

FLIPPED UPSIDE DOWN

by Rabbi Pinchas Avruch

This week's parsha records the first travels of the Jewish nation, after they spent almost a year encamped at the foot of Mount Sinai. At the beginning of the year at Sinai, they experienced the miraculous revelation of G-d's presence, hearing the first two of the Ten Commandments from G-d Himself. But of great significance was the fantastic statement of faith and trust declared by the new Nation of G-d: "Na'aseh v'nishmah", we will fulfill and we will understand. The Children of Israel had a complete trust in G-d's love for them, keenly aware that the Creator of the Universe had only their best interests "in mind", much as a child has complete trust in his parents. With this confidence in G-d, they accepted the Torah and its commandments from the outset (na'aseh/we will fulfill) with the goal of eventually gaining an understanding of the meaning of its contents (nishmah/we will understand). Yet, the impact of the Sinaitic experience diminished quickly as, soon after the departure, the Egyptian mixed multitude of not-so-sincere converts enticed the Jewish nation to complain against G-d twice about the quality of their Divine accommodations.

Immediately after the departure, before the complaints are recorded, the Torah relates the declaration Moshe made each time the nation traveled, one statement when the Holy Ark was uprooted to move and the second when the Ark came to its new resting place. Strangely, these two verses have two upside down "nuns" (fourteenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet), one at the beginning of the interruption and one at the end. Nachmanides (R' Moshe ben Nachman; 1194-1270; of Gerona, Spain; one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages) quotes the Medrash that explains this insertion really belongs in the narrative in chapter 2 discussing the design of the Jewish encampment and the regimen for moving the camp. Nevertheless, it is placed here to break up the string of three successive sins for which the nation received severe punishment.

We know that after this insertion are the two complaints against G-d for which they are punished, but immediately previous to this was the departure from Sinai. What was the sin and what was the punishment? The Medrash explains that the Jews feared that G-d was going to add mitzvos (commandments) to the Torah, adding to the awesome responsibility the Jews had so willingly accepted a year earlier. Commentaries explain that this anxiety was rooted in the normal human apprehension to embrace spiritual growth to the detriment of our enjoyment of the physical pleasures around us. Therefore, when they left Sinai, they excitedly fled, "as a child who flees school." Indeed, at the moment of departure, G-d was also "rushing": His plan was to expedite the nation's journey to the Land of Israel, which they would have swiftly conquered and the Messiah would have come - no forty years in the Wilderness, no first exile by the Babylonians, no second

exile by the Romans, no two thousand years in the Diaspora. Nachmanides conjectures that this entire plan was suspended because of this sin.

This clarifies why the interruption was needed, but why with "nuns" and why are they upside down? Me'am Lo'ez (monumental Ladino commentary on the entire Tanach by Rabbi Yaakov Culi of Constantinople; 1689-1732) elucidates that following the declaration of "na'aseh v'nishmah", the Children of Israel were more beloved to G-d than angels and had accomplished spiritually almost to the level of angels. But considering their identification and connection to the Master of the Universe, their hasty departure a year later was akin to throwing off the entire responsibility of Torah and mitzvos. Na'aseh and nishmah, which both start with the letter "nun", had effectively been flipped upside down.

Rabbi Yosef Granofsky (Rosh Yeshiva/Dean of Yeshiva Or David, Jerusalem) compares personal growth to mountain climbing. At the beginning, the grade is not steep and it is easy to take big steps. As one reaches higher heights, the steps are smaller and demand greater calculation and contemplation. But standing still and maintaining the status quo are not an option because eventually the footing will crumble. One must continue to move upward or risk the inevitable tumble downward. Angst accompanies every step, but the alternative is even more frightening.

Have a good Shabbos!

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