

Parsha Ponders

Beha'alo-secha | June 11, 2020 | 19 Sivan 5780

Turning curses into blessings¹

וַיְהִי בְנִסְעֵי הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוֹמָה יְקוֹק וַיִּפְצוּ אֵיבֵיךָ וַיִּנְסוּ מִשְׁנֵאיִךְ מִפְּנֵיךָ: וּבְנַחוּ יִאמֶר שׁוֹבָה יְקוֹק רַבּוֹת

אֶלְפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל: ַ

When the Ark would travel, Moshe would say: “Rise Hashem, may Your enemies scatter, may the ones who hate You flee before You.” When [the Ark] would rest he would say: “Rest Hashem, Israel’s myriads of thousands”²

In a standard *sefer* Torah, and in most standard *chumashim*, these two verses are surrounded by inverted letter-*nuns*. What are they doing here? The *gemarra* notes³ that Hashem placed signs⁴ before and after these verses. Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel explains this was to teach us that these two verses don’t belong here⁵. After the final redemption, they will be returned to where they belong, with the descriptions of the travel formations of the tribes⁶. Why then are the verses here?

Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel explains that they are in order to create an interruption between the punishment episodes described before and after these verses^{7 8}. This is because if there were

¹ Based on *Sefer Apiryon to Numbers* 10:35

² *Numbers* 10:35-36

³ *Shabbos* 115b, 116a

⁴ Hebrew: *simaniyos*. The *gemarra* doesn’t mention what the sign is, and as stated what we have in our *sifrei* Torah are inverted *nuns* surrounding the *parshiyos*. It’s interesting to note that the *Maharshal* (*Chochmas Shlomo ad. loc.*; *Teshuvos Maharshal* § 73) disagrees, and rules that if someone has extra inverted *nuns* in their *sefer Torah*, it makes the whole scroll invalid. Instead, he suggests that either the spaces before and after the *parshiyos* are the signs that the *gemarra* is referring to, or the *nuns* of certain words themselves are inverted. The *Noda B’Yehudah* I *Yoreh De’ah* § 74 strongly disagrees. He brings evidence from *Rav Hai Gaon* (quoted by *Maggid Mishnah* to *Mishneh Torah Hilchos Shabbos* 11:10) that the signs are two inverted *nuns* and not unnecessary spacing surrounding the *parshiyos*. He also says its more problematic to invert letters of actual words than to add extra *nuns* before and after. Our custom follows this opinion

⁵ *Rabbeinu Bachaye* to *Numbers* 10:35 explains according to this opinion why the sign is specifically the letter *nun*. He says if you count the number of *parshiyos* from *Numbers* 2:17 (where this *parsha* really belongs according to *Rashbag*) to 10:35 to you’ll find there are fifty, the numeral value of *nun* (this ends up being another proof for the *Noda B’Yehudah*, although he doesn’t cite it). An explanation that could work for *Rebbe* (see note 8) is mentioned by the *Maharam Shif* to *Shabbos loc. cit.*, who says it’s the Torah’s version of parentheses (סוגריית). However, the *Sefer Apiryon* will give his own reason why it’s the letter *nun*

⁶ *Numbers* Chapter 2. It’s not so clear why these verses are considered out of place and belong more over there. There the Torah describes how the various tribes were situated while they were traveling and where they encamped. Here, at the beginning of this chapter (10), the Torah described their first journey. This seemingly would be a fine place to mention what would happen when they started traveling

⁷ *Tosafos ad. loc. Cf. Rashi ad. loc.*, who somehow understands the episodes to be those following the *simaniyos*. See *Ramban* and *Rosh* to *Numbers* 10:35, and *Chasam Sofer* (*Derashos* II p. 311b s.v. כתיב, *Sefer HaZikaron* p. 52) for explanations for what possible punishment occurred before these verses

⁸ *Shabbos loc. cit.* brings the opposing view of *Rebbe*, who says that the signs that Hashem placed in the Torah were to teach us that these two verses are considered their own *sefer*. This means *Rebbe* holds there are seven books of the Chumash, not five: *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, the first half of *Numbers*, these two verses, the last half of *Numbers*, *Deuteronomy*. Surprisingly, there are laws derived from *Rebbe*’s opinion. The minimum number of letters needed to be in a *sefer* Torah to save it from a fire on *Shabbos* is eighty-five (*Shabbos* 115b). As well, *Yadayim* 3:5 says that only a *sefer* Torah with eighty-five letters on it impurifies the hands of those who touch it. Where does the number eighty-five come from? It’s the number of letters in the two verses we’re discussing,

consecutive punishments written in the Torah, the Jews would have been *muchzak* with punishments⁹. *Muchzak*, as in the legal term *chazakah*, where if something occurs multiple times in a row, it's assumed to occur frequently. To avoid the Jews having an assumed reality of punishments, the Torah interrupted the negative episodes with the two *nuns*^{10 11}.

Why will these two verses return to their proper place after the final redemption? Rashi explains¹² because at that time all Earthly punishments will cease. People will no longer worry about impending disasters or calamities. This is because the *yetzer hara*, the evil inclination, will be removed. People will no longer be driven to sin. There will then be no need for punishments. Is any of this alluded in the Torah itself?

The Torah describes¹³ ninety-eight¹⁴ curses which will (G-d forbid) befall the Jewish people if they don't follow the *mitzvos*. The Torah also adds a more general pronouncement, that the Jews will suffer "every disease" and "every injury", even those not written in the Torah itself¹⁵. This makes for a total of one hundred curses¹⁶. We see an allusion to this with the two inverted *nuns*. A *nun* has the numerical value of fifty. Two of them make for one hundred, corresponding to the one hundred curses. Meaning, in this world there's cause for concern regarding punishments, as the one-hundred curses still have sway. That's why these two verses were here, to separate between episodes of punishments in the Torah.

However, these two *nuns* are written inverted. This alludes to the fact that Hashem will reverse all curses into blessings, as in the future there will be no need for punishments. There will no longer be any *yetzer hara*, and no further drive towards evil. These two verses will then revert to their proper place, as there will be no concern for future punishments. May this happen speedily in our days. Good Shabbos

which according to Rebbe is the smallest book in Tanach. Something with eighty-five letters is considered a book which gets these laws

⁹ Ramban *loc. cit.*

¹⁰ We see a tremendous principle in this Ramban. He's suggesting that how verses are written in the Torah affect reality. If three punishments are written in the Torah consecutively, there are real life consequences for the Jews. This is an extension of the idea of *עלמא וברא עלמא*, that Hashem looked into the Torah and created the world (Bereishis Rabbah 1:1; Midrash Tanchuma Bereishis § 1; Pirkei D'Rabbi Eliezer Chapter 3; Tanna D'Vei Eliyahu Chapter 31; Zohar II parshas Terumah p. 161b). This world is a reflection of the Torah

¹¹ The Chasam Sofer (Chasam Sofer Al HaTorah to Numbers 10:35, Chiddushei Chasam Sofer to Gittin 60a s.v. לפי שאין) points out that Rashbag is consistent with his opinion in Yevamos 64b regarding *chazakah*, that it happens after three occurrences. There are three episodes in a row of punishments, and our two verses interrupt them, preventing a *chazakah* from forming. As well, Rebbe is consistent with his opinion that *chazakah* occurs after only two occurrences. Consequently, according to him, nothing was accomplished by putting the *nuns* around the verses. He therefore argues with Rashbag here as well, and gives a different explanation for why they're here

¹² Shabbos *loc. cit.*

¹³ Deuteronomy 28:15-68

¹⁴ If we count the specific curses, we'll come to this number, as attested by Midrash Tanchuma Nitzavim § 1 (brought by Rashi to Deuteronomy 29:12), Midrash Aggadah to Numbers 28:26, Midrash Tadsheh Chapter 11, Targum "Yonasan" to Numbers 29:32, amongst others. See also Ba'al HaTurim to Deuteronomy 7:15, who says כל חולי has the numerical value 98

¹⁵ Deuteronomy 28:61

¹⁶ Rokeach HaGadol Hilchos Berachos § 320, brought by Shenei Luchos HaBris Maseches Ta'anis Torah Ohr § 86; Sefer Gimatriyos § 83 by Rav Yehudah HaChossid. They add this is why we make one hundred blessings every day (Menachos 43b; Shulchan Aruch Orach Chaim 46:3), to protect from the one hundred curses