

THE "NUNS"

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The dawn of a brave new spiritually enlightened world would have broken over the darkened landscape of past strife and human failings.

The last two Parshios, as well as the first half of this week's Parsha, described the final preparations necessary for the Bnai Yisroel to enter Eretz Yisroel. Starting from the beginning of Perek 11, it is clear that the Jews were not yet ready to leave the protected encampment of the desert. They were not yet ready to assume the responsibilities of living "as all other nations". They were not yet ready to live on their own without the overt miracles of G-d's protection. Consequently, the relationship between Hashem and the Bnai Yisroel had to undergo a profound change so that they would remain in the desert and ready themselves to enter Eretz Yisroel.

The Gemara states that there are really seven books in the Torah, not five: 1) Bereishis, 2) Shemos, 3) Vayikra, 4) the beginning two and a half Parshios of Bamidbar, 5) the two bracketed Psukim of "When the Ark went forth," (10:35-36) 6) the rest of Sefer Bamidbar, and 7) Sefer Devarim. Basically, the Gemara gives the two verses of 10:35 and 36 the importance of being their own separate book of the Torah.

What is so significant about these two Psukim that the Talmud considers them a separate "Sefer"? Why are they the only verses in the entire Torah bracketed between backward, upside-down "Nuns"? (14th letter of the Hebrew Aleph Bet) Why do we say these two verses whenever the Ark is opened?

The Jews were taken out of Egypt and given the Torah, to be living role models of what G-d intended humankind to be. The miracles of the Exodus, as well as the time spent living in the desert, were intended to impact the consciousness of the Jews with the totality of their dependency upon Hashem. To the degree that they were able to accept their dependency would be the degree to which they would listen to G-d and the degree of their success in fulfilling their mission as Jews.

At the beginning of this week's Parsha, the Bnai Yisroel were poised to enter the promised land and begin living their national mission. All final preparations had been completed: the ordering and counting of each tribe, the placement of each tribe for the grand entrance into Eretz Yisroel, the positioning of the Leviyim and the Kohanim, and the final instructions for the care of the Mishkan. The Torah then states the exact day when the nation began their final trip. "In the second year of the Exodus, on the 20th of the second month..." (10:11) What a moment! The children of Israel were about

to fulfill the 432 year-old promise made to Avraham - "To your children will I give this land".

The generation of the Exodus was on the threshold of what could have been the messianic era. Moshe, Aharon, and Miriam would have lead them across the Yarden. The land would have been captured in 24 hours. Moshe and Aharon would have built the Bais Hamikdash, and the dawn of a brave, new, spiritually enlightened, world would have broken over the darkened landscape of past strife human failings. It was a singular moment in history for which the previous two years of overt miracles and divine revelations should have prepared the Bnai Yisroel.

The very final preparation was Moshe's invitation to his father-in-law Yisro to join them in entering the land. Yisro declined the offer and the Torah then stated the two bracketed verses of "When the Ark went forth". Clearly, the juxtaposition of these final verses prior to the Bnai Yisroel entering the land are of enormous importance, and were intended to be contrasted with Yisro's refusal to join the Bnai Yisroel in entering Eretz Yisroel.

Rav S. R. Hirsch explains the importance of these two verses. Being that the national mission in relation to the other nations was to model the integration of G-d into daily living, and the basis for this integration was their acceptance that all things were from Hashem; therefore, the Bnai Yisroel needed a final example and role-model of what it meant to be totally dependent upon G-d. The two bracketed verses are that example.

The two Pasukim of "When the Ark went forth" at first glance, do not seem to make sense. Moshe appears to be commanding Hashem to "travel", after the Ark and the pillar of clouds had already begun to move. Likewise, Moshe appears to be commanding the Ark to halt, after the pillar of clouds and the Ark had already come to a stop! What purpose did Moshe's commands serve?

Rav Hirsch explains that these two Pasukim are portraying Moshe as the ultimate servant of G-d. Moshe was a servant who understood his status as "the property of his master." Moshe was a servant who loved his master and would have done everything in his power to fulfill his master's wishes. Moshe was a servant who put his master's wishes before his own, and attempted to anticipate his master's commands and wishes before being commanded.

This was the manner of Moshe's relationship with Hashem. As the Mishnah in Avos (2:4) says, "Do the will of G-d as if it were your own." Moshe was so much the "servant" that G-d's will became his will. Therefore, regardless of what Moshe was doing at the time that the Ark began to move, Moshe immediately stopped his activities and began to travel. Likewise, whenever the Ark came to a stop, regardless of Moshe's thinking that maybe they should have stopped sooner or later than they had, Moshe stopped.

At first glance, this might not seem so impressive. We might even assume that under similar circumstances we too would have listened to the will of G-d no differently than Moshe. However, Moshe's response was significantly different than ours would have been. Most of us would listen to the command of Hashem by stopping or going, but still thinking that if it had been up to us, we

would have done it differently. Moshe, regardless of how inconvenient it was to listen to G-d's commandments, suspended his own judgment and did as he was told by G-d without the slightest hesitation or reservation. This is why Moshe appeared to be telling Hashem to travel after the Ark has already begun to move, and to halt after the Ark had already stopped. Once Hashem revealed His will to His servant Moshe listened to it with the same absolute conviction as if it had been his own idea!

We can now appreciate why the Torah separated these two Psukim from the rest of the Torah with the bracketed "Nuns". As the Bnai Yisroel were about to enter the land and assume their responsibilities as role models to the rest of the world, the Torah identified Moshe as the preeminent servant and role model. The example of Moshe's seemingly unnecessary command to go or to stop was a living example of the Bnai Yisroel's individual and national goals.

The reason we say these two verses as we take the Torah out of the Ark is to focus us on the ultimate goal of "making His will as our own"! How many of us have the attitude that Mitzvos are the only thing we should be doing at the time the opportunity to do a mitzvah presents itself, or when it is required of us? Imagine Super Bowl Sunday, and you have to choose between davening Mincha and watching the most crucial play of the game. How many of us would forgo davening in order to watch the game? How many of us would daven reluctantly and Super Sunday fast hoping to do both? How many of us would embrace the opportunity of speaking to Hashem with complete abandon, joy, and focus, believing that it was the single most important thing for us to do at that moment, and ignore the most crucial play of the Super Bowl? This is why we introduce the reading of the Torah with these Psukim. It reinforces the proper attitude we should have in relation to G-d's mitzvos as modeled by Moshe Rabbeinu.

These Psukim are contrasted with Yisro's refusal to join the Bnai Yisroel, because they are the primary difference between Yisro and Moshe. As we know, Yisro was a great man who played an indispensable role in Moshe Rabbeinu's development. Yisro was Moshe's teacher, mentor, advisor, and father-in-law. Yisro's conversion to a true belief in Hashem was intended as part of the nation's preparation for enter Eretz Yisroel and becoming the intended teachers for the other nations. Yet, when Yisro was confronted with the choice of listening to the word of G-d as spoken by His servant Moshe, or following the dictates of his own heart and mind, Yisro elected to follow his own agenda. Yisro did not join Moshe in leading the Bnai Yisroel; instead, he followed the dictates of his own intentions. Moshe, on the other hand, always followed the word of G-d and suspended his own thoughts and feelings. As we were about to enter Eretz Yisroel and usher in the Messianic era, the Torah contrasted the attitudes of these two great personalities, and underscored the example of Moshe's subservience, rather than the example of Yisro's well-intended independence.

Good Shabbos.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.
