

TIMELESS TORAH

BEHA'ALOTCHA - Trials & Tribulations: The Parsha of Three Books¹

The Misplaced Book

Of all the many and varied topics in Parshat Beha'alotcha, one that stands out is the short and uniquely bracketed passage of *Vayehi binso'a* (10:35-36). These two verses, which we recite to this day every time the Torah is taken out and placed back in the Ark, describe what would happen when the Aron began to journey from one encampment to the next. The Gemara teaches that, due to the extreme significance of this parshah, it is marked with inverted nuns before and after it, marking it out as a '*sefer bifnei atzmo*', an independent Book of the Torah. Another teaching in the Gemara, in a slightly different approach, adds that these verses should be written earlier in Chapter 10, together with the rest of the description of the encampment of the Jewish people. The passage is placed here in order to separate between two negative topics: the disorderly rush to leave Mount Sinai and the complaints about the material provisions in the wilderness.

The Gemara, then, discusses this passage in isolation, but when we look at the broader context of Parshat Behaalotcha, as taught by Rav Soloveitchik, this passage connects the seemingly unrelated topics of the parshah in a profound way. At this stage of the Jewish people's sojourn, they are a mere three-day journey from Eretz Yisrael and the tempo and the sense of anticipation can be felt through the verses of the parsha. Had the Jewish people continued in this way, they would have entered Eretz Yisrael immediately and built the Beit HaMikdash, which would then never have been destroyed. But it was not to be. The people fell into a crisis

of lack of faith, complaining and finding problems, which eventually led to their entry to the Promised Land being delayed for forty years.

Thus, this passage with its inverted nuns represents the reversal of the Jewish people's fortunes. The letter nun often stands for *nefilah*, falling, and here, this passage is bracketed with two letter nuns standing on their head, denoting that in place of the anticipation and excitement, the mood has changed to decline and sadness. These verses form an independent book of the Torah because it should have been the last book that Moshe wrote, but it instead leads into a trajectory of tragic decline. Conversely, though, this is a book of potential, a testimony to the redemption that was in our grasp and still can be attained if we only have the courage and faith to reach for it.

Learning From Distress

A close examination of the chapter following the inverted nuns show a number of distinct narratives that describe the various complaints of the Jewish people, but the first verse simply says that the people were '*kem-itonenim*', without specifying exactly what the complaint was. In fact, the meaning of this word is also not entirely clear. Ibn Ezra (d.1167) contends that it is related to the word *aven*, meaning sin, but the Ramban (d. 1270) rejects this because there is no reason that the Torah should not have identified this particular sin. According to the Ramban, the word *mitonen* means to groan, in pain over one's situation. At this juncture, after all the hype of the Mishkan and Kabbalat HaTorah had died down, reality set in,



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and the people began to wonder how they would survive in the wilderness, far from any other civilisation. Such misgivings might seem reasonable, but to merit immediate entry into the Promised Land, this exalted generation were expected to live with a sense of history, believing with all their hearts that just as Hashem had wrought numerous miracles for them until now, he would continue to provide for them in the same way. It seems that this leap of faith was challenging even for the generation that witnessed more open miracles than any other generation before or after. Nevertheless, we can apply this lesson to our own lives: when we are concerned about what the future will bring, we can have no more comforting thought than to contemplate how we have survived in the past.

A Model of Trustworthiness

Faced with these sentiments of reluctance to follow his example, Moshe calls upon Hashem to relieve him of his role as sole leader of the Jewish people and to allow a diversity of governance. With this, the commentators point out, he was echoing his original demurring to the role thrust upon him at the burning bush. Then, his hesitation was ignored, but now, Moshe was told that he may bring in seventy officers to assist him. From the beginning, the Ramban explains, Moshe's extreme humility pushed him to feel that there was not a single person in the world who was not more fitting for his position than him. But that humility was precisely the attribute that Hashem was looking for in the first leader of His nation.

With this crisis, however, things changed somewhat. The people had not managed

to retain the powerful levels of faith necessary to follow their great leader into Eretz Yisrael, and they had complained. Here, Moshe felt justified in repeating his claim that he was not worthy of leading the people, and this claim was now accepted.

This is the connection to the final episode of the parshah, in which the Torah states that Moshe was far greater than any other prophet because he was a '*ne'eman* — trustworthy'. According to the Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Berlin, Volozhin, d. 1893), this trustworthiness manifested itself in that despite Moshe Rabbeinu's unparalleled knowledge of the secrets of Creation, even possessing the explicit Name of Hashem with which He created the heavens and earth, Moshe never used this knowledge for himself. Indeed, not only did he not use his own knowledge, but he also did not talk about it. Unlike other prophets, who were instructed to relate to the people descriptions of the Heavenly hosts, Moshe Rabbeinu's entire career was built on being the faithful servant of Hashem, transmitting the word of Hashem to the people without any ulterior action.

This is the faith that we, as a nation, are still working on attaining. True faith is the deep belief that whatever happens, Hashem has a plan. Even when things are difficult and one feels the need to say or do something, a true *ne'eman*, faithful person, is able to hold back and restrict themselves to only what they have been instructed.

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