

The SEVEN Books of Moses?

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Parshat BeHa'alotcha

Deliberate calligraphic irregularities in the Tora text.

One of the stranger aspects of the written Sefer Tora is the augmentation of the size of letters within words,¹ the addition of dots over some or all letters of a word,² and the insertion of symbols into the text that are not part of any word at all, as in the instance of the “backwards ‘nuns’” in BaMidbar 10, between verses 34 and 35, and verses 36 and 11:1.

According to the classical categorization of fundamental approaches for interpreting the Tora SheB'Ktav (the Written Tradition comprised of the books of TaNaCh) represented by the acronym “PaRDeS”³ —“Peshat” (the literal, contextual meaning), “Remez” (ideas and themes that are hinted at by the use of particular letters, mathematical computations, symbols, etc.), “Derash” (homiletical interpretations derived by analogies, comparisons, parallel words, etc.), and “Sod” (interpretations that are arrived at by viewing the texts in question through the lense of mystical thought)—the “backwards ‘Nun’s’” fall under the category of “Remez”, a relatively esoteric, non-rational, non-logical way of biblical interpretation. However, whereas one may be disinclined to regularly consider Gematriyot (numerical computations of the letters comprising a word leading to interpretive insights),^{4 5} or the first letters of a sequence of words that spell out a particular concept or idea,⁶ it is impossible not to confront odd letters or dots in the text and account for them in some way.

¹ E.g., the “Alef” in “VaYikra” in VaYikra 1:1; the “Ayin” of “Shema” and the “Daled” of “Echad” in Devarim 6:4.

² E.g., “VaYeshakeihu” in Beraishit 33:4; “HaNistarot” in Devarim 29:28.

³ See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardes_\(Jewish_exegesis\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pardes_(Jewish_exegesis)) See for example HaShLA HaKodesh, HaGahot LeSifrei BaMidbar Devarim, Parshat Ki Tetze, d.h. VeHeneh Sha'ar HaMitzvot Kemo Yibum...

⁴ RaShI on BaMidbar 15:39 notes that the Gematria of the word “Tzitzit” (the strings that are to be attached at the corners of a four-cornered garment) is 600 (“Tzaddi” = 90; “Yud” = 10; “Tzaddi” = 90; “Yud” = 10; “Tof” = 400) and when one considers that each group of strands will consist of 8 strands and 5 knots, this results in the number 613, which represents the 365 negative commandments and the 248 positive commandments—see Makkot 23b-24a. Since seeing the physical Tzitziyot themselves is supposed to remind one of the need to perform the Mitzvot—BaMidbar 15:39—the numerical symbolism adds further impetus to the reminder.

⁵ An example of a commentator who was opposed to employing a “Remez” approach in at least one particular area of Jewish thought is found in Ibn Ezra’s comments to Daniel 11:30. Apparently, based upon the verses in this section of the biblical book, individuals were attempting to calculate when the “end of days” would occur, regarding which the commentator stated, “All those who calculate the words or the letters numerically, it is all vanity and empty wind, for Daniel himself did not know the date of the ‘end of days’...” Such a comment indicates that according to Ibn Ezra, even if one were to accept that Gematriot are appropriate interpretations within certain contexts, they are not to be calculated in other sensitive areas of Jewish thought, since such derivations could lead to conclusions that could prove theologically destructive. In the case of Daniel, assuming that a given year has been calculated, if it is inordinately far off, it could cause individuals to lose hope of being redeemed, while if the date comes and goes without any miraculous events occurring, an erroneous conclusion might be that the redemption will never take place.

⁶ E.g., Da’at Zekeinim on Beraishit 49:9 claim that when you take the initial letters of the phrase “Gur Aryeh Yehuda” (Yehuda is like a young lion cub), “Gimel” = 3; “Aleph” = 1; “Yud” = 10; for a total of 14, this is equivalent to the numerical value of “David”, “Daled” = 4; “Vav” = 6; “Daled” = 4, for a total of 14, foreshadowing the eventual birth of David as a descendent of Yehuda.

The backward “Nun”’s of BaMidbar 10.

Several of the biblical commentators (RaShI, RaMBaN, Chizkuni, Ba’al HaTurim, etc.) cite the Talmudic discussion appearing in Shabbat 115b-116a as the key to understanding the significance of these “backwards Nun’s” and the two verses that they bracket.

Our Rabbis taught: (BaMidbar 10:35) “And it came to pass when the Aron set forward, that Moshe said, etc.”—

(Tanna Kamma [the anonymous first opinion in a Tannaitic source]): For this section, the Holy One, Blessed Be He, provided signs (the “backwards ‘Nun’s’”) above and below to teach that this is not its place (i.e., verses 35-36 belong somewhere else in the Tora text).

Rebbe (R. Yehuda HaNasi) said: It is not for that reason, but rather because it (BaMidbar 10:35-36) ranks as a separate book (of the Tora).

With whom does the following dictum of R. Shmuel ben Nachman agree? (Mishlei 11:1) “She (Wisdom—Tora) has hewn out her seven pillars”. This refers to the SEVEN books of the Tora. With whom does this position agree? With Rebbe!

Who is the Tanna that disagrees with Rebbe (can we deduce who the Tanna Kamma is)? It is R. Shimon ben Gamliel. For it is taught: R. Shimon ben Gamliel said: This section is destined to be removed from here and written in its right place. And why was it written here? In order to provide an interruption between the first account of punishment and the second account of punishment. What is the second account of punishment? BaMidbar 11:1 ff. “And the people were as murmurers...” The first account of punishment? (BaMidbar 10:33) “And they moved away from the mountain of the Lord...” And where is its rightful place? In the chapter on the banners of the various tribes (BaMidbar 2).⁷

The four premises of this Baraita (Mishnaic material that was excluded from his compendium of the Mishna by R. Yehuda HaNasi) bear discussion: a) a section of the Tora may be written in an “inappropriate” place in terms of its seemingly logical placement;⁸ b) the section’s placement will be

⁷ Following BaMidbar 2:34, once the arrangement of the encampment had been established in terms of the manner in which it would be set up when in place, as well as the order in which it would travel from place to place, the verses regarding what would be said when the Aron was picked up at the beginning of a move and what would be said when it was put down following a relocation would have been appropriate.

⁸ In the Halachic sphere, an example of the assumption that a section of the Tora is not in its appropriate place, is referred to as the concept of Eiruv Parshiot (the mixture of the subject matters). According to Bava Kama 107a, there is a difference of opinion with respect to the interpretation of the context of a phrase in Parshat Mishpatim. Shemot 22:6-8 describes a dispute between an owner of an object who left it in the care of another, the latter agreeing to guard it for no compensation. When the owner comes to regain possession, the guard tells him that he cannot return the object because it was stolen. The insertion of the phrase “Ki Huh Zeh” (but rather it is this) in verse 8 suggests to some Rabbinic interpreters that we are dealing with a situation in which the guard does not testify that the object was stolen in its entirety (Kofer BaKol), but rather admits to a partial obligation (Modeh BeMiktzat), i.e., “I don’t owe you all that you say, only this lesser amount,” either because he claims that what he originally received was less than what is currently being claimed from him, or because he maintains that he has already returned part of what is owed. It is inferred that in a case where one individual is claiming a sum of money or the value of an object from another, while the burden of proof is upon the litigant who wishes to extract payment or compensation from the individual whom s/he is suing, nevertheless, before conceding that his case is insufficiently conclusive, s/he can demand of the individual claiming exemption from payment, in this case the guard, to swear publicly as to the validity of his/her testimony, i.e., that the object had been stolen. It is assumed that an individual who is lying would think twice before s/he would swear falsely by God’s Name, holding a Sefer

altered at some future time and restored to its proper location; c) sections discussing punishment are to be interrupted; and d) the book of BaMidbar can be viewed as constituting three separate books, one of them being only two verses long (1:1-10:34; 10:35-36; 11:1-36:13), resulting in the SEVEN rather than the five books of Moshe.

Analyzing the first of the four assumptions of Shabbat 115b-116a.

While a number of biblical commentators invoke the principle that the stories of the Tora might not be arranged in chronological order (Ein Mukdam U'Meuchar BaTora [there are no assumptions that what appears earlier in the Tora necessarily happened at an earlier time compared to that which appears later]),⁹ it would seem that the passage in question is not susceptible to the same type of explanation. BaMidbar 10:35-6 are statements of fact, i.e., what Moshe would say when the encampment would begin to travel, and what he would say when it came to a halt, rather than unique anecdotes or events that can be placed in a specific time frame and compared to other events that are assumed to have taken place either earlier or later. While it could be maintained that these verses cannot describe Moshe's actions prior to the first time that the camp embarked on its journeys after the building of the Mishkan, i.e., anywhere earlier than BaMidbar 10:11, nevertheless, the topic of what was to be done at the point of departure of the encampment had already been raised in 1:51, "And when the Mishkan would travel, the Levi'im would disassemble it and when the Mishkan would encamp, the Levi'im would erect it, and a non-Levi who would approach (during these times) would forfeit his life." Why couldn't the verses recounting what Moshe would say at such a moment be combined with what the Levi'im would be tasked to do, either immediately before or after BaMidbar 1:51? Ba'al HaTurim and HaKetav VeHaKabbala suggest that the utilization of the letter "Nun" whose numerical value is 50,¹⁰ suggests that the proper place for 10:35-6 is **50** Parshiot away (in contrast to each weekly Tora reading which is also referred to as a Parasha, the commentator is considering sections of the Tora that are delineated one from the other by blank spaces in the Tora text. The printed texts of the Tora indicate these two types of spaces by either the letter "Samech" representing "Setuma" [enclosed by letters on

Tora in the presence of a Beit Din. Raba disputes the context in which the Modeh BeMiktzat principle is applied. He argues that a Shomer Chinam (a guard who receives no compensation) may be tempted to withhold the object since if anyone is doing the other a favor, it is he who is helping out the owner of the object. Under such circumstances, there is no reason to believe him any more when he is denying the entire obligation or only a portion of it. Raba claims that Modeh BeMiktzat makes more sense if it were to be applied to a case where someone is attempting to collect an outstanding lone. In such a circumstance, the borrower would not be considered to have the audacity to look someone in the eye who has helped him out with a monetary advance, and deny the obligation in its entirety; however he may rationalize that he will pay part now, and deny the rest until he obtains the funds necessary to completely pay back his creditor. Consequently, only when someone admits to a partial obligation is there a need for an oath to be administered, but not where the entire amount is denied. Raba in Bava Kama therefore maintains that despite the verse of Ki Huh Zeh appearing in Shemot 22:8 within the context of an unpaid guard, it really belongs several verses later in verse 24, where loans are being discussed. Of course, the question would then remain: Why if this concept is applicable to loans rather than guarded objects, did the Tora not mention it in its proper context? Furthermore, in matters of civil law, one might argue that there is greater overlap between one area of discussion and another, as opposed to portions of the Bible that discuss aspects of Jewish history, as is the case in BaMidbar 10. Within such presentations, there would be a higher expectation for proper placement, since if the parts are out of order, they will not only add to the story, but even constitute a flaw or limitation in the narrative.

⁹ E.g., RaShI on Beraishit 6:3; 35:29; Ibn Ezra on Shemot 6:19; 16:15; RaMBaN on Beraishit 32:23; Shemot 2:1, etc.

¹⁰ Aleph =1; Bet = 2; Gimel =3; Daled =4; Heh =5; Vav =6; Zayin =7; Chet =8; Tet =9; Yud =10; Chaf =20; Lamed =30; Mem =40; **NUN = 50...**

both sides] or “Peh” standing for “Petucha” [the line is left open until the end of the column.]¹¹ Ba’al HaTurim maintains that the “Nun”’s are backwards to reflect that the two verses in question belong 50 Parshiot EARLIER, rather than later, as compared to their present location. But even if such explanations account for the “Nun”’s, they do not enlighten us regarding the uniqueness of this section of the Tora, and its relationship to the verses that precede and follow it.

Reflecting on the two particular verses chosen for special treatment in the Tora text in light of the Tannaitic dispute recorded in the Talmud.

It would appear that the two comments that comprise the central dispute between the R. Shimon ben Gamliel and Rebbe in the Talmudic passage cited above, place the emphasis upon two different aspects of 10:35-36. Whereas R. Shimon ben Gamliel is not concerned as much with the contents of these two verses, as with what comes immediately before and after, i.e., descriptions of punishments, Rebbe focuses on the two verses themselves, to the point where he is ready to pronounce them a separate book of the Bible.

The assumption that there are two essentially negative sections of the Tora that are to be separated generates the problem of identifying the punitive, pejorative nature of the earlier of the two sections, 10:33. Whereas it is clear that what follows 10:35-6 is hardly the Jews’ finest hour—11:1 begins the series of stories about the grumbling and complaining of the people that ultimately leads to God’s Decree following the sin of the spies, that all those above the age of 20 at the time of the Exodus must die in the desert before the people can enter Israel (14:22-3), why should the description of the encampment leaving Mt. Sinai be considered a negative action? Since the Jews would not move from place to place without God’s Indicating that it was time to do so by the repositioning of the Pillar of Cloud by day and the Pillar of Fire by night (9:17-23), how could their leaving Sinai be considered a transgression of some sort? The Midrash Yalkut Shimoni #729 reads between the lines and attributes the people’s sinfulness to their modification of what they had been commanded in this regard, as well as the attitude that precipitated this modification:

(10:33) “And they journeyed from the mountain of God three days...” Israel had been instructed to journey for only a single day.¹² Upon their own initiative, they journeyed for three days.¹³

¹¹ Such spaces can be found (in reverse order) 10:29; 10:11; 10:1; 9:15; 9:9; 9:1; 8:23; 8:5; 8:1; 7:84; 7:78; 7:72; 7:66; 7:60; 7:54; 7:48; 7:42; 7:36; 7:30; 7:24; 7:18; 7:12; 7:1; 6:27; 6:26; 6:25; 6:24; 6:22; 6:1; 5:11; 5:5; 5:1; 4:29; 4:21; 4:17; 4:1; 3:44; 3:40; 3:27; 3:14; 3:11; 3:5; 3:1; 2:32; 2:25; 2:18. It is at this point that HaKetav VeHakabbala says that 10:35-6 belong. Unfortunately, when these are counted, they amount to only 49 rather than 50. If we continue to count backwards, and then include 2:17, we don’t arrive at a verse that is a logical place for the insertion of 10:35-6. This leaves us with at least two possible conclusions: a) when the number 50 is used, it is approximate rather than specific, or b) the spacing that we have in our Sifrei Tora may have been altered, as compared to the Sifrei Tora that earlier commentators had at their disposal. Just as the spellings of certain words appear to have been different when we compare the texts in our Sifrei Tora with how verses are quoted within commentaries, this could be true regarding the spaces that are left between words as well.

¹² The assumption that they were only meant to travel for a single day is based upon a close reading of BaMidbar 11:33 “And they journeyed from the mountain of HaShem (Chorev, Sinai) ‘Derech’ (the way) of three days...” This leads to the interpretation that they were meant to travel only for a single day, yet covering in that one day the distance that ordinarily would require a three day journey, the “Kefitzat HaDerech” (lit. a jumping of the way, i.e., the distances contract and can be covered in a miraculously shorter time) phenomenon.

¹³ The formulation of the sin entailing going further than the original Divine Intent required, calls to mind one of the three things attributed to Moshe as having been undertaken without God’s Approval, but which in the end was Ratified by HaShem:

They in effect fled Sinai. They had encamped there eleven days short of an entire year, and HaShem Gave them new Commandments each day. When Moshe instructed them to journey away from Sinai for a single day, they journeyed for three days and an additional night, like a child who leaves the schoolhouse and runs (for joy of being “freed” and for fear of being given more assignments to do). Nevertheless, God did not Foresake them—“...and the Aron of the Covenant of HaShem journeyed in front of them for three days”. Yet it was “difficult” for HaShem that they had done so. Said HaShem, “Let one trouble not be written immediately after another trouble, but let a Parasha of honor be written between them. For this reason 10:35-36 appears where it does.

Wondering about the intent to separate these two negative behaviors, that perhaps should be understood in terms of cause and effect.

Although such an explanation accounts for how the earlier verses reflect shortcomings on the part of the people comparable to what is recorded in 11:1 ff., it seems to me that interrupting the sequence of events by inserting essentially a non sequitor, weakens and obfuscates an important point, even as it draws immediate attention away from the Jewish people’s duplicity. Shouldn’t the Tora be interested in illustrating how the desire to be done with Tora study and receiving commandments, ultimately leads to all sorts of disrespectful and sinful behavior? Or would emphasizing such a point be overly discouraging since intensive, uninterrupted, and constant Tora study is difficult to maintain unless one is given the total type of material support that the Jews experienced in the desert, but which was not meant to continue once they arrived in the land of Israel.

The construct of a biblical book comprised of only two verses.

Turning to Rebbe’s assertion that verses 10:35-36 constitute a book of the Tora in themselves, I find R. Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s homiletical insights the most enlightening. The commentator feels that “these two verses make us a compendium of the whole history of Israel and the world introduced by Moshe’s Divine Mission...”¹⁴ He contends that the movements of the Aron represent the spread of God’s Tora and therefore God’s Presence in the world. The demands of the Tora that man act in a disciplined and compassionate manner runs counter to many human cultural assumptions, and therefore opponents will rise in opposition to the spread of these Tora values (hence [10:35] “Rise up O

Yevamot 62a

For it was taught: Moses did three things on his own initiative and his opinion coincided with that of the Omnipresent. He separated himself from his wife, broke the Tables of Testimony and added one day... 'He added one day' on his own initiative. What exposition did he make? — 'As it is written, (Shemot 19:10) “And sanctify them to-day and to-morrow”. [It implies that] to-day shall be the same as to-morrow; as tomorrow includes the previous night so today must include the previous night. As, however, today's previous night has already passed away, it must be inferred that two days exclusive of today must be observed'. And his view coincided with that of the Omnipresent, for the Revelation did not take place before the Sabbath.

Adding days to a process therefore can be viewed as either a striving after greater holiness—Moshe and the days of separation prior to receiving the Tora, or the avoidance thereof—fleeing the site of the Giving of the Tora by the Jews. RaShI on BaMidbar 10:33 ironically places an opposite emphasis upon the three days journey from Sinai, suggesting that this was not a reflection of the people’s recalcitrance, but rather God’s Eagerness to bring the Exodus to its final conclusion:

The distance of three days they travelled in a single day, because God Wished them to enter the land of Israel immediately.

¹⁴ The Pentateuch, Translated and Explained by Samson Raphael Hirsch, trans. from the German by Isaac Levy, Vol. IV—Numbers, Judaica Press, Gateshead, England, 1976, p. 171.

God so your enemies be dispersed and those that hate You flee from before Your Presence”). 10:36 alludes to the ultimate goal of this process, when the period of conflict initiated by the introduction of the Tora into human society will successfully be resolved and the Jewish people will expand both internally as well as by the addition of many who will join them from other nations desirous of living the particular lifestyle advocated by God’s Law.

R. Hirsch’s ideas, which expand upon Rebbe’s view, are compatible with the presumption that had the people not descended the slippery slope of sin and transgression that is recorded in 11:1 ff., and if they had been able to directly proceed to enter the land of Israel, in accordance with the original Divine Plan, the ideals of 10:35-36 could have been realized that much sooner, and the rest of the Tora, at least the book of BaMidbar, would have taken on a different appearance.¹⁵ Yet the comment that in the future 10:35-36 will be restored to its rightful place, i.e., instead of merely serving as a positive buffer between periods of spiritual darkness, it will become a central component in accounting for Jewish and human history, suggests that while the idyllic state of affairs alluded to in 10:36 has been delayed, it has not been discarded, and the time will eventually come when the course of Jewish history will be back on track.

¹⁵ R. Hirsch’s approach very much parallels an interpretation quoted in the name of R. Joseph B. Soloveitchik in a recent volume that combines both Tannaitic positions mentioned in the Talmud:

...The Rav saw a unified theme being played out in Parashat BeHa’alotcha instead of what appears on the surface to be a disjointed series of unrelated events. The Rav explained, that after receiving the Tora at Har Sinai, the Jewish people were seized by a great sense of anticipation and excitement. Reading the beginning of BeHa’alotcha, one can sense the optimism, the accelerating tempo, the quickening tension and expectancy...On the threshold of deliverance and final redemption, they are ready to enter the promised land. They could have merited Kefitzat HaDerech, and God could have Hurried them into Eretz Yisrael within three days. Triumphantly leading the people into the land of Israel, Moshe would have been the Moshiach and he would have built a Beit HaMikdash that through his participation would never have been destroyed... But all this was not to be. At that critical moment in our national destiny, the Jewish people suffered a failure of Emuna, a lack of faith and self-discipline. They fell into a miasma of complaints, bickering, hedonism which occupies the text of BeHa’alotcha after the two Pesukim of “VaYehi Bi’Nesoa HaAron”. The precious opportunity was lost...The two verses in Parashat BeHa’alotcha represent the decisive point when our Emuna failed and tragedy overtook us. The two inverted Nun’s symbolize the reversal of our fortunes—history was turned on its head. ...the Rav said that the two verses constitute a Sefer by itself because these were the first and last Pesukim in the Sefer that Moshe would have written had history not taken the long and tragic turn that it did...

---Introduction by Menachem Genack, to Avishai David, Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parasha, Urim, Jerusalem, 2011, pp. 12-3.