



ויהי בנסוע הארון When the Ark Traveled

■ The Temporary Location

One who reads the Torah portion of Behaalot'cha cannot help but notice two verses enclosed on both ends by an unfamiliar symbol: an upside-down letter *nun*. The two verses are familiar to us from our prayers; we recite them when we open the Ark to remove and return, respectively, the Torah Scroll. The two verses are these:

וַיְהִי בְנִסְעַת הָאָרוֹן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה ה' וַיִּפְצוּ אֲבִיךָ וַיִּנָּסוּ מִשְׁנֵאִיךָ מִפְּנֶיךָ.

When the Ark went forth, Moshe said, "Arise, O G-d, and scatter Your enemies, and let Your foes flee before You."

וּבְנַחְתָּה יֵאמֵר שׁוּבָה ה' רַבְבוֹת אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

And when it came to rest, he said, "Rest Your presence, O G-d, on the myriads [and] thousands of Israel." (Bamidbar 10, 35-36)

Clearly, the upside-down *nuns* before and after this passage render these two verses an entity on their own. For what purpose?

Our Sages revealed to us that this short passage is actually not in its correct place in the Torah. In fact, its location here is just temporary, and in time it will return to its natural place. As the Gemara explains enigmatically:

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel says: "In the future, this passage will be uprooted from here and placed in its [correct] spot. Why, then, was it written here? So as to divide between two passages of punishment..."

(Shabbat 115b-116a)

And where is its correct place? The Gemara continues:

Rav Ashi says [that its natural place is] in the Passage of the Flags.

The Passage of the Flags is at the beginning of Bamidbar, where the Torah talks about the placement of the Tribes and their flags around the Tent of Meeting, the *Ohel Moed*. We will discuss this in greater detail below. For now, two questions present themselves:

1. What does Rabban Shimon mean when he says that the passage will yet return to its proper place? Will the Torah one day be written anew in a different fashion?
2. How are we to understand the Gemara's statement that the passage currently "divides between two passages of punishment"?

We must look carefully into Parashat Behaalot'cha to answer these questions.

■ Leaving the Mountain of Hashem

The passage in question – ויהי בנסוע הארון, *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron* – comes between two very negative events. The second one is the fire that broke out amid the Israelites following their bitter complaining, and is described immediately following our passage:

וַיְהִי הָעָם כְּמִתְאַנְנִים רַע בְּאָזְנֵי ה', וַיִּשְׁמַע ה' וַיַּחַר אָפוֹ,
וַתִּבְעַר בָּם אֵשׁ ה' וַתֹּאכַל בְּקֵצֵה הַמַּחֲנֶה.

*The people began to complain, and it was evil in G-d's ears;
He heard it and was angered, and His fire flared out amongst
them, consuming the edge of the camp.* (Bamidbar 11,1)

Israel's baseless complaints resulted in a fiery punishment, the second one referred to in the above Gemara. But what was the first? The verses that appear before the enclosed passage seem to provide no clue:

וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה' דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים ...

*The people traveled from the Mountain of G-d,
a three-day journey...* (10,33)

Did they do something wrong during this journey?

Let us compare this trip with Bnei Yisrael's departure from the Red Sea after it miraculously split. The Torah states: "*Moshe drove Israel from the Red Sea*" (Sh'mot 15,22), that is, he led them away against their will. But here,

when leaving Mt. Sinai, the Torah says: *“The people traveled”* - on their own. At the Red Sea, the people were occupied with the wealth they took from Egypt and did not want to leave so fast; this is why Moshe had to lead them out. But after they received the Torah, they left on their own, without having to be cajoled. Why did they seek to leave Mt. Sinai so soon?

The Gemara explains that when we read that the Children of Israel traveled away from G-d's mountain, it means they “strayed away from G-d.” Further elaboration is found in the Medrash Yalkut Shimoni (also mentioned in the Ramban's commentary on the Torah, as well as the Tosafot's commentary on the Gemara), which teaches that the problem was that “they left Mt. Sinai happily, like a boy running away from school.”

To understand this comparison, we must first analyze why a boy runs away from school. He does so because he does not like being given assignments or told what to do. He does not want to be forced not to do this and yes to do that, and he hates feeling that every minute he remains in school, he loses more and more of his freedom.

The source of the problem is that he does not realize that the teachers want only what is best for him. He fails to see that they are trying to give him the tools with which he will be able to succeed in the challenges of life. And why does he not understand this? Because he has no trust in the educational system. He may not have received the proper tools with which to realize this, or his teachers may not have known how to engender his trust in them.

The solution for this child is to restore his faith in his teachers. We must imbue in him the sense that everything they do is for his own future welfare. If we succeed in having him understand this, we can prevent his downhill slide into resistance, antagonism, and estrangement.

How does this relate to Bnei Yisrael after Mt. Sinai? They, too, ran away from Mt. Sinai, where they had received the Torah, all too eagerly – because they feared that Hashem would add more commandments, prohibitions and restrictions. They simply did not have enough trust in G-d; they did not internalize the fact that all His commandments are for our sake.

The Talmudic comparison between Har Sinai and school teaches us to internalize the fact that the Torah and its *mitzvot* were given to us so that we will be able to earn eternal life. The commandments stem from G-d's love for us, and certainly not, Heaven forbid, from the opposite.

This, then, is the first of the two negative incidents referred to in the Gemara: running away from Hashem and failing to grasp His love and concern for us.

■ As a Man Carries His Son

Moshe Rabbeinu made this same point when he rebuked Israel in the beginning of the Book of D'varim. Addressing Bnei Yisrael as he was about to take final leave of them, Moshe said:

וַתִּרְגְּנוּ בְּאֶהָלֵיכֶם וַתֹּאמְרוּ בְשִׁנְאֵת ה' אֲתָנוּ הוֹצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם
לְתֵת אֲתָנוּ בְיַד הָאֱמֹרִי לְהַשְׁמִידָנוּ.

*You complained in your tents, saying,
“G-d brought us out of Egypt to be destroyed by the Emorites
because of His hatred for us.”* (D'varim 1,27)

We see here, quite shockingly, that the Children of Israel had lost more than their trust in Hashem; they actually felt that He hated them! It is almost inconceivable that they would have such a groundless, negative and destructive view of their relationship with Hashem! Moshe knows that this terrible mistake must be corrected in order for Israel to progress towards their destiny.

It appears incredible that Israel could actually have been under such a misimpression. Could any of them have really thought, after all the miracles and wonders that G-d did for them in breaking King Pharaoh's yoke upon them, rescuing them from torturous bondage, and bringing them to eternal freedom - that this was all just to wipe them out??

How could it be that just weeks and months after not a hair on their heads was harmed throughout the Ten Plagues that hit the Egyptians, and after the Red Sea split open for them as they evaded the pursuing Egyptian army - they would feel that G-d hated them?!

When Moshe prayed for Israel after the Sin of the Golden Calf, he asked that Hashem not destroy them, for fear of what the nations would say:

פֶּן יֹאמְרוּ ... מִבְּלֵי יְכֻלֵּת ה' לְהַבְיִיאָם אֶל הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר דִּבֶּר לָהֶם
וּמִשִּׁנְאֵתוֹ אֹתָם הוֹצִיאָם לְהַמְתָּם בַּמִּדְבָּר.

*Lest they say, “G-d was unable to bring them
to the land He promised them,
and because of His hatred for them
He took them to die in the desert.”* (D'varim 9,28)

Perhaps the Gentiles might say this – but how could the Nation of Israel even *think* such a thing??

And what is the truth? How do we see that Hashem does in fact love us? The answer is that He carried us on His shoulders, so to speak, the entire way, out of total love and concern for us. The following story bears out this point with great clarity:

A man dreamt one night that he was walking along the seashore, together with an angel from the Heavens. He then sees a picture-history of his life. In each scene, he sees two pairs of footsteps in the sand - one pair left by him, and the other one made by the angel accompanying him. But he notices that in some scenes, the sadder and more difficult periods of his life when he truly required extra help, there is only one set of footsteps. “What happened to my angel?” he wonders.

The man turns to the angel and says, “You promised that you would walk with me and accompany me throughout my life. So why did you leave me all on my own precisely when it got hard and I needed you more than ever?”

The angel answered: “My son, I love you and would never leave you. The times when you saw only one set of footsteps - they weren't yours; that was me carrying you.”

Similarly, Moshe assures Israel that Hashem is always with us and wants what is best for us. The footsteps in the wilderness are only those of Hashem. As Moshe tells us:

וּבַמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר רָאִיתָ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׂאָהָ ה' אֱלֹהֶיךָ
כְּאִשֶׁר יִשָּׂא אִישׁ אֶת בְּנוֹ בְּכֹל הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הִלַּכְתֶּם...

And in this desert in which you saw how Hashem your G-d carried you, just like a man carries his son, all the way in which you walked. (D'varim 1,31)

But Moshe then adds this admonishment:

וּבַדְּבַר הַזֶּה אֵינְכֶם מֵאֱמִינִים בְּה' אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

And in this thing you do not believe in Hashem your G-d. (verse 32)

What is “*this thing*” to which Moshe is referring? It is exactly this point that we have been discussing, as the next verse continues:

הֵלֵךְ לִפְנֵיכֶם בַּדֶּרֶךְ לְתוֹר לָכֶם מְקוֹם לְהִנָּחֶכֶם
בְּאֵשׁ לַיְלָה לְרִאֲתֶכֶם בַּדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר תֵּלְכוּ בָּהּ וּבְעָנָן יוֹמָם.

*[G-d] goes before you along the way to scout out a place
for you to stay, in fire by night to show you the way to go,
and in a cloud by day.*

Moshe scolds Israel: “Precisely at the same time that you were running away from Him, for fear that He might add extra mitzvot, He was busy finding you a place to lodge! He is the One Who brings about the fire and the cloud in order to guide you through the dangerous wilderness!”

The Torah’s commandments are not in order to restrict and suppress us; on the contrary, they were given to benefit us, so that we might gain eternal life. This is the reason why there are so many of them, as we learn in this Mishna:

R. Chanina ben Akashya says: Hashem wanted to benefit Israel, and therefore He gave them much Torah and many commandments.

(Makkot 23b)

Let us now return to the passage *Vay’hi binso’a ha’aron*. Just two verses before it, we read that the People of Israel traveled for three days when leaving the mountain of G-d. What was Hashem doing during this period? The same verse that recounts how Israel “ran away” continues as follows:

... וְאֲרוֹן בְּרִית ה' נִסַּע לִפְנֵיהֶם דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לָהֶם מְנוּחָה.

*... and the Ark of the covenant of the Lord was traveling before
them for three days, to find them a resting place.* (Bamidbar 10,33)

We see that precisely as Israel was so negatively misinterpreting G-d’s intentions towards them, Hashem was seeking a resting place for them.

We can now understand much more clearly what the Talmud meant in saying that the Ark’s travels were recounted here as a break between two passages of misbehavior. The first misbehavior was Israel’s lack of trust in G-d’s love for us, and the second was bitterness and complaining against G-d. The lesson is that if we would have put the brakes on our spiritual decline immediately after running away from Mt. Sinai, by learning from the Ark passage how Hashem loves us and wants only what is best for us, we could have prevented the second type of misbehavior: the sin of complaining against Hashem, which led to the punitive fire.

By the same token, we would also have been able to prevent the sin of lusting after meat (Bamidbar 11,4), which occurred right after the fire.

This also explains the Gemara's words that in the future, the *Vay'hi binso'a* passage will be relocated to its proper place. It doesn't mean that the Torah will be rewritten. Rather, the day will come when Israel will recognize Hashem's kindness constantly upon them; they will no longer stray after other gods, and consequently, they will not be punished. The task of the Ark of the Covenant will then be to fight Bnei Yisrael's wars and, from its position in the center of the Israelite camp, to unite them into "one nation in the land."

■ The Upside-Down Code

Where is the correct place for *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron*? We saw in the Gemara above that it is in the beginning of Bamidbar, where we read how the tribes encamped and traveled with their tribal flags. Rashi says that it belongs there right after this verse:

וְנָסַע אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד מִחֵיָּהּ הַלְוִיִּים בְּתוֹךְ הַמַּחֲנֹת כַּאֲשֶׁר יַחֲנוּ כֹּן יִסְעוּ
אִישׁ עַל יָדוֹ לְדִגְלֵיהֶם.

*Then the Tent of Meeting shall set out,
[with] the Levite camp, in the center of the other camps.
As they camp, so shall they travel; each person in his place,
according to their flags.* (Bamidbar 2,17)

It makes sense that the verse describing the travel of the Ark would appear here. But why is the symbol for this dislocation an upside-down *nun* of all things?

Rabbeinu Bachye has a fascinating explanation. He says that there are precisely 50 Torah passages (*parashat p'tuchot*, followed by a paragraph beginning on a new line, or *stumot*, followed by one beginning on the same line) between the present location of *Vay'hi binso'a* and its designated spot in the future, in Chapter 2 of Bamidbar. In numerology (*gematriya*), the letter *nun* is equal to 50 – and the upside-down version of the *nun* tells us that we must go backward 50 passages until we reach the proper location for *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron*.

■ The Eighty-Five Letters

Let us continue to delve into these two remarkable verses.

Turning again to the above-quoted Gemara in Tractate Shabbat, we read there about what may and may not be saved from a fire that breaks out on the Sabbath. One is not permitted to save too much, for he might then lose control and extinguish the fire altogether, which is of course a Biblical prohibition on the Sabbath. Among the items permitted to be rescued are holy writings, including even a Torah scroll that is missing most of its letters, as the Talmud states:

A Torah scroll that is worn away, yet has 85 letters that can be salvaged - just like in the passage of *Vay'hi binso'a* - should be saved from a fire [on Sabbath]. But if there are not 85 letters, then it is not saved on the Sabbath.

As long as there are at least 85 letters, we are permitted to save it. Where does the number 85 come from, and why is it the minimum number of letters rendering a Torah scroll holy? It is the number of letters in the *Vay'hi binso'a* passage (with four letters for each Name of G-d), as can be seen here:

וַיְהִי בְּנִסְעַת הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה ה' וַיִּפְצוּ אֲבִיבָהּ וַיִּנְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאֵיָהּ מִפְּנֵיהָ:
וּבְנַחְהָ יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה ה' רַבְבוֹת אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:

When the Ark went forth, Moshe said...

And when it came to rest, he said... (Bamidbar 10, 35-36)

The Ark of the Covenant bears three things: the Name of G-d, the name of Israel, and the Torah, i.e., the covenant between G-d and Israel. The Ark is that which must accompany Israel both when they come in and when they go out. It “escorts them out” to battle and on their journeys, and “brings them in” back home to their single, unified camp.

We thus see that G-d's Divine leadership over Israel is the essence of the sanctity of the Ark of the Covenant and of the Torah Scroll.

The number 85 is the sum of 63 and 22. What do these numbers symbolize? Let us begin with 22 – the number of letters in the last phrase of this passage:

שׁוּבָה ה' רַבְבוֹת אֲלֵפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Rest Your presence, O G-d, on the myriads [and] thousands of Israel.

In addition to these 22 letters, the meaning of the words *myriads [and] thousands* comes out to 22,000. This is because the minimum plural is two: two myriads (20,000), and two thousands, for a total of 22,000.

And the Gemara, in fact, notes that the Shechinah - the Divine Presence - only rests upon at least this number of Jews:

The Divine Presence does not rest upon fewer than 22,000 Jews.

(Bava Kama 83a)

We see here a parallel based on the number 22, between the number of letters and the number of people. Not only that, but when Moshe counted the Levites, he found that they numbered 22,000 – for they, as leaders and guides of the nation, attained the minimum number required for the Divine Presence to rest upon Israel.

As mentioned, the passage of *Vay'hi binso'a* contains a total of 85 letters. If we take off the above 22, we are left with 63. What does this number hint at?

It hints at the total number of Jews in the wilderness - some 603,550. That is, 60 myriads and 3 thousands, in keeping with the rule we utilized in the first verse regarding the *myriads* and *thousands*.

Incidentally, this is one of the reasons why the people were counted in the desert. We see that every time the population of Israel was counted or estimated in the Torah, the total was never less than 600,000 (see, for instance, Sh'mot 12,37, Bamidbar 1,46 and Bamidbar 21,51). This shows the significance of this number, which we know for short as *shishim ribo*, "60 myriads."

It therefore results that the *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron* passage hints to two very important numbers: The total number of Israelites on which the Divine Presence rested, and the number of Levites, including Cohanim, on which the Divine Presence rested, in recognition of their sacred service and teaching of the nation.

This is why this passage is considered a significant entity in and of itself, as the above Gemara continues:

Rebbe (Rav Yehuda HaNasi) disagreed and said: "The upside-down *nuns* are not for that reason [because the passage is in the wrong place], but rather because this passage is a book in and of itself."

(Shabbat 116a)

That is to say, there are not five Books of Moses, but rather seven: B'reshit, Sh'mot, Vayikra, the first part of Bamidbar, the *Vay'hi binso'a* passage, the rest of Bamidbar, and D'varim.

Based on this, the Gemara goes on to say:

**R. Shmuel bar Nachman said in the name of R. Yonatan: “The verse in Proverbs 9,1 that mentions ‘its seven pillars’ refers to the seven books of the Torah.” According to which Tannaitic teacher was that taught?
- According to [the above-quoted] Rebbe.**

The Nation of Israel is a living and dynamic book in and of itself, with the souls of Bnei Yisrael serving as its letters. They are represented by the minimum of 85 scattered letters remaining in a torn and tattered Torah scroll that allow it to retain its sanctity.

In short: This wondrous passage of *Vay'hi binso'a ha'aron*, set off by upside-down *nuns* before and after it, incorporates within it G-d's great concern for His People Israel. It describes how His Ark goes before them to fight their enemies, on the one hand, and to bring peace amongst them, on the other hand. The verses also allude to the very number of Jews in the nation. It is therefore clear why we ascribe such importance to these verses, reciting them in the synagogue when we remove the Torah scroll from the Holy Ark and when we return it.

