

Parashat Beha'alotecha 5779, 2019:

“*May those who hate You flee from You*”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof and Pittsburgh, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Yakir Ephraim ben Rachel Devorah, Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* is unique as it contains the only instance in the Torah with *pasukim* (verses) preceded and followed by an inverted letter “*nun*.” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 10:35-36) One of the better-known discussions regarding this distinctive occurrence is found in *Talmud Bavli*, Shabbat 115b-116a:

Our Rabbis taught: “So it was, whenever the ark set out, Moses would say, ‘Arise, O L-rd, may Your enemies be scattered and may those who hate You flee from You.’” “And when it came to rest, he would say, ‘Repose O L-rd, among the myriads of thousands of Israel.’” (*Sefer Bamidbar* 10:35-36, these verses and all *Tanach* translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*): The Holy One, blessed be He, provided signs for this section above and below, to teach that this is not its place. Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi] said: “It is not on that account, but because it ranks as a separate Book.” With whom does the following dictum of R. Samuel b. Nahmani in R. Jonathan's name agree: “Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars.” (*Sefer Mishle* 9:1) [Are you suggesting that] this refers to the seven Books of the Law? With whom [that is, whose opinion does this follow?] With Rabbi [Yehudah HaNasi]. (Translation, *Soncino Talmud*, with my brackets and emendations)

Although there are two opinions in this passage concerning our *pasukim*, Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi's view is more widely-known, and considered to be the generally accepted position. In his view, the Torah is comprised of seven, rather than five, separate books: *Bereishit*, *Shemot*, *Vayikra*, *Bamidbar* (until our *pasukim*), *Bamidbar* 10:35-36 (our verses), *Bamidbar* (after our *pasukim*) and *Sefer Devarim*.

I find the first of our two *pasukim* particularly difficult to comprehend; in particular, the phrase, “and may those who hate You flee from You,” seems to hide far more than it reveals. After all,

exactly who are those “who hate You?” Moreover, what does it actually mean to “hate G-d?”

Fortunately, these questions were addressed long ago in the *Midrash Sifrei* on our *pasuk*:

“May those who hate You flee from You:” And are there really haters [that stand before] the One who spoke and the world came into being? Rather, the text is teaching us that anyone who hates the Jewish people is as if he hates the One who spoke and the world came into being. We find this idea, as well, in another verse, “And with Your great pride You tear down those who rise up against You; You send forth Your burning wrath; it devours them like straw.” (*Sefer Shemot* 15:7) And are there really those who rise up against the One who spoke and the world came into being? Rather, the Torah is teaching us that anyone who rises up against the Jewish people is as if he has risen up against the Omnipresent One (*HaMakom*). (*Pesikta* 84, translation and brackets my own)

According to this Midrash, no one actually hates or rises up against Hashem. Instead, anyone, be they individuals or nations, who has abject antipathy for our people and wreaks havoc against us is included among those who are called *sonei Hashem* (haters of Hashem). Professor Nechama Leibowitz *zatzal* (1905-1997), one of the previous generation’s greatest exponents of Torah analysis, offers an interpretation of our midrashic passage that is particularly apropos:

Accordingly, the enemies of Israel are synonymous with the enemies of G-d. Whether we are worthy or not of this title; those bent on our destruction regard us as the standard-bearers of truth and justice and the representatives of the divine Law. And it is for this reason they persecute and hate us. (*Studies in Bamidbar*, page 91, translated and adapted from the Hebrew by Aryeh Newman)

Professor Leibowitz buttresses her insights with the following synopsis of Rav Shimshon Raphael Hirsch’s *zatzal* (1808-1888) interpretation of our *pasukim*:

Hirsch, commenting on this passage, remarks that Moses was aware that enemies would rise up against the Torah from the moment that it was given. Its demands for justice and altruism were bound to antagonize aggressors and tyrants and stand in the way of their designs. The Torah’s call to holiness would not only arouse hatred, but active persecution. (*Ibid.*)

Taken in tandem, Professor Leibowitz provides us with a clear path for understanding the very nature of anti-Semitism, and why, for example, the *Haggadah* solemnly proclaims: “*B’kol dor v’dor omdim aleinu l’kaloteinu*” — “In each and every generation there are those who rise against us to completely destroy us.” In sum, we are “the standard-bearers of truth and justice and the representatives of the divine Law.” In addition, the Torah itself, and we as its representatives, are

antithetical to everything for which the tyrants of the world have stood and continue to stand. “Its demands for justice and altruism,” coupled with the Torah’s “call to holiness,” are ideals by which our enemies cannot abide. As a result, as the “People of the Book,” that is, as representatives of Hashem’s holy Law, we continue to be hated and persecuted until this time.

With the Almighty’s help and our fervent desire, may the time come soon and, in our days, when the words of Zechariah the prophet are fulfilled and proclaimed by all the nations of the world: “And the L-rd shall become King over all the earth; on that day shall the L-rd be one, and His Name one.” (14:9) Then, and only then, will the endless cycles of hatred and injustice against us cease and the words of Yermiyahu the prophet be realized, as we hear: “the sound of mirth and the sound of joy, the voice of a bridegroom and the voice of a bride, the sound of those saying, ‘Thank the L-rd of Hosts, for the L-rd is good, for His loving-kindness endures forever,’ bringing a thanksgiving offering to the House of the L-rd...” (33:11) *V’chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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