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Complaining

Complaints, complaints! This week's Torah portion is filled with puzzling complaints.

"The people took to seeking complaints; it was evil in the ears of Hashem... The rabble that was among them cultivated a craving, and the Children of Israel also wept once more, and said, 'Who will feed us meat? We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt free of charge; the cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic. But now, our life is parched, there is nothing; we have nothing to anticipate but the manna!'" (Bamidbar 11:1, 4-6)

The *eirev rav*, the mixed multitude, had an intense craving, and they cried. The Jewish people also cried for meat, and they remembered the free fish they ate as slaves in Egypt, as well as the squash, the watermelon, the onions, and the garlic. Rashi, quoting the Sifri, explains that they mentioned these specific foods because the manna tasted like anything they wanted except these foods,

which are injurious to nursing women.

What is going on here? The Jewish people are complaining about a meat shortage? They are longing for fish? They miss the taste of squash? That is what they are complaining about? Remember, we are talking about the *dor dei'ah*, the generation who saw the pillar of fire by night and the Clouds of Glory by day. They lived with miracles and heard God speak at Sinai - and they are asking, "Where's the garlic?"

How do we understand this? Grown men do not cry over a lack of meat, certainly when they are prophets of God! We have to examine the meaning of their complaining, because it cannot be taken at face value.

The Ultimate Tragedy

Ultimately, there is only one tragedy great people cry over, and that is being distant from the Almighty. For the generation that received the Torah directly from God, closeness to God is the only thing that matters, and a vacuum of this sort is indeed a tragedy.

The Jewish people are not simply complaining about not having fish; they are reacting to what the lack of fish implies about their relationship with God. They realize that this shortage means that the Almighty has pulled back from them. Even while enslaved in Egypt, God arranged for them to have plentiful free fish from the Nile. They even managed to eat cucumbers and watermelon in Egypt; yet now they are missing these things. This prompts them to think, "If Hashem were truly close to us, then we would have everything we need. Having this deficiency must mean that we have somehow moved away from Him!"

The tragedy is their realization that they are not as close to the Almighty as they used to be. *That* is something truly worth crying about. In fact, it is the most important thing to cry about.

If their crying was warranted, then what did they do wrong? Rashi (11:7) explains, "The Israelites said, 'We have nothing but manna to look at,' whereas the Holy One, blessed is He, inscribed in the Torah, 'The manna was like coriander seed...' as if to say, 'See, all you who inhabit the world, what my children are complaining about - the manna is excellent in so many ways!'" Furthermore, there was a reason why the manna could not taste like those foods they lacked; they are harmful to nursing women (Rashi 7:5). The Children of Israel erred in not living with the belief that *Kol d'avid Rachmana l'tav avid* - everything God does is for our good (Brachos 60b). There were deficiencies, yes, but those were for a reason. The mistake of the Jewish people was interpreting the deficiencies as God's abandonment, instead of viewing them as something a loving Father was doing in order to encourage them to grow.

The root cause of their mistaken conclusion was a lack of *hakaras hatov* (appreciation) for all the good the Almighty had given them. They were embraced by the *Shechinah*, and surrounded by miracles - Clouds of Glory, water from a stone, manna every single morning that tasted like anything they wanted. Although they found good reason to conclude that the Almighty was distant from them, had they been sufficiently grateful for all of Hashem's gifts, they would not have complained. They would have realized that the manna was just what they needed: It was teaching them a lesson in *bitachon*, training them to trust that God would provide their daily sustenance. They would have understood that everything Hashem did was to help them grow, and that a lack is not a sign that He is rejecting them.

Every one of us experiences some type of deficiency in life, and how we respond to our unique challenges reflects our sense of gratitude. If we lack appreciation for the good that Hashem has lovingly granted us, we are likely to respond with complaints and

negativity, even mistakenly concluding that the Almighty has abandoned us. But if we are grateful for everything Hashem does for us and as a result feel His unstinting love, then we can take the lack in stride and focus on what the Almighty is teaching us and how He is pushing us to grow. When we recognize all that Hashem has done for us, our complaints will evaporate.

Waking up every morning is a perfect time to work on appreciating God's unceasing gifts. When you say *Modeh Ani*, feel that you are in the presence of God and feel His love. He is giving you the gift of another day. And know that everything He is going to do today is also for your good. The Almighty is right here with you, rooting for you and showering you with gifts. So stop complaining and start appreciating, and listen to the messages God is sending you.



Maintain the Flame

The pilot of an F-16 plane became disoriented while in flight. He couldn't distinguish up from down or in which direction he was flying. Even in the daytime, at elevated heights, the sea and sky can look the same.

Much of a pilot's training is in how to rely on cockpit instruments rather than on his own sense of perception. Especially when in doubt, a pilot is instructed, repeatedly, to rely on instruments. They help him navigate turbulence, stay on course, and safely reach

his desired destination.

We each are in a similar situation. Our perceptions often can mislead us. As society's boundaries and values become increasingly blurred, we too can become disoriented and confused. In which direction do we navigate our lives? Just as the pilot is instructed to rely on his instrument panel, so too, a Jew is instructed to rely on his: the Torah. The Torah's teachings and mitzvot direct us and illuminate our way. In the best and worst of times, the Torah can lift us up to higher heights. This is illustrated through the kindling of the *Menorah* that is described in *Parashas Behaalosecha*.

At first glance, the word *behaalosecha*, meaning "when you elevate," is an unusual choice of words for God's commandment to kindle the *Menorah*. Why wasn't the more literal Hebrew word, *l'hadlik*, to light, as in the blessing for lighting the Shabbos candles, used instead? A relevant teaching lies therein. *Behaalosecha* precisely expresses the essence of this unique mitzvah.

The lighting of the *Mishkan's Menorah* engendered spiritual elevation for the Jewish People. More than a lamp to produce light, the *Menorah* was a spiritual symbol. It personified the purpose of every Jew: to spread Divine light. Each mitzvah is a conduit through which God's Divine light is revealed. As the interconnection between the spiritual and material realms, a mitzvah integrates and coordinates their elements. It channels a Divine light that spiritually illuminates, permeates, and interacts with the world around us. The mindful performance of a mitzvah enhances one's awareness of God's Presence. With consistent observance, a person's spiritual vision and perception become broadened beyond what the eye can see. Without Divine light, one may have twenty-twenty vision yet be spiritually blind. A deeper understanding of the details regarding the kindling of the *Menorah* sheds light through

which we can be illuminated.

Only pure olive oil, without sediment, could be used for the daily *Menorah* lighting. We can expound on this idea to impart a relevant lesson for all times. We must not allow alien concepts or corrupt influences to invade the purity of our minds and hearts. Aharon's personal example of cleaning the *Menorah* daily symbolized that we too need be vigilant in maintaining ourselves both physically and spiritually every day.

Since a Jew's purpose is to spread Divine light, his or her own inner light needs to be ignited continually. Torah study and mitzvah observance are the fuel through which a Jew's inner flame is maintained. At times, that inner flame may decrease, but it's never extinguished.

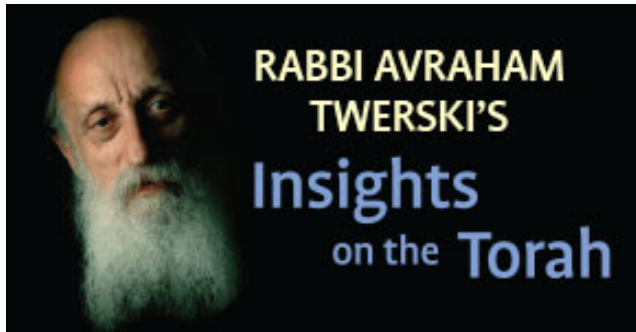
God's command to light the *Menorah* can be read literally as, "When you raise up the lamps," or "When you make the flames rise." *Sefer Mishlei* (Proverbs) states that "the soul of man is the lamp of God." Each of us possesses a unique soul, a Divine light that's waiting to be empowered and elevated. Just as the pure oil is used to light the *Menorah*, a mitzvah is used to ignite the soul. As stated in *Mishlei* (Proverbs), "The mitzvah is a flame and the Torah, light."

Rashi elaborates, explaining that the Kohen should apply the flame to the wick "until the flame rises on its own." Continued practice and repetition yield sought-after results. Fundamental teachings are being related directly to you and me.

Making It Relevant

1. Know that positive actions become internalized habits through repetition.
2. Keep in contact with positive role models and connect to ongoing Torah study.
3. Remember that at every age,

encouragement and support are integral elements for internalizing values and beliefs.



Two into One

Make for yourself two silver trumpets – make them hammered out (Bamidbar, 10:2).

This commandment appears to have applied to the period of the Israelites' sojourn in the desert, where the trumpets were used as a signal for assemblage or at wartime. Inasmuch as the Torah is eternal, this commandment must be relevant today as well.

R' Dov of Mezeritch points out that the Hebrew word for trumpets, *chatzotzros*, can be divided into two words, *chatzi tzuros*, “half forms.” The specification that they be hammered out means that they were to be of one unit of silver, and not fashioned of assembled parts. The verse can then be read as “Make for yourself two half-forms, and make them into a single unit.” This can have several interpretations.

The human being begins his life with only one driving force: the desire to satisfy one's cravings. Many human cravings are the work of the yetzer hara, the lower self. When one reaches the age of bas-mitzvah or bar-mitzvah, one acquires a moral and ethical drive (yetzer tov). These two opposing drives

are engaged in a constant struggle for mastery over the person.

In the Shema we read, “You shall love your God with all your heart” (Deuteronomy 6:5). The Talmud comments, “with all your heart means with both the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara” (Berachos 54a). The chassidic masters state that the yetzer hara, which is essentially the biologic component of the individual, is the source of human energy. The yetzer tov is the force that should provide direction, guiding the individual to harness the energy and channel it toward proper goals. The ultimate outcome should be that the yetzer tov succeeds in directing the energy of the yetzer hara to the point where doing the will of God becomes as natural as fulfilling any physiological drive.

We may think of the yetzer hara as the individual's first nature, which, by continued effort and direction to follow the dictates of the yetzer tov, can be transformed into a positive force, a second nature. When this is achieved, the yetzer hara is taken over by the yetzer tov, and both can function as a single unit.

This may be the message of the Divine commandment: Take the two “half-forms,” the yetzer tov and the yetzer hara, each of which constitute one half of an individual's character, and fuse them into a single unit.

There is only one way such fusion can occur. The yetzer hara may ignore the guidance of the yetzer tov, but it cannot transform it into anything other than what it is: a guide for proper behavior. However, by constantly channeling the energy of the yetzer hara toward commendable goals, the yetzer tov can transform it into a positive force. A successful fusion of the two “half-forms” into a single unit is the ultimate human achievement.

A second interpretation relates to marriage. The Talmud states that a person who is unmarried lacks completion. When a man and a woman marry, the Torah states, “They shall

become one flesh” (Genesis 2:24). This relates not only to their being united in their children, but that the two must form a single unit.

When husband and wife each have their own agenda, each seeking to achieve his or her own goals, the marriage is not a unit. Such relationships are vulnerable to fracture when stressed.

In chemistry, there is a difference between a “mixture” and a “compound.” Salt which had been dissolved in water is a mixture. The water can be separated off by evaporation, and the salt then emerges in its original form. Neither element undergoes an essential change in a mixture.

In a compound, the two elements combine to form a new substance. For example, when oxygen and hydrogen combine in a specific proportion, they form water, a new substance which, although comprised of the two, is an entity in its own right. As separate elements, oxygen and hydrogen have their own natures, which are very different. When they unite, they are divested of their individual natures. The new compound, water, has only one nature.

This may be the message in the verse cited. Take two “half-forms” and make them into a single unit. Man and woman are each a half-form. When they join in a way that they are a single unit, the marriage becomes a compound instead of a mixture. It is then much more stable and durable.

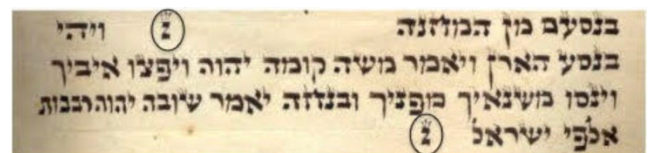


The Hidden Book of the Torah

How many books are in the *Chumash*, AKA the Five Books of Moses? Five, right?

The Talmud¹ reveals something astonishing: there are actually seven!

In this week’s Torah portion, two verses appear surrounded by inverted Hebrew letter Nuns (נ):



Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi explains that these markers delineate a separate book, effectively splitting the Book of Numbers into three distinct sections—making seven books total.²

Fascinating... but how could these two lines be an entire book of the Torah all by themselves? Given that each book of the Torah comprises an essential module in God's curriculum for life, how could two lines encapsulate such a grand vision? More intriguingly, the Sfas Emes³ explains that these verses contain the message of the *entire Torah*! The entire Torah in two lines? How?!

The Hidden Book

Let's examine these two verses⁴ to see if we can answer these questions⁵:

1. “And whenever the ark went out, Moses said, ‘Arise, God, and let your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate you flee before you.’”
2. “And when it rested, he said, ‘Return, God, to the ten thousand thousands⁶ of Israel.’”

At first glance, it appears that Moses is praying for success in desert warfare and conquest of the land of Israel. But as we saw, Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi considered these verses worthy of being their own book of the Torah, and the Sfas Emes taught that these two verses contain the message of the entire Torah. Following these insights, we must understand that these verses aren't merely describing military tactics—they're revealing the fundamental rhythm that governs existence itself. Together, they form what we might call the cosmic heartbeat of creation. With that context, let's see if we can find a more holistic interpretation:

"And whenever the ark went out..." In this verse, Moses prays that as the ark travels forth, God's enemies scatter and His haters flee. Zooming out, these enemies and haters represent the forces of evil, entropy, and malevolence that threaten to pull the world into chaos. The ark carries the Divine Mission from Sinai of enlightening the world with truth, morality, and Godliness. This verse teaches that we must physically and metaphorically carry Divine truth into the world, yet we must rely on God to remove all impediments so its holy message can reach every corner of the earth.

"And when it rested..." Moses prays that, after the nation goes out and conquers, the Divine Presence return from its outward movement to settle among the Jewish people. This inward motion counterbalances the outward motion of battling evil. The nation must travel, but it also must encamp. Conquering is step one. Filling the space with positivity and Divinity is step two.

To illustrate this idea, imagine investing tremendous energy into weeding a garden. The potential for growth is incredible, but if by failing to plant new trees and flowers in the fertile ground, the weeds inevitably return. Nature abhors a vacuum. As King David writes in Psalms, "Remove evil and do good" -

Remove the evil but don't stop there; cultivate the land; build infrastructure; leave the world better than you found it.⁷

The Universal Rhythm

This divine rhythm of outward purification followed by inward sanctification permeates all levels of creation:

Natural Rhythms: In breathing, we exhale toxins and inhale nourishing oxygen. Similarly, daylight sends us outward to engage with the world, while night draws us inward to rest and restore—both cycles sustaining life through balanced movement.

Masculine and Feminine: Masculine energy expresses outward with initiative and creative force, building the world through effort and exertion. Feminine energy draws inward with receptivity and nurturing, cultivating life from within. Together, they form the ingredients for a balanced life and a healthy relationship.

West and East: Western thought emphasizes conquering the external world through science, technology, and achievement. Eastern wisdom focuses on cultivating inner harmony, acceptance, and presence. Judaism synthesizes these approaches, valuing both transformative action and contemplative wisdom.

Creation and Rest: God created the world in six days of outward expansion—bringing forth increasingly complex forms of existence. Then He rested on the seventh—drawing divine blessing into creation. We mirror this pattern weekly: six days of worldly engagement followed by Shabbat's sacred return to family, community, and spirituality, renewing us for the week ahead.

This World and the Next: In this world, we engage outwardly through action and overcoming obstacles—building our spiritual identity through choices and challenges. In the

World to Come, we receive the fruits of our labor—experiencing the essence of what we've created through our earthly efforts.

Character Development: On an individual level, these verses illuminate our path to personal growth. The outward movement involves confronting and eliminating our negative traits—impatience, anger, self-doubt. The inward movement requires actively cultivating positive qualities to fill the void—patience, tolerance, self-confidence. The same principle applies to our habits: if someone stops smoking but never adds a new habit for relaxation, he'll be back to the pack in no time. Without both movements—the clearing and the filling—our efforts at self-improvement will always remain incomplete.

The Sfas Emes recognized that these two verses capture this cosmic dance perfectly—the outward movement to conquer and transform, followed by the inward return to integrate and restore.

Living in Rhythm

This week, examine where your life might be imbalanced. Are you constantly battling outward without taking time to restore inwardly? Or perhaps you're focused on inner peace without engaging the world that needs transformation? Try this exercise: identify one area where you're missing either the "outward" or "inward" movement, and take one small step to restore balance: For those constantly working, schedule 5 minutes of daily meditation or prayer. For those focused on inner development, find one practical way to bring your light outward—perhaps through teaching, volunteering, or creating.

By honoring both movements, we align ourselves with the cosmic rhythm captured in these two verses—the rhythm that, according to the Sfas Emes, contains the entire Torah.

Shabbat Shalom!

Avraham

Inspired by the teachings of Rabbi Beryl Gershenfeld, my primary Rabbi and mentor.

1. Shabbas 116A

1. Genesis
 2. Exodus
 3. Leviticus
 4. Numbers up to these verses
 5. These verses
 6. Numbers after these verses
 7. Deuteronomy
3. One of the great Chassidic commentators
 4. Bamidbar 10:35-10:36
 5. Who are the ten thousand thousands mentioned in our verse? The word for thousands - rivavos - is the same root word as the word for "be fruitful and multiply." Therefore, the Sfas Emes explains that these ten thousand thousands are the families who are carrying on the future of the Jewish people. The place where the holiness of Hashem's ark rests is among Jewish families raising their children to walk in God's ways. When we go out, we fight evil. When we return, we build good - family, community, nationality.
 6. When learning Torah, we understand that Hashem is speaking to us on many levels of reality. The Torah is simultaneously teaching us our history, our mission - national as well as individual, the metaphysical basis for reality, and much more. The Sfas Emes explains that these two verses encompass all of these aspects. For the purposes of this essay, I'll focus specifically on how they relate to the collective mission of the Jewish nation - tikun olam, as well as our individual mission to achieve perfection of character.
 7. The famous 10 rungged ladder of character development taught by Rabbi Pinhas ben Yair (the backbone of the most renowned book on character development, the Mesillas Yesharim) follows the same structure - First, build a foundation in Torah (see 1), then remove from evil, then hurry to do good: "*Rabbi Pinhas ben Ya'ir would say: Torah study leads to vigilance (zehirus) against sin. Vigilance leads to alacrity (zerizus) in their observance...*" (Avoda Zara 20B)." That's the exact same flow we see in our verse: First have an Ark; Torah. Then destroy the enemies; Vigilance. Then do the good; Alacrity.