

We have been waiting for this moment: the people are about to embark on their journey to the Land of Israel. To put things in chronological perspective, recall that the people came to Mount Sinai on the first day of the third month after they left Egypt:

בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשְּׁלִישִׁי לְצֵאת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם בַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה בָּאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי. וַיִּסְעוּ מִרְפִּידִים וַיָּבֹאוּ מִדְבַּר סִינַי וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וַיֵּחַן שָׁם יִשְׂרָאֵל נֹגַד הָהָר.

In the third month after the going-out of the Children of Israel from the land of Egypt, on that day they came to the Wilderness of Sinai. They moved on from Refidim and came to the Wilderness of Sinai, and encamped in the wilderness. There Israel encamped, opposite the mountain. (Exod. 19:1-2)

The following months were tumultuous. God gave Moses the Ten Commandments; the people worshiped the Golden Calf; Moses went up to get a second set of tablets, etc. By the second half of the year of the Exodus, the people had received all of the instructions for how to build the tabernacle as well as many other mitzvot. After several months of building, the tabernacle was finally completed *on the first day of the first month of the second year*, as it says:

וַיְהִי בַּחֹדֶשׁ הָרִאשׁוֹן בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית בָּאֵחָד לַחֹדֶשׁ הִקָּם הַמִּשְׁכָּן.

And so it was in the first month in the second year, on the first [day] of the month: the Dwelling was erected. (Exod. 40:17)

That is almost a year after they left Egypt.¹ At that point *God's cloud covered it*, as it says:

וַיִּכֶס הָעָנָן אֶת אֹהֶל מוֹעֵד וַיִּבְרָד ה' מִלֵּא אֶת הַמִּשְׁכָּן.

Now the cloud covered the Tent of Appointment, and the Glory of God filled the Dwelling. (Exod. 40:34).

When the *cloud rises from the mishkan* the people are supposed to move, as it says:

וּבִהְעֲלֹת הָעָנָן מֵעַל הַמִּשְׁכָּן יִסְעוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּכָל מְסֵעֵיהֶם. וְאִם לֹא יָעֹלָה הָעָנָן וְלֹא יִסְעוּ עַד יוֹם הָעֲלָתוֹ.

Whenever the cloud went up from the Dwelling, the Children of Israel would march on, upon all their marches; if the cloud did not go up, they would not march on, until such time as it does go up. (40:36-37)

Finally, the people embark on their journey. In this parasha, we get the timestamp for their embarkation:

וַיְהִי בַּשָּׁנָה הַשֵּׁנִית בַּחֹדֶשׁ הַשֵּׁנִי בַּעֲשָׂרִים בַּחֹדֶשׁ נִעְלָה הָעָנָן מֵעַל מִשְׁכַּן הָעֵדֻת.

Now it was, in the second year, in the second month, on the twentieth of the month, that the cloud went up from above the Dwelling of the Testimony... (Numbers 10:11)

Question: For how long were the Israelites encamped at the mountain? **Answer:** 11 months and 20 days. Or 350 days. That is: **50 = [49 (or 7x7+1) weeks]**. **Question:** How many days transpired from the completion of the tabernacle to the embarkation? **Answer:** **50 = [49 (or 7x7+1) days]**. Interesting.² Following the report that God's cloud lifted, the Torah goes into great detail about the order of the march. The tribes are ordered in the same way that they were for the presentation of gifts that we read last week. Then we get this very interesting story:

וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה לְחֹבָב בֶּן רְעֻוָּאֵל הַמִּדְיָנִי חֹתֵן מֹשֶׁה נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר אָמַר ה' אֲתָן לָכֶם לָכֶה אִתָּנוּ וְהִטְבֵּנוּ לָךְ כִּי ה' דִּבֶּר טוֹב עַל יִשְׂרָאֵל. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו לֹא אֵלֶיךָ כִּי אִם אֶל אֶרֶצִי וְאֶל מוֹלְדֹתַי אֵלֶיךָ. וַיֹּאמֶר אֵל נָא תַעֲזֹב אִתָּנוּ כִּי עַל כֵּן יִדְעַתְּ חֲתָנְנוּ בְּמִדְבַּר וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם. וְהָיָה כִּי תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ וְהָיָה הַטוֹב הַהוּא אֲשֶׁר יִיטִיב ה' עִמָּנוּ וְהִטְבֵּנוּ לָךְ.

Now Moses said to Hovav son of Re'uel the Midyanite, Moses' father-in-law: We are marching to the place about which God promised: that-one I will give to you; go with us and we will do-good for you, for God has promised good-things for Israel. He said to him: I will not go, but rather to my land and to my kindred I will go. He said: Pray do not leave us, for after all, you know our [best place to] encamp in the wilderness, you shall be for us as eyes. So it will be, if you go with us, so it will be: [from] that goodness with which God will do-good for us, we will do-good for you! (Numbers 10:29-32)

The Torah makes it seem as if Moses is asking his father-in-law at the last minute, to help guide the people, right as they were leaving. Maybe he had asked him beforehand but now that the cloud has lifted, it was crunch-time. There is a sense of urgency in their exchange. Listen to the string of key word-pairs and word triplets: **נֹסְעִים אֲנַחְנוּ-We're on our way!** **לָכֶה אִתָּנוּ-Come with us!** **וְהִטְבֵּנוּ לָךְ-We'll make it good for you!**³ **נָא אֵל-Please, Please! Don't תַּעֲזֹב אִתָּנוּ-leave us in the lurch!** **וְהָיִיתָ לָנוּ לְעֵינָיִם-You'll be our eyes for us!** **כִּי תֵלֵךְ עִמָּנוּ-If only you'd come with us!** **וְהִטְבֵּנוּ לָךְ-And we'll make it good for you!** The text doesn't tell us

¹ They left Egypt midnight on the 15th day of the 1st month. If there are 30 days in a month, then the tabernacle was set up 11 months and 15 days after the Exodus.

² Just like the number of days between Passover and Shavuot. Perhaps there is some significance in this. While these two 50-day periods of days overlap (in the first year) the fact that both of them are 50-day periods may suggest that they are formative periods. Passover to Shavuot is an agricultural period during which wheat ripens. The 50 days from *the 1st Day of the 1st Month* to the *20th Day of 2nd*

Month (1 Nisan to 20 Iyar) is the historical-religious period of enumeration, dedicatory gifts, consecrations. It is a 50-day period of **preparation** that culminates in the first embarkation towards the Land of Israel. There is no holiday on 20 Iyar to commemorate that event.

³ **וְהָיָה לָכֵן בְּתַתּוֹ לוֹ מִן הַשָּׁלָל וְכֶסֶף זָהָב אֲשֶׁר יִקְחוּ בְּמִלְחָמָה-in that he promises to give him some of the spoils, gold and silver that they will acquire in conquering the land.** Comment of Isaac Reggio. In other words, you will make out very nicely by coming with us.

what happens after that, or what Hovav, (also known as Yitro), decides. Does he stay or does he go? He does say that he wants to go back to his country, so we can reasonably conclude that indeed, he leaves. Now Moses is alone. Without a human guide, a mentor, a scout, someone who may have been somewhat familiar with the terrain, Moses must perforce, now only rely on God. And that's what we read in the next two verses:

וַיֵּסְעוּ מִהָר ה' דֶּרֶךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים וְאָרוֹן בְּרִית ה' נֹסֵעַ לִפְנֵיהֶם דֶּרֶךְ
שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לְתוֹר לָהֶם מִנוֹחָה. וַעֲנַן ה' עֲלֵיהֶם יוֹמָם בְּנֹסְעָם מִן
הַמַּחֲנֶה.

They marched from the mountain of God a journey of three days, [with] the Ark of God's covenant marching before them, a journey of three days, to scout out a resting-place for them. Now the cloud of God is over them by day, as they march from the camp. (Num. 10:33-34)

This is a complicated text. Some scholars believe that it should be understood that they simply traveled for three days until they arrive at the first stop where they start complaining about food.⁴ And right after those two verses, we have this next pair of verses which are recognizable to all of us from the Torah service:

וַיְהִי בְּנֹסֵעַ הָאָרֶן וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה קוּמָה ה' וַיִּפְּצוּ אֹיְבֶיךָ וַיָּגָסוּ
מִשְׁנָאִיד מִפְּנֶיךָ. וּבִגְחָה יֹאמֶר שׁוּבָה ה' רַבּוֹת אֵלַי וְיִשְׂרָאֵל.

And it was, whenever the Ark was to march on, that Moses would say: Arise [for battle], O God, that your enemies may scatter, that those who hate you may flee before you! And when it would rest, he would say: Return, O God, [you off] the myriad divisions of Israel! (Num. 10:35-36)

Scholars have been puzzled by these verses from the earliest times. There is a tradition that they were either part of a separate book or a separate book in itself. The upside-down **ל-nuns** act like a set of **brackets**, demarcating these lines from the rest of the text around them. The verses constitute what some have called, *The Song of the Ark*. The *Song* is a battle cry. **קוּמָה** **ה'**-literally means, *Attack, God!* The Ark is depicted as being representative of God's incredible miraculous power radiating some kind of pulsating energy that repels everything in its path. When Moses sings this *Song* he is summoning that miraculous force to lead and protect the people from its enemies. And then when the Ark rests, Moses heralds God's return to the people, welcoming God's presence back to their midst. According to historians of the synagogue service it was not until sometime in the 12th century that these lines were

sung as the Torah was taken out of the Ark in preparation for the public reading. In ancient synagogues, like the ones whose archeological remains are found in the Galilee, there was no fixed Ark. Torah scrolls were kept in a different location and taken out to be read. During the talmudic period and afterwards, the public reading of the Torah took on greater and greater significance. As synagogues evolved, the Ark became a permanent fixture at the front of the hall, and the act of opening the Ark, taking out the Torah, and walking around with it in a procession became ceremonialized. Opening the Ark and removing the Torah took on more significance as a kind of symbolic re-enactment of receiving the Torah at Sinai; reading the Torah became a symbolic re-enactment of God speaking to the people. Reciting **וַיְהִי בְּנֹסֵעַ הָאָרֶן** as part of the Torah service, takes us back to the desert which was the period of Israel's formation. Thus, in the synagogue service, we are presenting ourselves simultaneously as being in the *here-and-now*, as well as the *then-and-there*. We are here in Highland Park, NJ, but also back in the Wilderness of Zin, under God's providence, and imagining ourselves as if we are hearing the words of Torah for the very first time. Alternatively, we can see the placement of these verses in the synagogue service as a summons of God's power at the moment of our greatest communal vulnerability. After all, the opening of the Ark is the most dramatic moment of the service. It is precisely at that moment that we would want to summon God's protective power whether we have enemies or not; whether they are real or imagined. Certainly, this would have been the case



for the architects of synagogue ritual in medieval Europe around the period of the Crusades when Jews felt especially vulnerable. As we take out the Torah, we understand that we are declaring the Torah's truth to the world, that God is One, and that by extension all human beings are endowed with God's dignity and that is the source of their freedom and infinite value. These are ideas which are deeply threatening to tyrannical rulers whose desire is to subjugate others and accrue even greater power. Ideas that are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.

Shabbat Shalom!

TODAY IS DAY 260. WE PRAY FOR THE HOSTAGES. MAY GOD PROTECT THEM AND WATCH OVER THEM. MAY GOD PROTECT ISRAEL DURING THESE DAYS OF MISSILE BARAGES IN THE NORTH. "MAY THE ENEMIES OF ISRAEL AND THE JEWISH PEOPLE SCATTER AND FLEE!"

word or a phrase, for a second time, by mistake. By mistake.

⁴ The repetition of "three days" is a scribal error known as dittography, where a scribe copies a word or a phrase, a