

BEHAALOSCHA (NUMBERS 8:1-12:16)

The SEVEN Books of Moses?

2004 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Seplovitz

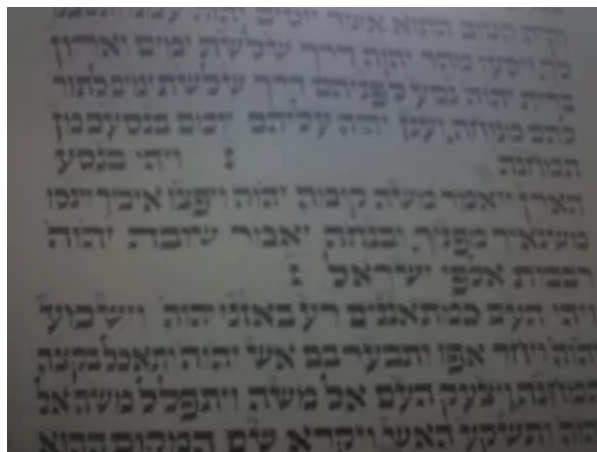
The Nation of Israel was traveling in the desert. They always knew when it was time to pick up camp and travel because the cloud of G-d's glory, which usually rested over the Tabernacle, rose up into the air. The nation would then begin to travel, with the Holy Ark being carried in the lead. They always knew when to stop because the cloud stopped moving.

When it was time to travel, Moses offered a prayer for Divine protection:

When the Ark would journey, Moses would say, *"Arise, G-d, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee from before You."* When it (the Ark) rested, he said, *"Reside tranquilly, G-d, among the myriads and thousands of Israel."* (Numbers, 10:35-36)

The prayers that Moses recited have, quite appropriately, been incorporated into our prayers. When the Torah is taken out of its ark to be read, we recite, *"When the Ark would journey..."* When the Torah is returned to the ark, we say, *"When it rested, he said, 'Reside tranquilly, G-d..."*

These two verses are the subject of a controversy in the Talmud. (Shabbos, 115a-116b) If you open up a Torah scroll to this section, you will see something unusual. The Torah often makes certain words or phrases look different from the rest of the text around it. Sometimes there are dots over particular letters. Sometimes letters are larger than usual; sometimes smaller. This paragraph stands out because it is it is



preceded and followed by an inverted letter "nun."

These "nun"s serve as virtual "asterisks" to emphasize something different about those words. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel differ as to the significance of these "asterisks."

Rabbi Yehudah states that the reason that these two verses are singled out is because they constitute a separate book of the Torah. In Rabbi Yehudah's opinion, the Book of Numbers is actually divided into three books: 1) Numbers, 1:1 until this point. 2) This short paragraph. 3) From here until the end. The inverted "nun"s before and after this paragraph serve as demarcations between the books.

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel disagrees. Rabban Shimon feels that the text before and after this section are marked this way as an indication that the paragraph is out of place. Really, Moses' prayer should have been quoted back in Chapter 2, where the Torah describes the march of the Hebrews in the desert.

Moses' prayer, according to Rabban Shimon, has been "cut" from Chapter 2, and "pasted" into Chapter 10. The two inverted "nun"s indicate the spot where the paragraph was inserted. Rabban Shimon maintains that someday the paragraph will be restored to its original location. Meanwhile, these "asterisks" point out the temporary change.

Why were the verses of the Torah rearranged? Why did G-d stick a paragraph into a place where it doesn't belong? Rabban Shimon explains that this paragraph was inserted here to serve as an interruption.

A few verses back, the Torah says, "*They traveled from the Mountain of G-d a three-day journey...*" (Ibid. 10:33) Immediately after the added sentences, it says, "*The people began to look for things to complain about ...and G-d heard, and His anger flared, and a fire of G-d burned against them...*" (Ibid, 11:1)

The reason for inserting Moses' prayer between these two verses, says Rabban Shimon, is "to separate the first punishment from the second punishment."

"Punishment." The Hebrew word used is "*Pur'anus*," which my Hebrew dictionary translates as "Divine retribution." I believe the root is "*Para* -- to pay." "*Pur'anus*," then, is payback from G-d for doing something wrong.

In order to avoid being overly negative, with G-d repeatedly punishing sinners, we take a break from punishment to read Moses' travel prayer. There's only one problem with this explanation. There is no punishment before the added verses.

Rabban Shimon told us that Moses' prayer is put into this spot "to separate the first punishment from the second punishment." To be sure, there is certainly plenty of Divine retribution against those who complained against G-d. That is "the second punishment" that comes right after the appended verses. But where is "the first punishment?" Where do we see G-d's burning wrath against the people who "*traveled from the Mountain of G-d a three-day journey?*" And why SHOULD there be any wrath? What did the Israelites do wrong by leaving Mount Sinai? They were commanded to do it!

The various commentaries offer interpretations as to what is referred to as "punishment" and what their sin was to deserve it. There is a Midrash that tells us what went wrong when they *traveled from the Mountain of G-d*. The Midrash tells us that they left Mount Sinai "like a small child running out of school. They said, 'Perhaps He'll give us more Commandments!'"

I picked up my six-year-old nephew from Yeshiva the other day. There were all these cute little kids, rambunctious with pent-up energy after a full day of school. They were happy to have some free time after the discipline of a classroom. Finally! The pressure's off!

There is nothing wrong with the above scenario. Kids are kids. The problem is when adults start acting like kids. The Israelites spent a year at the base of "the Mountain of G-d," learning G-d's Torah and living a life of holiness. Yet, it seems that deep down there was this feeling of, "Let's get out of here before the Teacher assigns us any more work!"

We now see what the sin was. But where is the punishment that Rabban Shimon refers to?

The answer, it seems, is that the attitude itself was its own punishment. When a Jew wakes up every morning with a hunger for holiness and a thirst for Torah, there is no such thing as reward and punishment. The opportunity to live as a Jew and perform G-d's Commandments is a reward unto itself. It is a privilege and an honor to be counted among those who are devoted to living as G-d wants us to live.

The problems start when we begin to resent our lifestyle. The people at the base of Mount Sinai followed all of the Torah's Laws. They studied Torah all day and kept strictly Kosher. They did everything that was required of them.

But they were apprehensive. "Enough Mitzvahs already!" they must have thought. How many more Commandments can we be expected to follow?!"

And so they ran. These spiritual giants, these righteous people, had proclaimed, "*We will do and we will obey!*" (Exodus, 24:7) They had fully and unconditionally accepted G-d's Torah. Yet, they ran away like schoolchildren, relieved of the burden of additional work.

It's not good enough to observe the Torah. We need to appreciate the Torah. As soon as we see Torah as a burden, we have reached the beginning of the end. And that is the worst punishment of all.

We pray every day for G-d to return His Divine Presence to Zion and rebuild the Temple. We implore G-d to remove idolatry, immorality, and hatred from the world. We beg Him to bless us with world peace.

It's time for us all to go back to school.

Have a great Shabbos.

