



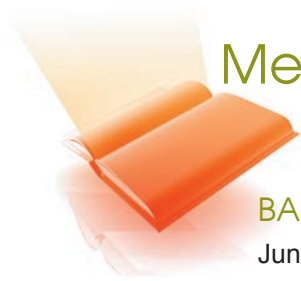
*“Words from the Heart
Enter the Heart”*

BAMIDBAR > Behaalotecha

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson

June 10, 2011
Behaalotecha

Secret Formula for Protection



Meaningful Sermons *"Words from the Heart Enter the Heart"*

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ABSTRACT

Life can often be quite difficult. Who among us has not had to contend, at times, with the tentacles of darkness? Whether it be tangible enemies, driven by violence, hate, envy and greed, or psychological demons and fears ... whether it be emotional losses and betrayals, or pain and suffering due to health and other frailties, or the basic dangers that lurk about ... much of life can present quite a daunting challenge.

This week's Torah reading, in a cryptic section consisting of two verses – which we recite to this day every time the ark is opened in the synagogue – provides us with a relevant answer and a practical approach to facing life's difficulties:

When the Ark [of the Covenant] went forth, Moses said, "Arise, O God, and scatter your enemies! Let your foes flee before You!" When it came to rest, he said, "Return, O God, the myriads of Israel's thousands!"

These two verses capture the challenging story of our lives. Despite life's hardships, we do not come unarmed. The Ark of the Covenant (i.e. the Torah) leads the way, and in its wake enemies are scattered and foes flee. The Torah – called the "Torah of life" and the "Torah of light" – illuminates the dark and lonely paths of existence and empowers us with direction, fortitude and commitment to make it through the most challenging experiences of life.

This is a two-part sermon:

Part I: "The Armament that is Torah" examines these verses and provides a practical approach to facing hardships.

Part II: "The Mysterious Brackets" goes farther, exploring the kabbalistic/mystical view of the above.

SECRET FORMULA FOR PROTECTION**PART I:****THE ARMAMENT THAT IS TORAH****1. Life is Painful (Humor)**

An Englishman named Charles and a Jew named Yankel were sitting in the waiting room of a prominent podiatrist, comparing notes and discussing their common symptoms. Both were suffering from a painful foot condition. Shortly, Charles was summoned to see the doctor. As the doctor began checking him out, the pain in his leg became so unbearable that his loud cries could be heard all the way out in the waiting room.

After a while, he came limping out of the doctor's office, telling Yankel that he should brace himself, because the check-up will be agonizing. "I know, I know," said Yankel. "I was able to hear you yelling in pain. But I have it all figured out. I know how to avoid feeling any pain."

Curious to see how Yankel would make out, and how he would avoid any pain, Charles decided to hang around in the waiting room while Yankel was being examined. A few minutes passed. No sound. Another few minutes passed. Charles was beginning to cringe, anticipating Yankel's cries. But all was still quiet. Not one sound is coming from inside the examination room.

Charles was quite amazed that Yankel was able to endure the pain without letting out a peep. "Wow," Charles thought to himself, "what self-control Yankel must have."

A few moments later the door opened and Yankel emerged with a wicked smile on his face. And Charles immediately asked him: "How did you manage that? You had the same symptoms as I, and you did not cry out even once." Yankel edged closer to Charles and whispers with a smile: "I showed the doctor my other foot..."

And speaking about pain...

Giants Linebacker Lawrence Taylor – known as LT – was known for his resilience in being able to play football even when he was seriously hurt. Asked once, what his secret was he said: “It’s simply mind over matter. When you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter.”

Were it so easy. Truth be told ...

2. Life is Difficult

Life can often be quite difficult. Who among us has not had to contend, at times, with the tentacles of darkness? Whether it be tangible enemies, driven by violence, hate, envy and greed, or psychological demons and fears ... whether it be emotional losses and betrayals, or pain and suffering due to health and other frailties, or the basic dangers that lurk about ... much of life can present quite a daunting challenge.

Indeed, the most famous book of the so-called self-help genre – which stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for 13 years – *The Road Less Traveled*, begins with the line: “Life is difficult.” And many people cite these words as the reason that made this book so memorable for them. I guess life’s difficulties resonate with everyone and just confirming that fact goes a long way.

3. Life is Also Beautiful

Long before *The Road Less Traveled*, people knew life was difficult. Many, many books over the ages have documented this fact, beginning with the Bible (which actually remains *the* largest best-seller of all time, to the point that it isn’t even counted in the best-seller charts).

But life is not only difficult. Life is also beautiful. Just witness the delight and joy of newlyweds or new parents. Hopefully, we all have had many radiant experiences of love and splendor, moments of peace and kindness, encounters with nobility or the awe of nature. Yet, despite the beauty, the pains of life remain a haunting force that, all too often, overwhelms us.

What can we do about that?

Denial – like Yankel showing the wrong foot or putting one’s head in sand like an ostrich and hoping for the best – is not the option of the wise. Tolerating or ignoring the pain like LT can only work so much and only for certain people. It definitely is not a long term solution, Faith and support of others are surely excellent tools to combat adversity. But are there other measures we can take to minimize (or even prevent) suffering? Are there other actions we can do to counter the forces of darkness?

4. The Torah’s Answer

In a cryptic section consisting of two verses, this week’s Torah reading provides us with a relevant answer and a practical approach to facing hardships.

As the Israelites began their long and arduous journey through the harsh Sinai wilderness, a “great, terrifying desert, where there were snakes, vipers, scorpions and thirst, with no water,”¹ they were led by the Holy Ark of the Covenant which contained the tablets of the Ten Commandments (both the second complete ones and the first broken ones).

In a dramatic fashion, the Torah describes the scene of this journey:

When the Ark went forth, Moses said, “Arise, O God, and scatter your enemies! Let your foes flee before You!” When it came to rest, he said, “Return, O God, the myriads of Israel’s thousands!”²

These two verses capture the challenging story of our lives. Despite life’s hardships, we do not come unarmed. The Holy Ark leads the way, and in its wake “enemies” are scattered and “foes” flee. That is why, to this day, we recite these verses when the ark is opened in the synagogue.

¹Deuteronomy 8:15.

²Numbers 10:35-36.

Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai, the author of the Zohar, explains the awesome power of opening the ark, taking out the Torah scroll and reading in it:

Taking out the Torah scroll in public opens up the gates of compassion and awakens the love above. Therefore, we say [following these two verses] *B'rich Shmei* ("Blessed be His name") ... to evoke and draw down the powerful energy during this time, to protect us and bestow upon us all blessings for livelihood, children and peace. For that reason, we ought to stand in awe when the Torah is taken out of the ark, just as we were standing at Sinai...³

These verses are so powerful that the Emek HaMelech⁴ was moved to comment:

Whoever reads [these verses] daily with proper intention will not be hurt, even when he may travel to a place of thieves, be at sea or in another dangerous location.⁵

5. Torah of Life

The Torah – called the “Torah of life” and the “Torah of light” – illuminates the dark and lonely paths of existence and empowers us with direction, fortitude and commitment to make it through the most challenging experiences of life.

The Torah is not just a book. It is a blueprint. A spiritual guide.

Just as every machine comes with an operator’s manual, life comes with an operator’s manual, and it is called the Torah. This manual offers us a step-by-step guide to the inner workings of existence and of ourselves. Every character, every story, every episode teaches us what “makes us tick.” It is a manual that instructs us as to which paths to take – how our “machine” will work best and how it will not.

³ Zohar II 206a. See also *Mikdash Melech*, Zohar I 15a.

⁴ Rabbi Naftali Hertz ben Yaakov Elchanan, a 17th century German kabbalist, was known as Emek HaMelech after his chief work *Emek HaMelech* (“Valley of the King”).

⁵ Emek HaMelech Gate I section 59.

Yes, life presents many difficulties, often harsh ones. But the most dangerous of them all is ignorance, and the confusion and demoralization it creates. Look at any suffering and you will see that often the worst part of it is the sense of loneliness and despair it creates ... the plaguing doubts whether a remedy can be found ... the agonizing over an unknown future, the hopelessness of it all.

Torah illuminates the inner path, and as such may not always take away the pain, but it allows us to see beyond it. It helps us transcend the pain, infusing us with hope and fortitude to fight on. And despite the questions, it empowers us to forge ahead and thrive, not just survive.

This is the power and blessing of a spiritual blueprint – the power of faith that comes together with a guide that directs our actions.

At one of the death camps, the prisoners were suddenly ordered to evacuate their barracks at point of a gun. Pandemonium broke loose. Prisoners stampeded out into big open field. There were two huge pits in the middle of this field.

A cruel voice came over the loudspeaker: “Each of you dogs who values his miserable life and wants to cling to it must jump over one of the pits and land on the other side. Those who miss will get what they rightfully deserve... death!”

It was clear to the inmates they would end up in the pits. Even at the best of times, it would have been impossible to jump over the pits much less on this cold, dark night in the Ukraine. The prisoners standing at the edge of the pits were skeletons, feverish from disease and starvation, exhausted from slave labor and sleepless nights. It was life or death for them, but for the guards it was just a game.

Among them was Rabbi Israel Schapiro, the Blozhiver Rebbe, and a friend, a philosopher from a large Polish town. They had met in the camps and a deep friendship had developed between them. The philosopher said “All your efforts to jump over the pits are in vain. We only entertain the Germans. Let’s just sit down in the pits and wait for the bullets to end our wretched existence.”

"My friend," said the Rabbi, "Man must utilize every opportunity to live. So my friend, jump we must."

As they neared the pits they could see them rapidly filling up with bodies. When they reached them, the Rabbi closed his eyes and commanded in a powerful whisper, "We are jumping!" They jumped, and when they both opened their eyes, they found themselves standing on the other side of the pit.

"We are here, we are here, we are alive!" the Rabbi's friend repeated over and over again, while warm tears streamed from his eyes. "Tell me, how did you do it?"

"I was holding on to the coattails of my father, and my grandfather and my great-grandfather, of blessed memory," said the Rabbi. "Tell me, how did you do it?"

The philosopher replied, "Rabbi, I was holding on to you."⁶

This, my friends, is the secret of survival – when we are bound above, we do not fall below.

As we come away from the holiday of Shavuot (just two days ago), when we celebrated the giving of the Torah at Sinai 3323 years ago, we must recommit to hold onto the protective shield of the Torah.

The ultimate way to protect against any adversary is to come armed with spiritual strength and resilience. By holding onto tightly and following the lead of the Holy Ark of the Covenant, we march not alone, but with the enormous might of the timeless Torah, which has carried us for over three millennia, through the worst and best of times.

Till today. Amen.

⁶ *Hassidic Tales of the Holocaust* by Yaffa Eliach

PART II:**THE MYSTERIOUS BRACKETS****6. A Rare Anomaly**

The secret behind the power of the Torah is revealed by a rare anomaly, occurring only once in the entire Torah:

The two verses in this week's Torah reading are preceded and followed by two inverted Hebrew letters – each one the letter *nun* – which create an affect that looks like two brackets. These brackets enclose this section, separating it from the verses before and after.

Explains the Talmud: “For this section God placed symbols above and below ... because it ranks as a significant book unto itself.”⁷

In effect, this renders the Torah into seven books. 1) Genesis, 2) Exodus, 3) Leviticus. 4) The beginning of the book of Numbers up to these two verses, 5) These two verses, 6) The rest of the book of Numbers, and 7) Deuteronomy.

7. The Deeper Meaning

But what is the significance of these brackets? Why would two verses be singled out to create an entire new book of Torah?

The mystics offer a fascinating explanation into the deeper meaning of these brackets.⁸

⁷ Talmud, *Shabbat* 115b.

⁸ As elucidated by the Rebbe Rashab in 1909, in a discourse which begins *Vayehi Binsoyah Ha'Aron*, based on the discourse with the same name in *Ohr HaTorah BeHaalotcha* p. 371. See also *Vayehi Binsoyah Ha'Aron* 5699.

The two brackets combine to create an image of a square []. This square symbolizes the “square garment” which explains the mystery of existence (as per Emek Hamelech⁹).

8. The Square Garment

Picture a garment – beautifully embroidered – both concealing and revealing. Concealing and revealing something very intimate and profound beneath. This “garment” is made up of two sections, one translucent, the other opaque. Existence hangs in the balance.

Kabbalists use the example of this “square garment” to explain the bridge between our perception of reality and the deeper higher reality that lies behind the curtain.

At times we all sense something “behind the scenes” – a force above and beyond our own existence. But true reality is like a brilliant light, an unbridled flow of energy. Unshielded we would be blinded by that light, overwhelmed by the energy force, which we are not merely unable to see, but unable to *be*. Our independent existence could not survive, our independent sense of self would cease to exist if we were to be submerged in the boundless energy of higher reality.

⁹Quoting Emek HaMelech: “This garment carries the secret of the squared and closed mem, because the garment is square, which then divides into two and becomes two nuns, and these are the two nuns written in the section ‘when the ark went forth...’ which is shaped like an open inverted nun... This constitutes a great secret: Whoever reads this chapter daily with proper intention will not be hurt, even when he may travel to a place of thieves, be at sea or in another dangerous location. As long as he keeps in mind the two above-mentioned nuns that hint to the two halves of the garment.

9. A State of Concealment

Consciousness, therefore, is actually a state of concealment. Our sense of existence – the feeling that “I am” – is possible only due to shrouded energy. Paradoxically, true awareness is not what we fathom, but that which we don’t fathom. To be awake means to be aware that we are asleep. True awareness is when we are aware of something beyond our awareness.

Yet, we are not trapped in an airtight prison. A delicate drape conceals the higher reality. As we look at the garment we sense that it is beckoning us while protecting us and drawing us closer, and yet keeping us away.

10. Our Life’s Work

Our life’s work on this side of the curtain is to channel and draw into our beings and our environments the light and energy from behind the curtain, in effect reconnecting both sides of the curtain.

This “dressing room” is the basis of an entire mystical treatise, which explains the magnitude of the two verses in our chapter.

With its own elegant brand of poetry, the mystics paint a graceful portrait – call it mystical poetry – that allows us to envision our limited perception juxtaposed against the backdrop of a higher reality, with an opaque curtain in between.

11. The Bracketed Verses

With this imagery we return to the two-bracketed verses:

When the Ark went forth, Moses said, “Arise, O God, and scatter your enemies! Let your foes flee before You!” When it came to rest, he said, “Return, O God, the myriads of Israel’s thousands!”¹⁰

The brackets which frame these two verses, the two *nuns*, create a square [] (also known as the closed *mem* in the Hebrew alphabet). This square forms a “significant book onto itself,” and this “book” tells the story of our lives, as captured in the portrait of the garment that both conceals and reveals the light beyond.

As the Midrash explains it:

From whence was light created? God wrapped Himself in a white *tallit* (a prayer shawl) and He shone forth from one end of the world to the next, as it says in the Book of Psalms [104:2]: “You are clothed with light like a robe.”¹¹

12. The Question About Light

Why the wonder about the creation of light more than all other creations?

Because light reflects and is drawn to the Divine, thus begging the question:

How can light be drawn down into creation when its personality is to ascend upward, like a flame that expires without a grounding wick?

The answer is that the Divine “dresses up” in the garment of light, thus allowing the light to be drawn down and contained in our finite existence.

The garment of light is the Torah, which manifests and “clothes” the Divine in ways that can be contained by our limited beings.¹²

¹⁰ Numbers 10:35-36.

¹¹ Midrash, *Shemos Rabba* 50:1.

¹² See Tanya ch. 52.

Read the verse from the Book of Psalms carefully: “You are clothed with light like a robe.” And you will see that two dimensions are described: 1) the Divine is clothed with light, and 2) this is like a robe.

These two dimensions refer to two dimensions of the Torah – the revealed and the concealed, also described as the outer and the inner – and these two dimensions correspond to the two sections of the “garment,” the two letters *nun*.

13. The Outer and the Inner

Like any effective intermediary, the garment must have an element of the source it is emanating and transmitting (the light), and an element that allows the light to be contained by the recipient (the robe).

The “outer” revealed dimension of Torah teaches us the mechanics and the rules, the do’s and don’ts, of life. The “inner” hidden dimension lifts us to the light.

The outer is finite; the inner infinite. Both are necessary. One provides revelation and transcendence, the other concealment and grounding.

Without the inner, we can succumb to the trappings of material life and its seductive powers. Without the outer, our existence would be annihilated in face of the blinding light. The outer manifests and contains Torah light in the defined structure and boundaries of existence. The challenge is not to escape life and its difficulties, not to deny the harsh wilderness, but to enter it, to tame, sublimate and refine the arid desert and its toxicity.

This is the deeper significance of the two verses – the book of its own – framed by the two *nuns*.

These two verses encompass the central theme of the entire Torah, and are thus framed like a “square garment,” which can also be seen as a mini-Torah scroll, within which are etched the two letters *nun*, corresponding to the two dimensions in Torah, the inner and outer, the “light” and the “robe,” each containing 50 (the numerical value of *nun*) gates of understanding.

14. Additional Understanding

“When the Ark will travel” refers to the light’s journey to earth. The ark in Hebrew is *ohron*, which consists of the *ohr* (meaning “light”) and *nun*.

The ark’s journey through the wilderness reflects the journey of each of our lives through this dark universe, each of us with our set of particular challenges.

But we come well prepared to face all adversaries. With the light of the ark leading the way, we have the power to “scatter all enemies” and cause all foes to flee. Armed with and surrounded by both “brackets” (the two letters *nun*), we are able to be both immersed in this world and remain above it.

And we recite these verses each time we open the ark in the synagogue, which tells us that at all times, even today, the journey of the ark leads our way and protects us from harm.

15. To Survive and Grow

To survive and grow in our harsh world we need two things: revelation and concealment. And this is what this “significant book” offers us. Framed by two nuns, this book is a “square garment” that reveals as it conceals the higher light.

One of many practical applications of this message is in the way it affects our attitudes and relationships:

How should we tackle a difficult situation? Should we ignore it or fight it? When faced with something that reflects the dark side of life, a painful experience or a person resistant to love, should we run the other way or fight and overwhelm the adversary? When our child has done a serious wrong, do you excuse or scold the child?

The bracketed “book” teaches us a third path:

We have the power to look head-on at the challenge, without fear or retreat, and then find a way to present a loving message in ways that others can contain it.

The same with the other situations: We were sent – purposefully sent – on a journey to a wilderness, a world with many difficulties, precisely for the purpose of sublimating and refining this hostile environment, and for this task we were given all the necessary tools. A challenge need not cause us to go from one extreme to the next, escapism or war.

Many protective measures and defensive strategies have been posited over the ages to shield us from harm. The Torah's approach is that the best defense is offense – wise offense.

Prevent rather than protect. Conceal while you reveal. Craft solutions in shapes and forms that can be contained. And above all, follow and connect to a force beyond your own resources, and draw that into your life. Clothe and integrate the light into your structures.

When you stay the course, led by the Torah, surrounded by its brackets, nothing can harm you. Remember that. Amen.