

The Ten Commandments Law

Category: Bamidbar, Be'halos'cha

Two verses in the bible that give us strength to deal with obstacles in exile.

This week, the Governor of Louisiana signed a law requiring the display of the Ten Commandments in every classroom in the state's public schools. The law specifies the minimum size for the poster and mandates that the commandments be presented in large, easy-to-read letters. Additionally, the poster must include a statement noting that the Ten Commandments "have been a prominent part of American public education for nearly 300 years."

Obviously, opponents of the law quickly emerged, arguing that it violates the separation of church and state, and they have vowed to sue the governor in federal court. The governor, for his part, has said that he eagerly anticipates the lawsuit. Other states, such as Texas, Oklahoma, and Utah, are interested in passing similar legislation but are simply waiting to see how the situation unfolds.

Israel's Blank Tanach

A similar drama is unfolding in Israel these days. Since October 7, there has been a significant awakening of Jewish identity among Jews throughout the world, and especially in Israel.

In Israel, there is an organization called "Me'irim" ("Illuminators"), whose goal is to "bring light back to the education system." Recently, it published a comprehensive study on the (dismal) state of Tanach studies in Israel's public education system.

The situation wasn't always like that. David Ben-Gurion, an ardent Bible enthusiast, frequently repeated that the Tanach is the "deed" to our ownership of the Land of Israel. As the first Prime Minister, he ensured that the Tanach was taught in all educational institutions across the country. Indeed, from the 1950s to the 1970s, more hours were dedicated to Tanach than any other subject except for English and Mathematics. However, since the 1970s, there has been a significant decline in Tanach instruction. In some classes, Tanach is taught only one hour a week, and in others, it is not taught at all.

The organization is trying to raise public awareness about this issue. As part of their campaign, they printed a “blank Tanach”—a book with a regular Tanach cover but with blank pages inside—to emphasize that Israeli children are not receiving any knowledge of Judaism’s holiest book. This week, blank Tanachs were placed at the entrances of dozens of schools across Tel Aviv, accompanied by protest signs stating: “In this school, they study a blank Tanach.”

The public opinion on this matter is actually changing. Me’irim conducted a survey involving 500 public school teachers and 500 parents of children in public schools. It revealed that 80% of the teachers believe the current curriculum does not adequately address Jewish heritage topics, and 80% of the parents think that following the recent war, there is a need to better understand Jewish heritage.

How Many Books Are In the Torah, Really?

Every Shabbat, the Parsha is divided into seven aliyot. Did you ever wonder: why it is specifically divided into seven, and not five—given that the Torah itself is divided into five books: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Bamidbar, and Deuteronomy, known collectively as the “Chumash” (related to the Hebrew word for five)?

In fact, there is a puzzling statement in the Talmud (Shabbat 116a), which states that the world was created in seven days, based on the seven books of the Torah. So is the Torah divided into seven or five? What exactly is going on?

The answer to this question can be found in this week’s Torah portion.

In Beha’alotcha, which we read today, there are two verses that everyone recognizes, the verses we chant when we open the Ark: “*Vayehi binso’a ha’aron... When the Ark would travel, Moses would say...*” In the Torah scroll (and this is also shown in printed Chumashim), these verses are preceded and followed by a strange icon which doesn’t appear anywhere else in the Torah—an inverted letter nun, resembling parentheses.

Why is this? The Talmud explains, “Because it is considered a book unto itself.”

In other words, from the beginning of the Book of Bamidbar until the verse “When the Ark would travel,” is one book. The two verses (a total of 85 letters) are

another book, and the following verses until the end of Bamidbar is another book. So, instead of one book of Bamidbar, we have three—and according to this division, there are seven books of the Torah in total.

As the Rebbe explains, this is why each Torah portion is divided into seven aliyot, corresponding to these seven books of the Torah (Toras Menachem 5747 1:32).

The Sudden Shift

What is the idea behind this division?

The Book of Bamidbar, and specifically Beha'alotcha, is divided into two parts. The section before "*Vayehi binsoa*" is very optimistic. It describes in detail how, during their journey in the wilderness, the cloud of G-d protected the Israelites, and how He guided the entire journey: "By the word of G-d they camped, and by the word of G-d they traveled." It was a journey entirely directed from above. G-d protected the Israelites in the wilderness with clouds, "as a nurse carries an infant."

Just a few verses before "*Vayehi binsoa*," Moses turns to his father-in-law, Yisro, and invites him to join the Israelites on their way to the Promised Land. Moses sounds very optimistic, telling Yisro (according to Rashi 10:29), that they might enter the land within three days.

However, right after the short 'Torah book' that interrupts the portion, the tone changes drastically. It says, "The people took to complaining," and from here, the mood and atmosphere shift. The Israelites complain once, and then complain again about the manna, the heavenly food that miraculously appeared near their homes without effort. They grew tired of this food and complained about it. From there, things only deteriorate, culminating in the sin of the spies and the resulting punishment of wandering in the wilderness for forty years instead of entering the land.

The Message from the 'Book'

The two verses which are considered a separate book serve as a prelude to what follows.

They speak of the Ark of the Covenant. The first verse describes what happens when the Ark is in motion: “When the Ark set out, Moses would say, ‘Arise, O L-rd, and let Your enemies be scattered, and let those who hate You flee before You.’” This is a plea for G-d to disperse His enemies and those who hate Him. This transition marks a shift from a divinely guided and protected journey to a period of challenges and complaints, highlighting the contrasting experiences of the Israelites.

However, Rashi adds a very important point here.

Who exactly are the ‘enemies of G-d’? “Those who hate the Jewish people—for anyone who hates the Jewish people hates the Creator of the World.” According to Rashi, it is impossible for someone to hate Jews and love G-d. The Jewish people represent G-d in the world; they are His ambassadors on Earth. Thus, opposing them is essentially opposing G-d.

The second verse, completing the “book,” says: “And when it rested, he would say: ‘Return, O L-rd, to the ten thousands of the thousands of Israel.’” What is the significance of these words? Rashi explains: “This teaches that the Divine Presence does not rest upon Israel if they number less than twenty-two thousand” (Bamidbar 10:36). The Torah here hints at when G-d will return to dwell among us—when we are together in the tens of thousands.

In other words, despite the apparently critical nature of the following sections in the Torah, the message in these verses seeks to support and inspire the Jewish people. The Rebbe explained the verses as follows:

Despite all the difficulties we will face in the “wilderness” of “exile,” there is a recipe for success: “When the Ark travels,” meaning, when we advance in Torah study, “And Moses said,” i.e., when our learning is connected to Moses, the righteous leader of the generation—then, we can overcome all adversaries.

The second verse tells us the condition for Divine rest:

Where does G-d find rest, where is His place of comfort? It is among “the tens of thousands of Israel.” When the Jewish people are united, the Divine Presence dwells among us, and we find rest from all our surrounding enemies.

Ultimately, our success hinges on two factors: strengthening our connection with

G-d, and strengthening our connection to the Jewish people. Let's do both, and we'll see the results ourselves.