YESHIVAT HAR ETZION

ISRAEL KOSCHITZKY VIRTUAL BEIT MIDRASH (VBM)

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PARASHAT HASHAVUA

**Parashat Behaalotekha**

**The Section of “*Va-Yehi Bi-Neso’a Ha-Aron*”**

**Harav Yaakov Medan**

And it came to pass, when the ark set forward ["*Va-yehi bi-neso'a ha-aron*"], that Moshe said: “Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You.” And when it rested, he said: “Return, O Lord, to the ten thousands of the families of Israel.” (*Bamidbar* 10:35-37)

This section has two unusual markers the likes of which are found nowhere else in the Torah – an inverted *nun* before it and an inverted *nun* after it. These markers are found also in *Tehillim* 107 where they separate between the verses of "the song of the sea," the song of thanksgiving sung to God by seafarers for the miracles that He performed to rescue them.

The Talmud discusses the nature of the markers found in our *parasha*, citing two opinions on the matter:

Our Rabbis taught: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward, that Moshe said" – For this section the Holy One, blessed be He, provided signs above and below, to teach that this is not its place. Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi] said: It is not on that account, but because it ranks as a separate book. With whom does the following dictum of R. Shmuel bar Nachmani in the name of R. Yonatan agree: "She [Wisdom] has hewn out her seven pillars" (*Mishlei* 9:1) – this refers to the seven books of the Torah. With whom? With Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi]. Who is the *Tanna* who disagrees with Rabbi [Yehuda Ha-Nasi]? It is R. Shimon ben Gamaliel. For it was taught: R. Shimon ben Gamaliel said: This section is destined to be removed from here and written in its [right place]. And why is it written here? In order to provide a break between the first [account of] punishment and the second [account of] punishment. What is the second [account of] punishment? "And the people were as murmurers" (*Bamidbar* 11:1). What is the first [account of] punishment? "And they set forward from the mount of the Lord" (*Bamidbar* 10:33)… And where is its [rightful] place? In [the chapter on] the banners… If a Torah scroll is decayed, if eighty-five letters can be gathered therein, such as the section, "and it came to pass, when the ark set forward," we must save it; if not, we may not save it. (*Shabbat* 115b-116a)

**I. A Separate Book (The Opinion of R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi)**

According to R. Yehuda Ha-Nasi, the two markers set apart the verses under discussion as a separate book of the Torah, like *Bereishit* and *Shemot* – a book of two verses that contain eighty-five letters in total. Based on this opinion, the *gemara* maintains that a Torah scroll that was decayed may be saved from fire, even on Shabbat, if there are eighty-five letters belonging to words that are still complete, like this small book, the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a ha-aron*."

The *gemara* understands that according to this opinion, the Torah consists not of five, but of seven books.[[1]](#footnote-1) But what is the nature of such a small book among the other books of the Torah?

It is possible that these two verses allude to "the book of the Wars of the Lord":

Therefore it is said in the Book of the Wars of the Lord: Vahev in Sufa, and the valleys of Arnon. (*Bamidbar* 21:14)

This book contained a description of the wars of God that the people of Israel waged against their enemies. This book has not come down to us, and only a few of its verses were included as the word of God in the Torah. Among the verses that entered the Torah are the aforementioned verses describing the war in the valleys of Arnon. It is possible that the first verse of the book, as well as the last verse, were also included in the Torah. The first verse is likely to have been: "And it came to pass, when the ark set forward that Moshe said: Rise up, O Lord, and let Your enemies be scattered; and let them that hate You flee before You,’" Moshe's prayer before the army of Israel went out to fight the wars of God. The last verse is likely to have been: "And when it rested, he said: Return, O Lord, to the ten thousands of the families of Israel," Moshe's prayer at the time of the return of the army of Israel from the wars of God.[[2]](#footnote-2) The "abridged" version of the book of the Wars of the Lord could very well have been the book that was added to the five books of the Torah, and, accordingly, it is marked by inverted *nuns* at its beginning and at its end.

It is also possible that these verses constitute a "war song," for many wars in Scripture have songs associated with them. This war song parallels the "song of the sea" of those who go down to the sea in ships in *Tehillim*, each verse of which is preceded by an inverted *nun*:

] They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters – ] these saw the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep; ] For He commanded, and raised the stormy wind, which lifted up the waves thereof; ] They mounted up to the heaven, they went down to the deeps; their soul melted away because of trouble; ] They reeled to and fro, and staggered like a drunken man, and all their wisdom was swallowed up; ] They cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He brought them out of their distresses. (*Tehillim* 107:23-28)

Our proposal that the two verses of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a ha-aron*" are a prayer during God's wars is based on the content of the verses: "And let Your enemies be scattered and let them that hate You flee before You," on the fact that the ark sets forward when these verses are recited, and that it goes out with the people of Israel to war, as we see in the following examples:

And when the people were come into the camp, the elders of Israel said: “Why has the Lord smitten us today before the Pelishtim? Let us fetch the ark of the covenant of the Lord out of Shilo to us, that He may come among us, and save us out of the hand of our enemies.” (I *Shmuel* 4:3)[[3]](#footnote-3)

Moreover, these verses appear in a slightly different form in David's song of war:

Let God arise, let His enemies be scattered; and let those that hate Him flee before Him… O God, when You went forth before Your people, when You did march through the wilderness; Selah. The earth trembled, the heavens also dropped at the presence of God; even Sinai trembled at the presence of God, the God of Israel… The chariots of God are myriads, even thousands upon thousands; the Lord is among them, as in Sinai, in holiness. (*Tehillim* 68:2-18)

The psalm begins with “Let God arise; let His enemies be scattered," just like Moshe's prayer in our chapter, and it describes a war like the war of Devora and Barak that is described in the song of Devora. It continues by noting that the chariots of God are "myriads, even thousands upon thousands," like the “ten thousands of the families in Israel" in Moshe's prayer.

**II. A Break between the Punishments (The Opinion of R. Shimon Ben Gamiliel)**

We will now discuss the opinion of R. Shimon ben Gamliel – that the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a ha- aron*" was written here in order to provide a break between the first punishment and the second punishment. According to the *gemara*, this means between the punishment for "And they set forward from the mount of the Lord," which was recorded before the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a ha-aron*," and the punishment of the murmurers, which was recorded after it. This exposition requires explanation, for what punishment is there for setting forth from the mount of the Lord toward *Eretz Yisrael*?[[4]](#footnote-4) And why was it necessary to uproot a section from its natural place – "Then the tent of meeting, with the camp of the Levites, shall set forward in the midst of the camps; as they encamp, so shall they set forward, every man in his place, by their standards" (*Bamidbar* 2:17) – and set it between the punishments? After all, in many places two calamities with their punishments are recorded one after the other (the murmurers and the lusters, the spies and the *ma'apilim*, Datan and Aviram and the two hundred and fifty burners of incense, and others).

And they set forward from the mount of the Lord three days' journey; and the ark of the covenant of the Lord went before them three days' journey, to seek out a resting-place for them. (*Bamidbar* 10:33)

It seems that the Torah wishes to emphasize the space that surrounded the camp of Israel before it and behind it. The mount of the Lord was at a distance of a three day journey behind the camp, and the ark of the covenant of the Lord was at a distance of a three day journey before it. The distance from the two centers of the covenant and the Torah was exceedingly great![[5]](#footnote-5)

This is reflected in the request made first by the mixed multitude (the *asafsuf*), and afterwards by all of Israel, to receive meat. The people of Israel do, indeed, receive meat, but in a wrathful manner:

And there went forth a wind from the Lord, and brought across quails from the sea, and let them fall by the camp, about a day's journey on this side, and a day's journey on the other side, round about the camp, and about two cubits above the face of the earth. (*Bamidbar* 11:31)

The empty space between the Israelite camp and the Torah, Mount Sinai and the ark, is filling up. It fills up with meat. The very abundance of meat is negative and dangerous. When the abundance of meat takes the place of the Torah and of the covenant with God, it is many times more dangerous.

This reminds us of the problem raised in the book of *Devarim*:

When the Lord your God shall enlarge your border, as He has promised you, and you shall say, “I will eat flesh,” because your soul desires to eat flesh; you may eat flesh, after all the desire of your soul. If the place which the Lord your God shall choose to put His name there be too far from you…. (*Devarim* 12:20-21)

The chassidic reading of these verses accounts for the lust for eating meat, which is so emphasized in these verses, as following from the fact that the *Shekhina* is at such a distance. A person who is close to the *Shekhina* does not indulge in eating meat. The verses in our *parasha* mention lust and meat on multiple occasions. Here too it is because "the place is too far from you." The mount of the Lord is a three-day journey behind them, and the ark of the covenant of the Lord is a three-day journey ahead of them. This was a calamity that required temperance. The song of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*" separates between their separation from God's Torah by way of a three-day journey from the mount of the Lord and from the ark of the Lord, before the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*," and their clinging to meat on all sides of the camp, one-day's journey in this direction and one-day's journey in the other direction, after the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*."

(Translated by David Strauss)

1. The accepted explanation of Rashi, the commentary attributed to the Ran, and others, is that the book of *Bamidbar* is divided into three parts: until the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*," that section itself, and the rest of the book after it. In my opinion, the fact that the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*" constitutes a book of its own does not necessarily mean that we must divide up the book of *Bamidbar*. It is possible that this small book, the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*," was integated into the book of *Bamidbar*, but the rest of the book of *Bamidbar* remains one book, not two. According to this, the Torah is made up of six books: *Bereishit*, *Shemot*, *Vayikra*, *Bamidbar*, the section of "*Va-yehi bi-neso'a*," and *Devarim*. The seventh book might be the book of *Yehoshua*, based on what is written at the end of his book: "And Yehoshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God" (*Yehoshua* 24:26). In several respects, and also in its style, the book of *Yehoshua* is connected to the Torah of Moshe, as in, for example: "And the Lord spoke to Yehoshua, saying: Speak to the children of Israel, saying" (*Yehoshua* 20:1-2), and elsewhere. The book of *Yehoshua* continues the section dealing with the cities of refuge that begins in the Torah. Similarly, it realizes the words of the book of the covenant at Arvot Moav concerning the assembly at Mount Gerizim and Mount Eival. There is no fundamental problem with saying that the entire book of *Yehoshua* should be treated in the same way and that it is a continuation of the Torah of Moshe, just as Yehoshua is the continuation of Moshe. Moreover, R. Adda bar R. Chanina maintained (*Nedarim* 22b) that had Israel not sinned, they would have been given only the five books of Moshe and the book of *Yehoshua*. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Perhaps this verse refers to the future resting of the ark in the Temple of Shlomo, about whom it is stated: "And I will give peace and quiet to Israel in his days" (I *Divrei Ha-Yamim* 22:9). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. While it is true that that incident involved a sin, the sin related to one particular element, but not necessarily to the very taking of the ark out to battle. There are also other examples. See *Yerushalmi Shekalim* 6:1; *Sifrei Bamidbar*,chap. 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Chazal* explained (*Yalkut Shimoni* 729 from *Midrash Yelamdeinu*; see also Ramban) that they set forward "like a child running away from school," but the calamity and punishment still seem to be obscure. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The explanation that we have brougt here concerning the great distance between the camp and the mount of the Lord, on the one hand, and between the camp and the ark of the covenant of the Lord, on the other, is correct according to the position of the Sages in the *baraita* in *Shekalim* (6:1) that there was only one ark – the ark of the covenant on which rested the *kaporet* and the two *keruvim* – and here it advanced before them and not among them, in its natural place, between the first two sets of banners and the last two sets. However, according to the opinion of Reish Lakish, there were two arks – a wooden ark in which lay the broken tablets went before the camp to seek a resting place for them, and the ark of the covenant with the *kaporet*, in which lay the second set of tablets, that went among them – and they were not far from the latter. (In *Sifrei Zuta* on our chapter, the reading is reversed, and it was precisely the ark with the broken tablets that went in the heart of the camp.) The position of Reish Lakish according to our text of the Tosefta (*Sota* 7:18) is different: Both the whole tablets and the broken tablets rested in the ark of the covenant, as argued by the Sages, and in the ark that went before them there was only the scroll of the Torah (which was still incomplete). See R. Saul Lieberman (*Tosefta Ke-Peshuta*, ad loc.), who cites texts of the Tosefta that make it parallel to the Talmud and the *Sifrei*, as we wrote above. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)