

Our Parashah contains a strange anomaly: At the end of Chapter 10, verses 35-36, there are two letter *nun*, each standing upside down, and bracketing two verses, which we know very well from the Torah service.

	<small>NUN #1</small> 	
וַיְהִי בְנִסְעַ הָאָרֶץ וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה		35. So it was, whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say, “Arise, o Lord, may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from you.”
קוּמָה יְהוָה וַיִּפְצְוּ אֹיְבֹיךָ וַיִּגְסוּ מִטַּנְאִיךָ מִפְּנֶיךָ:		36. And when it came to rest, he would say, “Return o Lord, (to) the myriads of thousands of Israel.”
וּבְנִיחָה יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה יְהוָה רַבְבוֹת אֲלֹפֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל:	<small>NUN #2</small> 	

What do those strange-looking *nuns* mean? The Talmud provides two explanations (Shabbat 115 b):

1. The Torah has seven, rather than five books. This is based on Proverbs 9:1 “Wisdom has built her house, has hewn out her seven columns.” Therefore, the *nuns* enclose a complete book, albeit one made up of only two verses, but qualifying just the same because it contains the required number of 85 letters. According to this opinion, the Book of Numbers (Bamidbar) is actually three books, which brings the number of books in the Torah to seven.
2. But why are these two verses important enough to be considered a book in themselves? The Talmud maintains that right now, they are not in their proper place. In Messianic times, they will take their rightful place in Parashah Bamidbar (2:17), where the position of the Ark is discussed. Now, the verses are here in order to separate two cataclysmic events, or as the Talmud puts it: In order to demarcate between the first punishment and the second punishment.

The first punishment is in Chapter 10, verse 33 – “They traveled from the mountain of HaShem for three days.” In other words, they turned their backs on HaShem. A Midrash elaborates: They could have taken a direct route, but they ran away like a schoolboy escaping from the burden of learning.

The second punishment is the people’s incessant complaining, followed by *lashon hara* (slandorous speech). The complaining is nothing new; but this time HaShem has had enough and many people die. Tired of manna, the people want meat, fondly remembering all the delicious food they had in Egypt, while conveniently forgetting that it came with the price of their freedom. So, for a full month HaShem inundates the camp with quails, until, as Moses tells them, “[the meat] comes out of your nose and nauseates you.” This is compounded by two egregious instances of *lachen hara* (derogatory speech): Although they are not among the 70 elders chosen by Moses, Eldad and Medad prophesy, a lad tells Moses, Joshua demands that Moses imprison them, and Moses rebukes him. Later, Miriam and Aaron, jealous of Moses’ special standing with HaShem, disparage him because he had married a Cushite woman – a remark we would consider racist today. Miriam is stricken with leprosy and quarantined outside the camp for a week. It is painfully obvious that after generations of slavery, learning the ways of freedom is a difficult and perilous undertaking!

I think these two verses contain an important message. In the first verse Moses tells HaShem to arise, calling for an end to the ingratitude, complaining, impatience, jealousy, and negativity that represent the enemies and haters mentioned at the end of the verse. The second verse implies an end to strife and the onset of a better world. The root שׁוּב (shuv) is contained in words like return, turn back, and repentance. (*teshuvah*, for example – a word we use frequently from the month of Elul through the end of the Chagim) The letter *nun* represents the number 50, a number that transcends the worldly and brings us into communication with the divine. We have just taken the 49 steps (7 weeks, or 7x7 days) from Pesach to Shavuot, standing on the 50th day at the foot of the holy mountain to receive our Torah – our “instruction manual” for living in this world. It is therefore logical and fitting that we should chant the first of these verses as we remove the Torah from its resting place. We then “learn a little Torah,” as my Zayde, and many other traditional Jews would say. Perhaps the reading sparks a desire in us to engage in a bit of self-reflection, or in active *tikkun olam* (helping to better the world). The Torah is our bridge between past and future – we read, we learn together, and we gain wisdom to help us live in the present. And we return the Torah to its resting place with new resolve to uphold our part of our eternal covenant with HaShem.

Shabbat shalom!