

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Beha'alotcha

The rabbis incorporated several verses from this week's Torah portion into our siddur, requiring us to say them in conjunction with the public reading of the Torah in the synagogue. The Torah (Numbers 10:35-36) describes the prayers Moshe would say when the nation would start a journey and when they would stop to camp. "When the Ark would journey, Moshe said, 'Arise, Hashem and let your enemies be scattered and let those who hate you run away from before you.' And when it rested, he would say, 'Reside peacefully, Hashem, among the myriad thousands of Israel.'" When we take the Torah scroll out of the Ark to read it publicly in the synagogue, we say the first verse (10:35), and we say the second verse (10:36) when we return the Torah. We will explain that a third verse (9:23), which also relates to the travels of the Jews in the desert, has also made its way into the Torah reading's proceedings.

When we finish reading from the Torah, we lift it high in the air so that the congregation can see the actual letters, and we say "This is the teaching that Moshe placed before the children of Israel." Although this verse (Deuteronomy 4:44) refers to a specific portion of the Torah that Moshe taught the Jewish people prior to his death, we say this verse and point to the entire Torah scroll. We declare that we received this very text from Moshe, and it has been transmitted to us, generation after generation.

Immediately after saying this verse from Deuteronomy, we add "By the word of Hashem, through Moshe." This fragmented verse from our parsha (9:23), which describes the Jews' travels in the desert, seems superfluous. We just mentioned that Moshe taught us the Torah, so why would we repeat this? R' Chaim of Volozhin (18th century) explains that we borrow the verse from Deuteronomy to refer to the content of the Torah, exclaiming that Moshe taught us this Torah. We then mention the fragmented verse which describe the travels of the Jews in the desert, because whenever we move the Torah scroll, we say verses that describe the movement of the Ark.

Presumably, R' Chaim's comments are based on Rashi's explanation of this cryptic phrase, "By the word of G-d, through Moshe." Rashi says that when G-d wanted the Jews to travel, the clouds of glory which encircled them would fold up, signaling it was time to travel. Then Moshe said his prayer (10:35), "Arise Hashem," and the people began moving. Similarly, when G-d wanted the people to stop traveling, the cloud would start to spread out and Moshe would say the prayer, "Reside peacefully, Hashem." So when the verse says, "By the word of G-d," this refers to G-d's signal through the changing position of the clouds. When the verse subsequently says the words, "Through Moshe," this actually refers to Moshe's prayers which preceded the traveling or camping of the nation. Essentially, this cryptic verse refers to the movement of the clouds and to Moshe's prayers (10:35-36).

While R' Chaim explains nicely how the verse, "By the word of Hashem, through Moshe" fits into the siddur, we need to understand why all of the verses referring to Moshe's prayers are put in the siddur. After all, Moshe said his prayers in the desert when the entire Jewish people traveled or stopped to camp. Their travels also involved taking apart or putting back together the portable Mishkan and its vessels. Yet when we say these verses in the synagogue, we are not in the process of traveling, nor is our synagogue in the process of



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being folded up and transported to another place. So why do we say these verses, which accompany the movement of the entire nation, when we simply move the Torah scroll from one place in the synagogue to another?

To address this question, let us examine the above verses based on another passage in our parsha. The Torah (10:12-28) describes the Jews' first journey from the Sinai desert, and it tells us the order in which the twelve tribes traveled. Rashi there explains that the first six tribes started traveling, and then the Kehatities picked up the ark, menorah, table, and altars. They would carry these items while they traveled, and the last six tribes would follow. Rashi also explains (9:18) that Moshe said his prayer for the welfare of the Jewish people right after the cloud signaled that the first tribe should start traveling. If so, why does the verse say that Moshe said his prayer when the Ark would journey, if in fact he actually said his prayer before the Ark started moving?

If the Torah describes Moshe's prayer as being when the ark traveled, it seems to be indicating that his prayers for the Jewish people's well being depended on the merit of the Torah. When Moshe asks for protection from enemies when the Jews are enroute, or for the divine presence to rest peacefully in the Jewish camp, he does not simply ask for G-d to bless his people. He asks Hashem to bless them because the Torah is the centerpiece of their encampment and they keep it uppermost in their hearts and minds. The Zohar says, "The Jewish people, Torah, and G-d are one," meaning that the Jewish people's relationship with G-d is only through Torah. So when Moshe prays for the traveling nation, he prays that G-d help them in their mission to keep his Torah.

In light of this understanding, we can understand why we have borrowed the verses of Moshe's prayers when the Jewish people traveled, saying them in conjunction with the reading of the Torah in the synagogue. Although we are not traveling through the desert, we choose these verses to honor the Torah and show its primacy in our lives. By saying Moshe's prayers, we show our belief that when we cling to the Torah and its teaching, G-d will protect us from our enemies and allow his divine presence to rest in our midst. G-d will be most interested in our welfare when we are bearing the torch of his Torah. This applies not only with the Jews' journey in the desert; it relates to us throughout our history. Torah study and observance gives us the greatest chance of winning divine favor, for they empower us to carry out our mission.

When we return the Torah to the Ark, we mention Moshe's prayer that G-d reside peacefully among the Jewish people, and then we say verses from Proverbs extolling the Torah and its teachings. We say it is a tree of life, its supporters are fortunate, its ways are pleasant and all of its paths are peaceful. When we take out the Torah scroll to read it in public, we take the opportunity to recognize the centrality of the Torah in our lives and all the blessing that we hope to receive if we follow cling to it.

Shabbat Shalom

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