

Shabbat shalom.

My grandfather, my father's father, Domenico Mostardi, was born in the Italian region called Le Marche, sometimes said in English as 'The Marches.' The word *marches* popped out at me as I read the first line of parasha Mas'ei: *These were the marches of the Israelites*. Aha, marches! My grandfather came from the Marches!

I'm actually cheating a little bit here, because the word *march* as in 'The Marches' does not mean 'a Roman legion marching down the Appian Way.' The Italian word *marche* comes from the medieval word *marca*, meaning a borderland (as opposed to a 'heartland'). The word *mark* survives today in words such as Denmark, meaning the march, or the borderland of the Danes; and the French nobility title *marquis*—the title in England is *marquess*—meaning a feudal lord who controls a mark, or a borderland.

So anyway, not that kind of march. But the marches of the Israelites are laid out in Chapter 33, which in our triennial cycle we did not read today. These marches are laid out in great detail; some would say 'boring' detail. Here is a sample:

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- 33:5. The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth.
 6. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness.
 7. They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baal-zephon, and they encamped before Migdol.
 8. They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah.
 9. They set out from Marah and came to Elim. There were twelve springs in Elim and seventy palm trees, so they encamped there.
 10. They set out from Elim and encamped by the Sea of Reeds.
 11. They set out from the Sea of Reeds and encamped in the wilderness of Sin.
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There are forty-two marches in total, all in row. One verse for each march. They set out from A and went to B. They set out from B and went to C. The only interruption is three verses describing the death of Aaron at Mount Hor.

There is a very good drasha in *Etz Hayyim* noting that ‘what strikes the casual reader as a dry [boring] list of place-names is viewed differently by the Sages.’ They quote a midrash in Numbers Rabbah where God Tells Moses to ‘write down all the places through which Israel journeyed, that they might recall the miracles I wrought for them.’ Here is where we crossed the Sea of Reeds; here is where I gave them manna; here is where Moses struck the rock, and so on.

In this way, I see this passage as a parallel to the genealogies in Bereshit: Avraham begat Yitzhak, Yitzhak begat Yaakov, Yaakov begat Yosef. The parallel midrash would be God telling Moses to ‘write down all the ancestors through which Israel is descended, that they might recall the good deeds that each person did.’

If we combine the two kinds of lists, we get the all the places that our specific ancestors journeyed: Avraham went from A to B, Yitzhak went from B to C, Yaakov went from C to D. And thinking of that makes me think of my grandfather Domenic, whose journey in 1911 would only have a few stages: he left the town of Amandola and journeyed to Napoli. He got on a ship at Napoli and arrived in New York City. He got on a train in New York City and arrived in Chicago.

On my mother’s side, there are more marches on the list: over 300 years Mom’s ancestors went from the south of England > Cumberland Co. ME > Madison Co. NY > La Salle Co. IL > Champaign Co. IL > Chicago IL > California.

There’s another aspect I want to talk about, and that is music. Let’s go back to Chapter 33, but this time, instead of reading it I’m going to chant it, so that you can hear the music. This is verses 15-19, and how they would sound if I were reading from the Torah. Listen for the melody:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר סִינַי:
33:15. They set out from Rephidim and encamped in the wilderness of Sinai.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִמִּדְבַּר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּקִבְרוֹת הַתְּאַוָּה:
16. They set out from the wilderness of Sinai and encamped at Kibroth-hattaavah.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִקִּבְרוֹת הַתְּאַוָּה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּחֲצֵרוֹת:
17. They set out from Kibroth-hattaavah and encamped at Hazeroth.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִחֲצֵרוֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִתְמָה:
18. They set out from Hazeroth and encamped at Rithmah.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִרִּתְמָה וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִמּוֹן פֶּרֶז:
19. They set out from Rithmah and encamped at Rimmon-perez.

Forty-two marches in a row, and they're marked so that they all sound the same. Why would they do that? One reason they're marked the same is clearly so that it's easy to chant. The Torah has no markings on it, so that you don't have to remember different melody patterns for the forty-two different journeys.

Another reason for repeating something is to learn it, because we all learn things by repeating them. Years ago, in my Masoretic Bible, I noticed that books that we never read liturgically in shul, books like Proverbs, Job, Daniel, Chronicles... those texts all have cantillation marks—trope symbols, as if you were going to sing them—but there's no time when we ever do sing them. So why do they have cantillation marks? I asked Rabbi Kelman that once, and he said 'oh, it's for memorization.' The idea being that a yeshiva student might have a hard time just memorizing the text, but if they could *sing* the text, it would be much easier. Twelve hundred years ago, books were very expensive, and you didn't get to have your own. You had to memorize things, and the easiest way to memorize a text was to add music. The same way that I would struggle to remember the words to a Beatles song if I were to recite to you as poetry, but I could easily sing it to you.

Music in its Western manifestations is very repetitive. Beethoven repeated melodies. So did the Beatles. All the prayers that we've sung so far today, those melodies all repeated. If you've written a good tune, you don't waste it, you use it multiple times, and human brains like to hear good melodies multiple times. If you're like me, you suffer from earworms: a melody gets stuck in my head, and I replay it over and over, dozens of times, sometimes over a couple of days. An earworm becomes a kind of meditative chant.

While preparing this drasha, I found a website with a recording of an excerpt from Homer's *Odyssey*, a proposed reconstruction of what it would have sounded like back when it was composed, in the 6th or 7th century BCE (which, coincidentally, was roughly when the Torah took its present form). The performer sang the text, with a simple accompaniment by an ancient string instrument called a *phorminx*. I don't know Greek, so I wasn't trying to understand the words. The recording was five minutes long, and covered 100 lines from Book 8 of the *Odyssey*. I'm sure my untutored ears were missing many subtleties, but basically each line sounded the same. The passage described the love between Ares and Aphrodite, but if I'd been told it was a long list of Odysseus's marches from Troy to Ithaka, I would have believed that. It was very repetitive, but I found it soothing and meditative.

Meditation, of course, is all about repetition, and a narrowing of the thought process: a musical chant, concentrating on breathing, a mental focus on one aspect of God. Maimonides himself suggested that 'intellectual meditation is a higher form of worship than either sacrifice or prayer.'

Singers and musicians who perform long, repetitive pieces, or who perform the same piece every day for months or years, have to decide how they're going to handle that: how to respect the music, how to keep it fresh, how to not think of it as boring. One friend of mine, who played in an orchestra for 40 years, rejected boredom out of hand: 'You cannot get bored. It's your job. You are getting paid to not be bored.' That approach worked for her, but I need to work harder to not be bored. I need a way to climb into the music, and for our text today, the forty-two marches, the meditative find-the-flow-and-go-with-it is what I would choose.

And that is the image of the Israelite marches I'd like to leave with you. A calm, meditative, repetitive chant, a 42-verse song of how our ancestors travelled from Egypt to Canaan, recalling at each stage the miracles God wrought for them.

So next year, when we come around to those long, boring genealogies in Bereshit, or the long, boring census at the beginning of Bemidbar, or the long, boring list of marches here in Mas'ei, just remember that they're not really that boring after all.

Now, I'd like you to work with me here. I argue that there isn't much difference between the kind of repetitive melody I just chanted and a song like this:

*There's a feather on the bird,
And the bird in the egg,
And the egg in the nest,
And the nest on the branch,
And the branch on the limb,
And the limb on the tree,
And the tree in a hole,
And the hole in the ground
And the green grass grows all around, all around and the green grass grows
all around.*

That's a famous example of a 'cumulative song,' one where the chorus gets longer and longer with each verse.

My favorite cumulative song from my own childhood is: *there's a fleck on the speck on the flea on the fly on the wart on the frog on the bump on the branch on the log in the hole in the bottom of the sea*

And of course, where do we Jews famously sing lots of cumulative songs? At the end of the seder, of course. *Echad mi yodea, Chad gadya*. We might say to ourselves, 'we sing cumulative songs at seder because there are lots of kids at seder and kids love cumulative songs.' And we might say to ourselves 'the songs teach the kids that nine are the months of childbirth, and eight are the days of the *brit milah*.' But we're kidding ourselves if we think that cumulative songs don't speak to adult brains as well.

I'm not suggesting that we turn the marches of the Israelites into a cumulative song. It would have 42 verses. Just imagine at seder: ... ארבעים ושתיים אני יודע. *da da da da da...* forty-two times. No one would ever come back to your seder if you did that.

If you're familiar with the Masoretic cantillation system, the trope marks on the text next to the vowels, you know that the 28 different trope symbols are not evenly distributed in the text: far from it. If we were to assign Scrabble letter values to the trope symbols, common ones like *mercha*, *tipcha*, and *munach* would

be a 1, less common ones like *pazer* and *yetiv* would be a 6 or an 8, and really rare ones like *shalsholet* would be a 275. In other words, just a few of the cantillation marks constitute the majority of them, and so if it's ever seemed to you that Torah chanting kinda all sounds the same, that's the reason. But with this line of thinking, that's the whole point. We *want* it to be repetitive. We *want* it to sound like a cumulative song.

Many books have been written by many experts about how both music and repetition affects the brain, and how the human predilection for music may have evolved, and how, if at all, that evolution was connected to the evolution of language. It was rather fun learning about the very intense academic debates on this topic.

Harvard psycholinguist [Steven Pinker](#), who in a 1997 talk famously called music “auditory cheesecake” and dismissed it as evolutionarily useless, displacing demands from areas of the brain that should be handling more “important” functions like language. (Mr. Pinker obviously

There's plenty of plain repetition at seder too: I'm sure you've all been to seders where you've thought “if God had parted the Red Sea for us, but had not given us a song that with 29 verses in it, *dayenu!*”

וַיִּסְעוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִרַעַמְסֶס וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּסוּכּוֹת:

33:5. The Israelites set out from Rameses and encamped at Succoth.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִסּוּכּוֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּאֶתְמֹת בְּקִצְיָה הַמִּדְבָּר:

6. They set out from Succoth and encamped at Etham, which is on the edge of the wilderness.

וַיִּסְעוּ מֵאֶתְמֹת וַיִּשָּׁבְעוּ עַל־פִּי הַחִירֹת אֲשֶׁר עַל־פְּנֵי בְּעַל צִפּוֹן וַיַּחֲנוּ לִפְנֵי מִגְדּוֹל:

7. They set out from Etham and turned about toward Pi-hahiroth, which faces Baalzephon, and they encamped before Migdol.

וַיִּסְעוּ מִפְּנֵי הַחִירֹת וַיַּעֲבְרוּ בְּתוֹךְ־הַיָּם הַמִּדְבָּרָה וַיֵּלְכוּ דְרֹךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָּר אֶתְמֹת וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמָרָה:

8. They set out from Pene-hahiroth and passed through the sea into the wilderness; and they made a three-days' journey in the wilderness of Etham and encamped at Marah.

(some transition into the final paragraph)

Ezra chanting the Torah in public? Singing was how this was done back in ancient times. Homer didn't recite the Iliad and the Odyssey, he sang it.