

When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered, and may Your foes flee before You! And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands! --- Numb. 10:35-36

When the Ark was to set out: The Torah made signs for (this passage) in front of it and after it, to indicate that this is not its place. So why was it written here? To make an interruption between two passages dealing with troubles, as noted in the Talmud (**Shabbat** 115b-116a). --- Rashi

When the Ark was to set out: The upside-down letters that mark off these verses are found only seven other times in the Bible, all in Psalm 107. These two verses are separated from the surrounding text to show that Moses did not intend them to refer to whatever particular leg of the journey they were on, but to the whole goal of getting them out of Egypt and into the land they were to inherit. --- Gersonides

Why was the inverted **nun** chosen for this mark? The Talmud explains (**Berakhot** 4b) why the letter **nun** is not represented in the alphabetical Psalm 145 (**Ashrei**). The **nun** alludes to **nefilah**, fall, and the author did not want to speak of the fall and failing of the Jewish people. Therefore, when the Torah wants to isolate Jewish sins, it employs the letter symbolic of spiritual fall. Why then are the **nuns** inverted? The answer lies in a midrash in which God is compared to a deer. Just as a deer turns its head backwards when in flight, so God always “turns His head” toward us even when He seems to be running away. Even when we sin, God does not even momentarily remove His attention from us. Thus the **nun**, symbolic of falling, is inverted to teach this lesson. Like a deer that turns its head backwards, the **nun**, symbolic of God, “looks back,” ignoring our flaws and focusing on the good in us. --- Rabbi Jonathan Eibenschutz, 18th c.

What does this mean, *Your foes*? Who is a foe of God? Rather, it refers to those who hate Israel, for whoever hates Israel hates the Creator. Similarly in the Song at the Sea it says: *In Your great triumph You break Your opponents.* (Ex. 15:7) What can this refer to except for the opponents of Your people Israel? --- Based on **Sifrei**
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Advance, O Lord: Moses would say this, and then the **Shekhinah** would move off from above the cover of the Ark. --- Rashbam

Those who leave the community and actively reject the way of the **mitzvot**...who consider themselves totally free of Jewish responsibilities, like those people of other nations, and who rebel and reject Judaism, are not to be mourned for at the time of their death; rather, their families should wear white and eat, drink, and celebrate, for those who hate God have perished. And of these Scripture says: *O Lord, You know I hate Your enemies.* (Psalm 139:21) --- Maimonides, **Mishnah Torah**, Laws of Mourning 1:10

There are three branches of the love of God: communion, joy and jealousy. Jealousy means that one should be jealous for God's Name, hating God's enemies and trying to humble them as much as possible so that God's service may be done and God's honor increased...*O Lord, You know I hate Your enemies.* --- Moshe Chayim Luzzatto, 18th c. Italy, The Path of the Just, ch. 19

O you who love the Lord, hate evil! (Ps. 97:10)

What is meant by 'Israel's myriads of thousands'? Our Sages believed that this phrase stresses the importance of quantity. A midrash on this phrase points out that “**Shekhinah** (Divine presence) does not rest upon less than two myriads and two thousand (22,000) Israelites” (Talmud, **Yevamot** 64a). However, Israel is known to be a people of quality rather than quantity: *It is not because you are the numerous of peoples that the Lord chose you...for you are the smallest of all peoples.* (Deut.7:7)

Moreover, how do we reconcile this midrash with sayings in **Pirkei Avot**, which claim that God's presence rests upon ten people, five, three, or two who devote themselves to the words of God, and even a single person who carries the yoke of Torah and **mitzvot** will merit divine presence...Paradoxically, the aim of this midrash in stressing the critical mass

needed for **Shekhinah** is to emphasize the individual responsibility to fulfill the mitzvah of procreation. If your Jewish community numbers only 21,999 people and you could have brought one more child to the world but did not, the blame for the absence of Divine presence from your community is entirely upon you!

It seems that our Sages spoke of two kinds of experiencing “**Shekhinah**”: The individual experience of performing a **mitzvah**: When you caused your fellow Jew a great relief or a great joy, when you decipher a passage of Talmud or grasp the deeper meaning of a Biblical verse, then you experience **Shekhinah** as an individual. The other type of religious experience: When you stand in the midst of hundreds or thousands who are united in the same prayer, the same chant, the same song or dance (I experience this every summer in Karmiel Folk Dance Festival) ...you feel that special excitement which is best described by the words: The voice of the multitude is the voice of God!

--- Rabbi Gil Nativ, contemporary

To be sure, the Children of Israel were sentenced to die in the desert because of the sin of the scouts (**Meraglim**), as we will read in **Parshat Shelach**. However, the first signs of dissolution emerge in **B’ha’alotekha**.

Two verses are set off with two inverted letters (**nun**) to mark the end of the idyllic condition described at the beginning of the book of **Bamidbar** (ch. 1-10)—the order, purposefulness and unity—and the onset of deterioration: *The people took to complaining bitterly before God, and God heard and was incensed; and a fire of God broke out against them, ravaging the outskirts of the camp* (11:1). These are the troubles that culminated in the sin of the Scouts.

Actually, the Rabbis say (**Shabbat** 116a) that verses 10:35-36 are set off “to separate the earlier calamity from the later calamity,” suggesting that the first signs of trouble were evident even before the people’s grumbling. The Torah wants to avoid mentioning too many accusations against them in succession, hence the separation. The first hint of dissonance, the Sages claim, is in: *And they journeyed from the mountain of God a distance of three days, with the Ark of the Covenant of God traveling before them a distance of three days, to search out a resting place for them* (10:33).

But, where is the portent of evil here? Does this not describe a continuation, albeit brief, of the harmony of the first part of **Bamidbar**? The sages explain that *And they journeyed from the mountain of God* connotes “that they turned away from

following God.” **Midrash Tanchuma** compares them to a child who flees from school. But what is there here to suggest the stirrings of rebellion?

Maharsha (R. Shmuel Eliezer ben Judah HaLevi Eidels, 1555-1631), in his commentary to **Shabbat** 116a, notes that *the mountain of God* (using the Four-Letter Name, the ineffable “proper” Name of God) always refers to permanent sanctity, as in: *And Abraham named that site (Mt. Moriah) Ad-nai Yireh, “God will see,” hence the present saying: “On the mount of God there is vision,” and Who shall ascend the mountain of God; who shall stand in His holy place? (Ps. 24:3)*

On the other hand, Mount Sinai/**Chorev**, where the Torah was given, did not retain the same level of sanctity after the Revelation. When God does associate His Name with it, it is always with the more general and detached Name **Elohim**, as in: *So Moses and his attendant Joshua arose, and Moses ascended the mountain of Elohim (Exod. 24:13), and And he (Elijah) arose and ate and drank and by the strength of that meal went forty days and forty nights to Chorev, the mountain of Elohim (I Kings 19:8).* Our verse, *And they journeyed from the mountain of God*, is the only occasion in the Hebrew Bible in which Sinai is called the mountain of **Ad-nai**.

The Children of Israel disencumbered themselves as they departed from Sinai. Their attitude, as reflected in the words of the verse, demonstrated that they were distancing themselves from God and the sanctity of the Torah, like a student who leaves his learning behind him in the schoolhouse. Their frame of mind was the root cause of all subsequent tragedies.

R. Moshe Chayim Luzzatto (1707-1746) writes in **Mesillat Yesharim**, The Path of the Just (ch. 1): “When you examine the matter you will see that the only true perfection is attachment to Him, may He be blessed. This is what King David says, *And as for me, closeness to God is my good (Ps. 73:28)* . . . For if man is drawn to this world and distances himself from his Creator, behold he is ruined and he ruins the world with him. But if he controls himself and is attached to his Creator and makes use of the world only as an aid in serving his Creator, then he is elevated and the world itself is elevated with him.”

Rav Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook (1865-1935), in “The Pangs of Cleansing,” writes: “The attachment to God in feeling will have its effect in directing life on an upright path to the extent that this basic principle is operative in the soul, in a state of purity. . . All the troubles of the world, especially the spiritual, such as grief, impatience, disillusionment, despair, the truly basic troubles of man—they came

about only because of the failure to view clearly the majesty of God. . .No grandeur of God is then manifest in the soul, but only the lowliness of wild imaginings, that conjure up a form of some deceptive, vague, angry deity that is dissociated from reality.”

When the Children of Israel detach themselves from God, all their troubles result. It will take many years, and much effort, to revive the attachment that we once enjoyed at **Matan Torah** (the giving of the Torah). --- Rabbi Avraham Fischer, contemporary

There is a very strange statement in the Talmud. In a section speaking about books to be rescued from a fire on the Sabbath, the Talmud speaks of the seven books of the Torah. (**Shabbat** 116a) We all know the Torah has five books; from where comes the seven? In the middle of this week's portion are two strange marks that look like upside-down versions of the Hebrew letter **nun**. In the middle are the two verses quoted about, about when the ark moved forward and when the ark rested. The book of Numbers is really three books. The part of the book of Numbers before this passage is one book, this passage is one book, and the part of the book of Numbers after this passage is one book. With Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy, there are seven books altogether, at least according to this strange opinion.

Not only is this passage set apart by strange marks in the Torah, but it also became part of our liturgy. When we open the ark to take out the Torah, we recite **vay'hi binsoa ha-aron**, *When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord! May Your enemies be scattered.* Before we close the ark to put the Torah away, we say **uv'nucho yomar**, *And when it halted, he would say: Return, O Lord, You who are Israel's myriads of thousands!* These two verses surround the central event of synagogue ritual, the public reading of the Torah.

This does raise a question. Is it appropriate to introduce the reading of the Torah with a prayer that God scatter our enemies? Could we have found a passage that is a bit less belligerent, that speaks of peace rather than war. After all, we do say that all the ways of Torah are peace. The Reform Movement in its official prayerbooks has removed this passage from its liturgy. They skip to the words that usually follow, *From Zion shall the Torah come forth and the word of God from Jerusalem* (Micah 4:2).

I prefer to use the Torah passage as it appears in the traditional liturgy. I am always reluctant to change the liturgy, particularly regarding a passage from the Torah. But how should I interpret this? How can I say, let your enemies be scattered, for the Torah shall come forth from Zion? Let me give a possible interpretation.

What is the central message of the Torah? I am aware that there are countless messages, seventy interpretations of every verse according to tradition. But what is the central message? Over and over the Torah teaches about human dignity. It says countless times to care about the stranger for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. It speaks of caring for the poor, the widow, and the orphan. It teaches that all human beings, not just Jews but everybody, were created in the image of God. This is the message that goes out every time we read from the Torah.

So who are the enemies we want scattered? The enemies are all those who would subtract from human dignity. The enemies are the anti-Semites, the racists, the bigots, the homophobes, the misogynists, the haters of the world. The enemy is anyone who fails to see the dignity of other human beings. It is those who would follow in the steps of the Nazis by seeing some people as less than human, as mere vermin. The enemy is those who think hate speech is all right, who believe racist jokes can be tolerated. If the Torah is about loving your neighbor, then the enemies are those who hate their neighbor.

So what is the message at the center of our Torah service? Let those who practiced hate be scattered and let love pour out. Let love overcome hate. As the **Avot of Rabbi Nathan** teaches, "Who is strong? Someone who turns an enemy into a friend." The message when we take out the Torah is not to kill the enemy. Rather it is to transform the enemy. It is to take a message of hate and overpower it with a message of love.

We often sing our prayers without considering what we are singing. But as we sing about scattering our enemy, perhaps we need to remember to overpower hatred with love. --- Rabbi Michael Gold