

Parshat Beha'alotcha, Leffell School Newsletter

It still surprises me, every time I see it, and it remains one of my favorite teachings in all of Torah. The Hebrew letter “*nun*,” backwards, twice, right in the middle of our parsha, Behaalotcha. No other single letter ever even appears *alone* throughout the whole Torah, and here two single letters appear... *backwards*!

Of course, these backwards “*nuns*” surprised our rabbis, as well. One suggestion in the Talmudic tractate Shabbat explains that these letters are signs, almost like brackets, which come to highlight the two verses that come between them. These two verses—liturgically familiar to us from the opening and closing of our synagogue Torah service-- describe the journey that Israel took in the wilderness.

Vayehi b'nesoa ha'aron, vayomer Moshe... “And it came to pass when the Ark set forward that Moses said...” *Uv'nucho yomar...* “And when he placed it down, he said...” (Numbers 10:35-36)

For Rabbi Yehuda Hanasi, the editor of the Mishnah, these verses form their own book. *Sefer chashuv hu b'nei atzmo*, “an important book unto itself (Shabbat 116).” If so, then the question remains. Of all the verses in the Torah, why would these be so essential?

In his book, The Burnt Book, French psychoanalyst Marc-Alain Ouaknin brings one of my favorite understandings of the centrality of these verses to Jewish life and learning. For him, these verses represent our people's focus on the Ark's “departure and settling,” or, in other words, on the journey of the sacred Ark.

Ouaknin reminds us that, in fact, the *portability* of the Ark was one of its most salient features. Torah law required that the staves which carried the Ark remain in their rings at all times; it was prohibited to remove them. The Ark had to be in a state of readiness at all times for the journey in the wilderness.

For Ouaknin, this ability to move at any moment is, even today, the essence of Torah. “It is not only a matter of an ‘ever-readiness’ for traveling, but, in fact, of continuous, perpetual movement... Being, for the Torah, is to be journeying.” (pp.151-152)

In order to stay relevant, then, the Torah has to be in movement. If our own learning stops changing or growing, our tradition loses its meaning. The journey of the Ark represents our own journey of Jewish learning, our own ever-changing relationship to the Torah and to our heritage.

What a brilliant liturgical move the rabbis made by putting these two verses at the beginning and end of our Torah service. Each time we open or close our own synagogue arks, we are reminded of the journey of the original Ark. We are reminded that Torah is something that comes with us wherever we go; we have to make it portable enough—and meaningful enough—so that we can carry it throughout our lives.

The story of the reversed “*nuns*,” it turns out, is a more complicated story of scribal notation. Most likely, scholars agree, the “*nuns*” stand for the *nekudot* (dots) that once may have highlighted this text. Evidently, these two verses have been significant to scribes and to Torah readers alike for generations. For centuries, the journey of the Ark has been worth its own signage. So, too, our own journey, our changing, growing, transforming connection to Jewish life, is worth its own special bracket. Wherever we are on our own path, whether we are in the “departure” or in the “settling,” this week’s Torah text invites us to highlight the journey itself, and to celebrate the twists and turns that make it so sacred. Shabbat Shalom.