

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Parshas Beha'alo-secha

When Letters Face Backwards:

Examining the Parsha of “Vayehi Binsoa ha’Aron”

INTRODUCTION

Our parsha contains a most unusual phenomenon; unique, in fact, in the entire Torah. The final two verses of chapter ten are “*Vayehi binsoa ha’aron*” and “*U’venucho yomar*,” well known to us as the verses we recite when removing and returning the sefer Torah on days when the Torah is read. In the sefer Torah itself, these two verses are preceded and followed by the letter *nun*, which in both cases is written backwards! Rashi, citing Chazal, comments on this situation. In order to appreciate the background to his comment, let us first survey events as they unfold in the subsequent chapter.

KIVROS HATA’AVAH: TWO CAUSES FOR WEeping

Most of chapter eleven is devoted to the two calamities of the *misonenim* (complainers)¹ and the *kivros hata’avah* (graves of desire),² the first discussed very briefly and the second at quite some length. The *kivros hata’avah* episode began with the people voicing their desire for meat,³ as well as listing off all the foods they remember fondly that they would eat in Egypt: fish, gourds, onions etc.⁴

However, verse 10 reveals another reasons the people were upset. The verse relates that Moshe heard the people “*בְּכָה לְמִשְׁפְּחֹתָיו*”. The simple meaning of these words is “crying in their families,” i.e. in groups. However, Chazal⁵ reveal another meaning, namely that they were crying about their families, i.e. over the members of their family that they were forbidden to marry having received the Torah.⁶

1 11:1-3.

2 Ibid. 4-34.

3 Verse 4.

4 Verse 5.

5 Yoma 75a, cited in Rashi loc. cit s.v. *bocheh*.

6 The Maharal (Gur Aryeh, Parshas Vayigash 46:10) states that although the Bnei Yisrael underwent *giyur* (conversion) at Har Sinai, as outlined in Yevamos 46a, nevertheless, the halachic concept that “*גר שנתגייר כקטן*” (a convert is considered as a newborn) (see Yevamos 22a) did not apply to them, and all their prior familial relationships remained intact. This assertion seems to be supported by the Gemara’s explanation that the people were weeping over the newly forbidden relationships to their family members (cf. Meshech Chochmah to Devarim 5:26)

PSHAT, REMEZ AND THE SUBCONSCIOUS

It is most interesting to note how Chazal see fit to provide a reason for the people weeping, even though a reason has seemingly been explicitly provided *by the verse itself* – the foods which they missed that they used to have in Egypt! What is the purpose of explaining something that has already been explained?

R' Yaakov Kamenetzky⁷ makes a most profound observation. There is no way in the world that the absence of these foods could constitute the full reason for the state of upset. With all due respect to those foods, their lack is not cause for national mourning! In their stead, the people had manna to eat, a food of unsurpassed quality. Thus, it is clear that underneath all their protestations of the various foods they were not eating, something else was eating them – the relationships which had been forbidden to them! The reason they did not mention this as the cause was not because they were embarrassed to do so, but because *they themselves were not aware* that this was the real cause for their outcry. It was buried in their subconscious, expressing itself very powerfully on their emotional state while eluding detection as the real concern. Thus, the people found themselves weeping over a lack of fish and onions without themselves fully understanding why!

It is fascinating to consider in this light, the fact that the food items are mentioned explicitly in the verse (pshat), while the issues of forbidden relationships is expounded from an allusion in the verse (remez). These differing layers of meaning in the verses parallel the differing levels of consciousness on the part of the people regarding these causes. The food items, readily apparent in the verse, reflect the notion that was apparent to the people about their distress. In contrast, the message concerning the newly forbidden relationships lies buried in the verse, reflecting the awareness which likewise lay buried within the consciousness of the people, too deep at that time for even them to detect.

TRANSMITTING TORAH: FROM HASHEM TO MOSHE – AND FROM MOSHE TO THE PEOPLE

A most basic question regarding the above statement of Chazal is raised by Rabbeinu Eliyahu Mizrachi, the foremost commentator on Rashi's commentary to the Chumash: *Why are the Jewish people crying about these relationships now?* This episode occurred on the twentieth of Iyar – almost a year after they received the Torah, and over seven months from the time Moshe descended the mountain after Yom Kippur and transmitted it to the people. As such, to cry over this matter now seems something of a delayed reaction!

In answer to this question, the Mizrachi presents of profound idea. Although Moshe received the Mitzvos in their entirety while on Har Sinai, nonetheless, his transmission of the mitzvos to the people was not instantaneous upon descending the mountain. Rather, it took place over the ensuing weeks and months. Accordingly, it seems that the time the mitzvah of forbidden relationships was transmitted was when they left Har Sinai, at which point they reacted with weeping.⁸

⁷ Commentary *Emes le'Yaakov* to verse 10.

⁸ The Mizrachi adduces support for the idea that not all mitzvos were transmitted to the people immediately, from the Gemara in Gittin 60a which states that eight sections of the Torah were transmitted on the opening day of the Mishkan – the first of Nisan. These included the mitzvos pertaining to the kohanim, the leviim, the procedure for purifying oneself from *tumah* etc. Thus, we see that not all sections were said at once. However, R' Yaakov Selnik, author of commentary *Nachlas Yaakov* on Rashi, objects to this comparison. Those eight sections were not stated immediately because they were not yet relevant until the Mishkan was in operation. In contrast, the forbidden relationships were relevant straight away, why then would they be delayed? For his part, perhaps the Mizrachi would respond that those relationships did not become forbidden

Thus, according to the Mizrachi, there was no delayed reaction on the part of the people; they reacted as soon as they received the mitzvah. However, it is possible to understand the timing of the people's reaction in a different way. In order to understand how, let us return to the "bracketed" two verses at the end of chapter ten.

READING THE SIGNS

Commenting on these verses, Rashi writes:⁹

(The Torah) provided markers both before and after (this section), to indicate that this is not its (natural) location. And why was it written thus? In order to divide between one calamity and another.

This is a truly unique and remarkable situation! The Torah "transplanted" a section from its rightful place in order to divide between two negative sections. Interestingly, the item chosen to serve as the bracket is the letter *nun*. What is behind this choice? Here are two classic explanations:

1. R' David Pardo¹⁰ explains by drawing our attention to the Gemara in Berachos 4a, which notes that all of the letters of the aleph beis are present in the Psalm of Ashrei, with the exception of the letter nun. The reason for this, explains the Gemara, is that nun has an association with *nefila* – falling; therefore, David Hamelech did not wish to have that letter represented in Ashrei. Based on this, says Rav Pardo, we can understand why the letter *nun* was chosen as the bracket for this section, as the episodes it serves to divide describe the Jewish people at a time of a fall.
2. Another fascinating explanation is offered by Rabbeinu Bachye. As we mentioned, Rashi notes that these two verses were moved from their natural location. The Gemara in Masseches Shabbos,¹¹ which is the source of Rashi's comment, states that the natural location for these verses was earlier on in chapter 3 of Bamidbar, when the Torah describes how the people travelled and encamped. As we know, the sefer Torah is divided into paragraphs. Rabbeinu Bachye notes that the rightful place for these two verses is actually fifty paragraphs earlier than where it appears. For this reason, they are bracketed by the letter nun, which has the numerical value of fifty. Moreover, the letters are *facing backwards*, acting as a form of "signposts" and indicating the place in the Torah which represents their natural location – fifty paragraphs earlier!

WHAT WERE THE TWO CALAMITIES?

Rashi, in his comment on the verse, did not specify what the two calamities were that this section divides between. He does, however, conclude his remark by referring to the Gemara in Shabbos, where the two calamities are identified. By way of preface, let us survey the events as they are recorded in the Torah:

until the prohibition concerning them had been transmitted to the people, the appropriate timing for which was decided by Hashem.

It should be noted that while the Gemara states only that the cause for their weeping were the additional relationships, without commenting on when they were communicated, the Sifrei to our verse (cited by the Mizrachi) prefaces by saying: "בשעה שאמר להם משה לפרוש מן העריות היו מצטערים" – At the time Moshe told them to refrain from prohibited relationships, they were in distress." This seems to support the position of the Mizrachi.

9 10:34 s.v. *vayehi*.

10 Commentary *Maskil le'David to Rashi loc. cit.*

11 115b.

1. The Jewish people journeyed from Har Sinai (10:33).
2. **The two bracketed verses** (ibid. 34-35).
3. The episode of the *misonenim* (11:1-3).
4. The episode of *kivros hata'avah* (ibid. 4-34).

Accordingly, the Gemara identifies the two calamities as (1) journeying from Har Sinai and (2) the episode of the *misonenim*.

What is the nature of the first calamity – “Journeying from Hashem’s mountain”? Rashi¹² explains that as the people journeyed from the mountain they were already beginning to desire the base desires described later on in chapter eleven. In other words although the desire for meat *erupted after* the episode of the *misonenim*, it had, in actuality, already *begun to take root earlier on*, at the time they journeyed from Har Sinai.¹³

JOURNEYING FROM HASHEM’S MOUNTAIN

In order to understand this idea further, we need to consider the question of how journeying from Har Sinai can be considered a “calamity” at all; after all, the decision to journey was not the people’s – it came from Hashem Himself moving the Clouds of Glory, thereby indicating that the people were to move on! If so, then where was the calamity?

The answer was not in the journeying itself, but in the way it was done.

The entire time the people were encamped around Har Sinai, there was an elevating atmosphere derived from the Divine Presence which rested there. To be sure, the people could not stay there forever, however, the critical question is *how* they journeyed on from there. Did they undertake to maintain, as far as possible, the inspiration and ideals which they had experienced there, or did they perhaps loosen or sever their connection with those things, leaving them behind as they moved away? For even as one cannot stay around Hashem’s mountain forever, the question of how one leaves is decisive for one’s future beyond that time.¹⁴ This was the indictment of the people, and it is reckoned as the “first calamity.” As if to say, since it was the root of what would later erupt as the *kivros hata'avah*, the bracketed passage intended to “divide between two calamities,” is likewise placed here.

Indeed, this brings us to another explanation of the significance of the backwards letter nuns that bracket this section – one that is at once both fascinating and devastating. The *Yalkut Me’am Lo’ez* explains that these two nuns represent the two words with which we famously accepted the Torah: “נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָעַ – We will do and we will hear.” The preceding of accepting “to do” even before hearing what the mitzvos are denotes an absolute commitment to Torah law and Torah living. There is no question that these two words represented our finest hour as a people during that formative time. On contrast, the journey from Har Sinai a year later involved, as we have seen, leaving much of that elevation behind. This tragic reversal is accompanied by two backwards *nuns* – reflecting the reversal of the initial *Naaseh ve’Nishma!*

With this in mind, perhaps we can offer a different response to the question of the Mizrahi, mentioned above, namely, why did the people cry over the newly prohibited relationships only

12 Shabbos ibid.

13 Rashi, apparently, considers it inconceivable that the catastrophic episode of *kivros hata'avah* would go unregistered as a “calamity” within this discussion; hence, he explains that that catastrophe is being referred to with the people journeying from Hashem’s mountain.

14 See Tosafos, Shabbos ibid. (s.v. *puranus*) who cite the well-known comment of the Midrash that the people journeyed from the mountain “כְּתִינוּק הַבּוֹרַח מִבֵּית הַסֵּפֶר – As a child who runs away from school.”

now if they had already received them months earlier. Perhaps as long as they were at Sinai, the elevated atmosphere precluded such a mundane and base reaction. However, once the “travelled from Hashem’s mountain” and left the rarified atmosphere of Sinai behind, restrictions that had posed no problem to them months earlier suddenly became the cause of great distress.¹⁵

FACING FORWARD: FUTURE TIMES

With this understanding of the reversal of the letter nuns in mind, we can likewise understand a comment of the Zohar¹⁶ that in future times these letters will be restored to their correct forward-facing position. In terms of our discussion, this means that the reversal of *Naaseh ve’Nishma* which we experienced upon journeying from Har Sinai is not permanent; rather, it is something that will be rectified with the final redemption, representing a full and unwavering attachment to Hashem and His Torah. Moreover, even the reversal at that time never undid the *Naaseh ve’Nishma* of Har Sinai on a *fundamental* level; any reversal was purely *behavioral* in nature. The essential commitment of Sinai, however, representing the essential connection of the Jewish people to the Torah, remained intact throughout, and it is from there that we ourselves look forward to it being reclaimed and restored – *on all levels!*

15 R’ Aharon Dovid Golberg, Shiras Dovid, Bamidbar 11:10.

16 Cited by R’ Yitzchak Chaver, Derashos Siach Yitzchak, Drush *Vayehi Binsoa*.