

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to David and Renee Bienenstock, who are sponsoring this week's drasha in honor of their 50th wedding anniversary and in honor of the Bar Mitzva of their grandson, Yosef Simcha Dobin. May David and Renee celebrate many more simchas together in good health, with continued bracha, hatzlacha, and nachas!

I want to wish Mazel Tov to Eva and Josh Gonsler on their son, Ephraim Mordechai's Bar Mitzva this Shabbos. Mazel Tov to his grandparents, Dr. Peter and Rosemary Warschawski and Rabbi Allan and Rini Gonsler. May they all have much nachas from Ephraim Mordechai and all their children and grandchildren!

On Shabbos morning, when we open the aron Kodesh to take out the Sefer Torah, as a tzibur, something we look forward to experiencing again soon in Shomrei IY"Y, we rise and recite the famous words from this morning's Sedra-- ויהי בנסוע הארון "when it came to pass that the aron would journey", ויאמר משה "Moshe would utter a special prayer to Hashem" ויפוצו אויבך "arise Hashem and disperse Your enemies" ...

It's a beautiful tefilla, but why do we recite it when we open the aron? What is its message? And why do we recite it only when a tzibbur is present?

Moreover, these words seem to disrupt the storyline in our Parsha. Indeed, our mesorah recognizes this fact, and this phrase is set off by special symbols גוּנִין הַפּוֹכֵן, backwards nuns, like parentheses, to set it apart from the rest of the narrative.

So, why indeed was it placed **here**? And what is its significance?

רש"י במדבר פרק י פסוק לה
(לה) ויהי בנסוע הארון - עשה לו סמניות מלפניו ומלאחריו, לומר שאין זה מקומו. ולמה נכתב כאן, כדי להפסיק בין פורענותו לפורענות וכו' כדאיתא בכל כתבי הקדש (שבת קטז א):

Chazal, as quoted by **Rashi**, give the following reason: "to interrupt between the recounting of one calamity and that of another." The nuns interrupt the description of two terrible events that involved our ancestors in the desert. Presumably, so that these two events will not seem so depressing, the Torah interrupts them by telling us of the prayer recited when the aron moved forward.

What were these two debacles? What is the relationship between them? And what is the message of this particular pasuk, ויהי בנסוע הארון?

Were we to try to identify the first puranus, the first calamity, the one before the הארון בנסוע הארון, we would be hard pressed to locate it. All we read in this preceding Pasuk is:

במדבר פרק י פסוק לג
וַיִּסְעוּ מִהַר ה' דְּרֹדָה שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וַאֲרוֹן בְּרִית־יְקֹנָק נִסַּע לִפְנֵיהֶם דְּרֹדָה שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לָהֶם מִנוֹהָה:
They journeyed from the mountain of Hashem a distance of three days.

Why would this be considered a calamity?

רמב"ן במדבר פרק י פסוק לה
אבל ענין המדרש הזה מצאו אותו באגדה, שנסעו מהר סיני בשמחה כתינוק הבורח מבית הספר, אמרו שמא ירבה ויתן לנו מצות, וזהו ויסעו מהר ה', שהיה מחשבתם להסיע עצמן משם מפני שהוא הר ה', וזהו פורענות ראשונה.

Ramban quotes the **Medrash**, which compares the Jewish people leaving Har Sinai כתינוק הבורח מבית הספר, to a child running away at the end of the school day! They thought they had absorbed enough commandments at Mt. Sinai, and they were afraid, שמא ירבה עלינו מצוות, that Hashem may add even more commandments.

What an image—the Children of Israel were like little children fleeing their school! They were **bothered** and felt **burdened** by Mattan Torah. They had received the precious Torah, but felt that they had received too much homework, as it were, that too much discipline had been imposed on them, and that their freedom was too restricted. They regarded Sinai not as a precious gift, but as a **burden**, and they were overjoyed to finally leave!

That is the first calamity, that the Jewish people were כתינוק הבורח מבית הספר.

The second calamity, which is mentioned after the phrase ויהי בנסוע הארון, reflects a similar, but even worse attitude. It represents a more advanced stage of degradation. It is an attitude that came to the fore in the story of the מתאוננים. In that regrettable episode, the Jewish people complained bitterly to Moshe and said זכרנו את הדגה אשר נאכל במצרים חנם “we remember the fish that we ate for free in Egypt.” What a strange remark: *free fish*... Were they not slaves who performed back-breaking labor from dawn to dusk? And if so, can a piece of fish—even fancy sushi—provided by their task-masters be regarded as חנם, free?

The **Zohar**, however, gives us a profound insight into the word חנם

זוהר כרך ג (ויקרא) פרשת בהר דף קח עמוד א
(במדבר יא) זכרנו את הדגה אשר נאכל במצרים חנם, בלא ברכה, דלא הוה עלנא במצרים עול דלעילא,

They did not mean that it was חנם, free, in the usual sense that they did not have to pay for it. Rather, the word means “*belo brachah*,” that they were not required to recite a blessing over the food. Because, they argued, דלא הוה עלנא במצרים עול דלעילא while we were in Egypt, before we came to Sinai, the yoke of Heaven had not been placed on us. Imagine complaining over the simple obligation to recite a blessing over a bit of fish! At this point, they had moved beyond a child who **runs away** from school so as not to get any **more** homework. Now, they wanted to **be rid of the mitzvos they had already**—all the homework that they had already been commanded to observe!

The late **Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm** makes the following observation about these two disasters: “*All this points to a lack of love, an absence of inner commitment, and therefore a religion which is joyless and unhappy. It is the approach of a child who flees from, rather than to, school. It is the grievous error of spiritual truancy. And this indeed is the first great catastrophe of any people. . .*

A Judaism lived without joy and love and affection is disastrous. It is the way of wildness and irresponsibility. It is the way of חינום, it is the way of בלא ברכה — no benediction, no grace, no charm...”

When you have a negative attitude towards your religious faith, then even the responsibility to recite a short bracha seems to be a burden. Hence, what begins with a protest against homework ends as a rebellion against all education and discipline. **What begins as a rejection of school ends as a revolt against the Divine Teacher.** If the first calamity is like being school child who runs away from school as soon as the bell rings, the second calamity is like becoming a drop-out, a truant from the school of Sinai. Viewing Judaism as a burden, without joy and affection, can be

disastrous. It can lead to resentment and anger, and ultimately it can end with its terrible fallout. That is the second calamity, the desire to be rid of the Torah and Mitzvos.

So why does ויהי בנסוע הארון interrupt the narrative at this point, separating between the two tragedies?

One of the **Baalei Tosafos** cited in “**Moshav Zekeinim**” asks why the pasuk says ויהי בנסוע הארון “When the aron traveled.” Would it not be more accurate to state, ויהי בנסוע נוסעי הארון “When those carrying the aron traveled”? After all, wasn’t it the people carrying the Ark who began to move while holding the aron?

The answer, according to the Baalei Tosafos, is that it only **appeared** that the men were carrying the aron. Actually, the aron moved by itself and carried those who held it.

As the **Gemara in Sota 35a** writes-- it was נושא את נושאינו.

Thus ויהי בנסוע הארון teaches us that the aron, the Torah, and the whole Jewish tradition moves under its own steam. It does not rely upon the people who think that they are carrying it for support. The truth is just the opposite—the Torah **gives support** to those who adhere to it...propelling them forward in life, with meaning and purpose and connection to God.

These episodes should spur us to examine our own relationship with Mitzvos. Do we not experience a similar attitude, to some degree in our own lives? Don’t we sometimes approach our religious obligations in a similar manner? Rather than appreciating and cherishing them, do we approach them without enthusiasm? Do we take joy in observing the mitzvos? Or is the observance (the minyan, the shiur, the chessed) just something to check off our endless to-do lists? How many times are we looking at our watches during shul or a shiur, counting down the minutes until it ends?

Indeed, aren’t we sometimes a little like the people leaving Har Sinai? Don’t we feel that we already have more than enough mitzvos and sometimes resent what they require of us. Our challenge is to rid ourselves of this pernicious attitude towards Torah and Mitzvos... **We must realize that we may think we carry the aron; but in reality it carries us. We think that our observance of mitzvos is our gift to God; but, actually, Torah is His gift to us.**

As the great Rabbi Chanania ben Akashya taught:

רבי חנניה בן עקשיא אומר רצה הקב"ה לזכות את ישראל הלכך הרבה להם תורה ומצוות
*God wanted to enhance **our** lives—and therefore gave us so many Mitzvos.*

We speak of the regimen of Mitzvos as a yoke—*ol malchus shamayim*. We must remember that the yoke is there to direct us to the greener pastures of the spirit during our long journey through life, to a life filled with meaning, with purpose, with transcendent values.

ויהי בנסוע הארון reminds us to change the attitude of תינוק הבורה. Instead of acting like school children at the end of the school day, we must be mature adults who hear the bell ringing and return happily to the Beis Hamedrash and Beis HaKnesses, serving Hashem with joy. Instead of harboring the dangerous fear of that there is **too much to observe**, let us consider the fact that we may not be doing enough and doing it with sufficient feeling. Then, indeed, we will be carried forward by the Ark of the Torah. Then we will discover the timeless truth of the Torah in the aron--the aron that will protect us through the storms of life and that will guide us through the wilderness of a society that constantly challenges our morals and our values.

But there is one important question left to ponder. Why do we recite **ויהי בנסוע** only when there is a tzibur present?

If we explore the second calamity, we find something very strange. The Jewish people had been miraculously rescued from the brutal conditions in Egypt, with ten miracles, the splitting of the Sea, Manna from Heaven, clouds of glory, a well providing water, and Mattan Torah at Har Sinai. Yet they complained bitterly about trivialities.

But if you read the Pesakim carefully, the root cause of their complaints was not only the “burden” of making a bracha. Instead, it began very simply. As the Torah records:
והאספוף אשר בקרבם התאוה תאוה...
...והאספוף אשר בקרבם התאוה תאוה...

The complaining started with the *Eruv Rav*, a diverse group of malcontents who were part of the exodus and came along with a negative and cynical attitude. They were not at all representative of the masses of the Jewish body.

Rav Leib Chasman, the famous Mashgiach of Chevron Yeshiva, writes in his *Ohr Yahel*, that at first glance it makes very little sense that this disparate group of rabble rousers could influence the multitude of Jews!

אלא מכאן למדים אנו מהי כוחה של השפעה רעה! יכולה היא לקלקל גם את הצדיק הגדול, והפרוש מכל תאוה העוה"ז!! וכיון שבני ישראל היו בחברת הערב רב הושפעו מהם וירדו לדרגות שפלות ביותר...

He writes that this shows us that the incredible importance of one’s surroundings! The incredible power of social pressure. As the **Rambam** writes, human nature is to be influenced by friends, neighbors, and countrymen.

רמב"ם הלכות דעות פרק ו הלכה א

דרך ברייתו של אדם להיות נמשך בדעותיו ובמעשיו אחר ריעיו וחביריו ונוהג כמנהג אנשי מדינתו, לפיכך צריך אדם להתחבר לצדיקים ולישב אצל החכמים תמיד כדי שילמוד ממעשיהם, ויתרחק מן הרשעים ההולכים בחשך כדי שלא ילמוד ממעשיהם,

Similarly, the **Mesilas Yesharim** lists a bad peer group as one of the three things that most likely interferes with avodas Hashem.

ספר מסילת ישרים פרק ה

והמפסיד השלישי הוא החברה, דהיינו, חברת הטפשים והחוטאים, והוא מה שהכתוב אומר (משלי יג): ורועה כסילים ירוע. כי הגה אנחנו רואים פעמים רבות אפילו אחר שנתאמת אצל האדם חובת העבודה והזהירות בה, יתרפה ממנה או יעבור על איזה דברים ממנה כדי שלא ילעגו עליו חבריו או כדי להתערב עמהם, והוא מה ששלמה מזהיר ואומר (שם כד): ועם שונים אל תתערב

So I believe the lesson of **ויהי בנסוע הארון** is twofold. First, we need to absorb the proper attitude towards Torah and Mitzvos in general. And, second, we recite this as a tzibur because we need to appreciate the importance of community; that we need each other for support and cooperation, encouragement and collaboration in our quest for a meaningful life. We depend on our community to keep us focused and strong.

May we remember this perspective **ויהי בנסוע הארון** and be zoche to see God respond positively to our tefilla with Divine protection, and soon see the return to our shuls as a community, and the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash...bimhera viyamenu...amen.