff'. This word is used for the Tribes of Israel. The Sedra begins with the words "And Moses spoke to the heads of the Tribes". The word for 'Tribes' is *Mattot*, 'staves'. The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that this term 'staff, meaning a firm stick, cut from a tree, when applied to the Jewish people, carries a number of interesting overtones.

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Firstly, the staff has been cut from the tree. The Jewish people is composed of exalted souls which, before they are born into this world, emerge from a spiritual “Tree”, a term denoting the provenance of the souls in upper realms. Then the individual soul enters this world, in a physical body. In a sense, it has been cut from the Tree, torn away from its close contact with the Divine. It is now part of the physical world.

Further, in the physical world the soul confronts many challenges. In order to face these, it has to become firm and strong, like a staff. To accomplish this transformation, the soul draws on its own supernal spiritual essence, its most exalted level of strength, even higher than the ‘Tree’. We thus see that by entering this physical world and facing its challenges, the soul taps into a higher level of spiritual energy than it could before it descended into physical life.

This higher level leads to greater power for the soul, expressed in the name of the second Sedra: *Mas’ei*, meaning ‘journeys’. This Sedra lists the stages of the journey of the Jewish people from Egypt to the Holy Land<sup>3</sup>. Applied to the soul, the theme of ‘journeys’ means that the soul is moving forward and upward, achieving ever new spiritual heights. But it can only do this because of the firm base it achieved at the stage of the first Sedra, *Mattot*.

These two aspects of the soul combine: the firmness of consolidating one’s position, despite the challenges we encounter, and the spiritual journeys forward and upward. In fact, the Rebbe points out, the attempt to be ‘firm’ is itself a ‘journey’. When we stand up to the negative pressures around us, holding our own, we are really moving forward in important ways, and discovering new dimensions of experience.

This combination of firmness and movement applies to all aspects of our lives: running a business, writing a book, being a housewife. And, in particular, it applies to our struggle to advance in our personal observance of Judaism. Through the right blend of firmness and movement each one of us, and the entire Jewish people, will reach the Promised Land...

1..*Mattot*: Numbers 30:2-32:42; *Mas’ei*: chs.33-36. 2. The following is based freely on the Lubavitcher Rebbe’s *Likkutei Sichot*, vol. 18 pp. 382-6. 3. See Numbers 33:1-49.

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*SEDRA MATTOT – MAS'EI*

**MOVING ON**

"I can't believe the school year is almost over! This year flew by so fast!" Racheli remarked as she was walking through the hallways in school, with her friends, on her way out to break.

"Tell me about it!" Rina agreed, as she swept her ponytail to the side. "And can you imagine, we're finished junior school! We're going to high school next year!"

Tamar laughed, excitedly, "Ooh, I feel so old...!"

"It's so sad though," Rina continued, "I have to leave some friends behind. Like you Tamar, you're going to a different high school. I don't know what next year is going to be like without you in my class..."

"And our favourite teacher, Mrs Bernstein," Racheli added, "won't be teaching us anymore."

"Aww," Tamar sighed, "it is going to be hard. But, hopefully it will be okay. High school is difficult, though. My older sister, Abigail, is constantly complaining about her GCSE's. I hope it's not as bad as she makes them sound..."

“Excuse me, girls,” the girls heard a voice behind them. They turned around and saw Mrs Bernstein’s smiling face. “I couldn’t help but overhear some part of your conversation. Do you mind if I just put in my own two cents?”

“Sure,” Tamar smiled.

“I know it must be hard for you to leave the school you’ve been in since Reception, and all the friends with whom you’ve grown up. But, life moves on and you’ve just got to go with it. Things change, but you learn from your experiences and grow from them. It’s actually an idea we learn from this week’s Torah portion. This week we have two Sedras together, Mattot and Mas’ei. Mattot means ‘Sticks’ - a term used for the twelve tribes of Israel - and Mas’ei means ‘Journeys’. And we can learn something from each title. We can learn to stand firmly where we are, like solid ‘Sticks’. And we can also learn to move on and carry on with life, like the Jewish people’s ‘Journeys’.”

“Wow, that seems like a contradiction!” Racheli commented.

“Well, you’re right, but that’s the point. Sometimes it’s important to stand firm and stick to what’s important, other times it’s better to move on and not get too caught up with the past, but focus on the future instead.”

“That’s wonderful, Mrs Bernstein!” Rina beamed. “We should focus on how awesome high school is gonna be!”

“You got it!” Mrs Bernstein smiled. “Now run along girls, break is almost over!”

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