

Beha-aLotecha 5775

[Last year](#), for this *parasha*, I spoke briefly about these two mysterious upside down *nuns* in Chapter 10, verses 35 and 36. About how Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the man who arranged, organized, and composed the *Mishnah* said that the text between these two *nuns* should be its own entire book, separating Numbers into two books, bringing the total number of books in the Torah up to seven.

Each of these books has a particularly strong lesson or statement within its first verses. I like to think of that lesson almost as a fugue, a musical term where one theme is expanded on by all the different parts of the orchestra. One of the most prominent examples of a fugue is Beethoven's seminal 5th Symphony (if you're reading this, say "da da da Dum" out loud – *that* symphony).

In this symphony, every group of instruments takes this four note theme and either rephrases it, rearranges it, alters it, or otherwise expands on it. This creates interweaving lines of these four notes, sometimes clashing against each other, sometimes lining up and creating shimmering beauty, sometimes allying to create an even more powerful statement. This musical mechanism drives tension, evolves into resolution, and produces a pattern that resonates in our minds and stays with us. How powerful is this musical tool? Powerful enough that just reading "da da da DUM" is evocative of the entire piece, and enough to get this well known composition ingrained in your mind.

Our Torah was composed in much of the same way. Just as Beethoven's symphony has a four note theme that builds and grows through the movement, each book has a strong theme outlined in its first verses, which comes around into a fugue in various times. In Genesis, with the creation of the world, it was acceptance of the world and our drive to improve,

punctuated with our follies. In Exodus, it was how quickly things can change, with the introduction of the new king who didn't know Joseph. In Leviticus, it may seem esoteric, but the introduction of sacrifices and then two immediate deaths from the ever vague "strange fire" are merely the introduction of what to do and how not to go astray. Deuteronomy brings accountability.

It seems I left out Numbers.

The first verses of Numbers tells not how to count for each other, but that we *should* count each other. That we, a people and community, are exactly that. This is a context that is crucial through the entire book and, if you keep it in mind, it can change how you apply parts of the text.

If you take Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi's suggestion and punctuate the Book of Numbers with this mysterious upside down *nun* interjection, you end up with two new books. Let's take a quick look into that.

Between these two *nuns* is:

So it was, whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, Arise, O Lord, may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from You.

And when it came to rest he would say, Repose O Lord, among the myriads of thousands of Israel.

The immediate book, with Moses proclaiming and, I believe, blessing the movement of the Ark, is so short that context is hard to establish. However, I feel it provides depth for the remainder of the books and for the remainder of the Torah.

Last year, I spoke of how I believed these two *nuns* represented Hashem serving us out of love, and it's quite fitting that they surround this verse. The Ark was G-d's dwelling place on Earth, it was where G-d met his people. I

say "Moshe blessed", because "May your enemies be scattered" sounds a lot like "May G-d keep you and protect you," and many other fatherly biblical blessings.

This shows that if we are to be in a covenant with Hashem, like any functional marriage, it is a partnership. Hashem blesses us and we bless Hashem. If we are to meet G-d on Earth, as in the days of the Ark, we can expect G-d to enjoy our blessings, just as we enjoy his.

If we take this newly expanded relationship and color some parts of the next book with the context it provides, we see Hashem providing a more nuanced protection to Israel when putting words in Balak's mouth to Balaam. Instead of what initially seems to be blatant manipulation, this context changes it to a gentle conversation in the only way that Hashem can get through to someone.

Even further, in *Re-eh*, Deuteronomy 13:2-8, ordering death to those that go astray from Judaic monotheism, it changes the context from a jealous god trying to protect what's his to a cautious god trying to keep a nation from committing adultery against her.

So, if we take out these two bookended inverted *nuns*, we have a brand new book which can give the remainder of our Torah a different context. But what does that leave the remainder of Numbers, now split in two?

The first verses of this new Numbers 2.0 is of people complaining and Hashem hearing them. The foods they were accustomed to were no longer available and the infamous manna debacle ensued. They felt a terrible craving and those that fully gave into that craving died from its repercussions.

This seems like a fairly strong context for the remainder of Numbers: moderation and self control. We even have mitzvot laid out about taking care of one's body. But self control goes past that, past food. Later in this very chapter, Miriam

is inadvertently cursed, an unfair punishment, but her and Aaron lacked moderation and self control in their words.

Even as soon as the next chapter, we see the ramifications of a lack moderation and self control in the scouts, and how Moses is eventually barred from entering the Holy Land. While that is a *drash* for a different day, I challenge you to read ahead and see how this new context changes what could be read.

So what am I ultimately saying? There are three ways to read this. One is with the context of communal responsibility, looking out for each other, injected into everything. One is with the idea that we have a reciprocal relationship with Hashem for blessings further coloring how we read onward. Finally, one is with the continued idea that we must take personal moderation and self control to help protect our communities.

The next time we're confronted with the monotony of manna, even though we may be filled in one way but lacking in another, we can gird ourselves against our nature to complain. We can look inward and figure out how to improve our situation ourselves, rather than complaining about how easy it used to be. The Israelites missed the variety of food and, no doubt, experiences they were used to in Egypt and let themselves go because of their misery. That misery, though, was brought about by losing focus on what was important and what was good.

I hope and pray that we can find the good in our lives, focus on it, and contextualize our experiences with blessings to and from G-d. Shabbat shalom.

D'var: B'Ha Alot'kha

Seven.

Seven is the theme of today's *parashah*. Well, one of them. Seven and love.

Today's reading covers many things, among them are the building and lighting of the *menorah* lamps, hammered out of solid gold with each side facing the other. It moves on to the purification and assignment of the Levites to protecting the people Israel from plagues resulting from coming too near the sanctuary.

One major part of our religion comes from Chapter 9, where Hashem set the rules for Pesach, including a secondary festival for those who may have become impure by helping with the dead during the first festival and, thus, been ineligible to participate.

We cover trumpets and traveling, troop movements and Tabernacle assemblies. There's manna which, according to Rabbi Yonatan Eybeschutz, fulfilled our people physically, but not psychologically due to its abundance. Moshe saw the lack of morale in the tribes and Hashem had him bring 70 of the elders and leaders of the tribes to the Tent of Meeting to eventually show their folly in complaining about the lack of meat.

G-d brought in immense amounts of quail which some of the people ate so voraciously that they didn't even cook it. Hashem saw this, arguably rightly so, as indignation and second-guessing about having ever been taken out of Egypt, where meat was plentiful but manna was unavailable. Those who suffered from this greed did not suffer much longer; Hashem put forth a plague which struck those who felt that way.

Finally, we have Miriam and Aaron talking behind Moshe's back about how he married a Cushite woman and how they were jealous

that Hashem spoke to Moshe directly. Hashem called the three of them, Miriam, Aaron, and Moses, to the Tent of Meeting, and chastised the first two about speaking poorly of Moses. He then put a temporary disease on Miriam which delayed the departure of the people from Hazereth.

Amidst all this, it's easy to miss one extraordinarily interesting part on page 826 in Chapter 10, verse 35.

Now, I can't read Hebrew, but I'm pretty sure that Nun is upside down, and I'm also pretty sure the Nun at the end of the chapter is also upside down.

The Nun is, of course, the 14th letter of the *aleph-bet*. It is one of a few letters written differently, depending on its position. In the beginning or middle of a word it's bent while, at the end of a word, it's straight.

Rashi explains that the difference between the two *nuns* represents people. The bent *nun* represents a person who serves "bent over" out of humility and love. At the end, in the World to Come, they will be able to stand tall.

What is between these two *nuns*?

"When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say
'Advance, O Lord!
May your Enemies be scattered,
And may Your foes flee before You!'
And when it halted he would say:
'Return, O Lord,
You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!'"

Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi, the very man who compiled the *Mishnah*, thought that these two verses were their own book of the Torah unto themselves. He further suggested the Book of Numbers should be divided into three individual books: the first 10 chapters, these two verses, and then the remainder of the Book of Numbers. This would bring the full number of books of the

Torah from the five that we know up to seven.

His view was even supported partially from Proverbs 9:1
“Wisdom has built her house, she has hewn her seven pillars.”

What makes these two verses so amazingly important that the very man who put together the text we, and all other Jews, read thought it should be its own book? I think the answer lies in those two *nuns*.

Often, there will be an out of place letter, a line, or something different in the text to indicate something of extreme importance or grammatical imperfection. I would posit that these two *nuns* are **not** bookends to something misplaced, misspelled, or misspelled, but to something that is so profoundly important to our relationship with G-d that we need to be reminded of it constantly. In fact, we pray about it, we sing about it, and I've even mentioned it before in previous *d'vrei Torah*.

Hashem helps us not out of obligation or fear, obviously, but love and humility. His anger has been the cause of many plagues and calamities, but his actions stemming from humility preserve us.

If a *nun* bent over represents our humility to G-d, would a *nun* descending bent represent G-d extending his own humility and love? I think yes. We can look up while he looks down; whether its all the way in the heavens or from a modestly raised pillar of cloud.

We don't *need* pets, children, or friends to live. They do, however, help us realize our humanity and purpose. They extend meaning to our existence and, when we give them our love, it furthers the connections between every involved party and often ancillary ones. Hashem doesn't *need* us, but maybe our existence to Him inspires love, and maybe that love furthers *tikkun olam*.

Those two *nuns* demonstrate that during those two verses:

“When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say

“‘Advance, O Lord!

May your Enemies be scattered,

And may Your foes flee before You!’

And when it halted he would say:

‘Return, O Lord,

You who are Israel’s myriads of thousands!’”

Hashem was protecting us and elevating us out of love. It was that love which makes us his chosen people and, just like you’ll often hold the spouse you chose to a higher standard than the rest of the people out there, he holds us to that higher standard.

G-d loves us so much He gave us His one and only Torah. He loves us so much that he protects us so that we may study it.

He loves us so much that He will help us gather our myriads, or, as an alternate translation, clans of thousands.

So, we have seven lights in the *menorah* in the beginning of the *parashah*.

We have four sets of seven in our two *nuns* dividing it.

We have 10 sets of seven in the elders that were punished afterwards.

We have seven sets of seven that just passed on *Shavuot* with the *Omer*.

And what do we do when the one that we love most is to be betrothed to us? We circle them seven times and share in a festive meal daily, for seven days, with seven blessings at each meal.

Maybe John Lennon was right when he said “all you need is love.” Maybe not, though, as action is required on top of it all for *tzedakah*, *tikkun olam*, and other *mitzvot*. Seven days

of creation, after all, started with love but blossomed with action. Shabbat shalom.