

“Beha’alotcha: Episodes of displacement and replacement”

Rabbi Dr Jeffrey M. Cohen

When I study the weekly portion, I always search for thematic or other links between the various sections given that the Torah is a magnificent literary work as well as the sacred word of God. The links are not always readily apparent, nor are they applied consistently. However, the sages of the Talmud believed in this literary approach and viewed the proximity of Pentateuchal passages or laws – referred to as *semuchin* – as allowing for legal inferences to be made from one to the other.¹ Within our sidrah, *Beha’alotcha*, we find the themes of displacement and replacement juxtaposed.²

We are introduced to this theme in the passage commencing Nu. 8:5, where Moses is commanded to take the Levites through some preparatory purification rituals before entering their new role as sanctuary ministers. It explains *inter alia* how it came about that they were given this special privilege:

For they are formally assigned to me from among the Israelites: I have taken them for Myself in place of all the first issue of the womb of all the first-born of the Israelites. *For every first-born among the Israelites...I consecrated to Myself at the time I smote every first-born in the land of Egypt.* Now I take the Levites instead of every first-born of the Israelites (vv.16-19).

For the background to this, we need to remind ourselves of the episode of the Golden Calf (Ex. ch.32) wherein all the tribes, except for most of the tribe of Levi, indulged in that act of gross apostasy. As, until then, it was the first-born of each family that served as its consecrated spiritual representative (see above quote), it followed that they bore most of the guilt for not having dissuaded their families and tribes from participation in the act.

However, since, when Moses called for support – “Whoever is for the Lord, join me!” (v.26) – it was the majority of the tribe of Levi that responded, they were instructed to administer punishment to the perpetrators, not sparing even those of their own kin that had succumbed (see Ex. 32:26-28). Thus, the first-born were ‘displaced’ by the Levites. However, following this, the Levites were told that one of the terms of their office was that they would also suffer ‘replacement’ once they had attained the age of fifty years (Nu. 8:23). The Talmudic formulation of this arrangement is also couched in the clearest phraseology of displacement – *Shanim poslin bahem v’ein ha-mumim poslin bahem* – ‘[The attainment of] years *disqualifies* them, though physical blemishes do not *disqualify* them.’³

The succeeding section continues this theme with the instruction that the festival of Pesach be observed ‘at its set time’ (9:3). It then relates a situation of

some men who were unclean by reason of a corpse and could not offer the Passover sacrifice on that day. Appearing that same day before Moses and Aaron, those men said to them, “Unclean though we are because of a corpse, why must we be debarred (*lamah niggara*) from presenting the Lord’s offering at its set time with the rest of the Israelites?”(9:6-8).

While the notion of ‘displacement’ or ‘replacement’ may not be considered quite as precise in this context, it is our view that the *Jewish Publication Society* translation of the Hebrew *niggara* as ‘debarred’ does bring it into greater focus.⁴ It underlines the fact that the effect of the men’s impure status was to ‘*displace*’ them from where their family was celebrating the sacrifice and eating of the Paschal Lamb, and its ‘*replacement*’ with their own private compensatory celebration on the same day of the following month.⁵

The succeeding passage (Nu. 9:15-23) recounts the pillars of cloud and fire that accompanied, and served as guides for, the Israelites as they travelled through the desert between their various encampments. The cloud appeared by day, as a demonstration of God’s

favour towards, and protection of, Israel, and in the evening it was ‘displaced’ by and ‘replaced’ with the pillar of fire.

There then follows the account of Moses’ father-in-law, Chovav’s decision to leave the Israelite camp and return to his home in Midian (see 10:29ff). He is referred to in the *TaNaCh* by various names: In the book of Shemot as Reuel (2:18) or Yitro (18:1ff), and here as Chovav. Rashi observes that he went by seven names, the others being Yeter (Ex. 4:18: an abbreviation of Yitro),⁶ Chever, Keini, and Putiel. The association of the latter three names with Yitro is more a matter of tradition, however, than proven by direct textual identification. The episode nevertheless provides another example of displacement – in this case, self-chosen by Chovav.

This is followed by Moses’ encampment plea: *Vayyehi binso’a ha-aron* (Nu.10:35-36), which our Masorah (textual tradition) placed within two inverted or mirrored letter *nuns* (*nun hafuchah*), to indicate (according to the first view mentioned in the Talmud⁷ that the passage had been ‘displaced’ from elsewhere and placed in this position to create a barrier between two passages that relate punishments that befell Israel. The first is only obliquely referred to in the verse, ‘And they journeyed from the Mount of the Lord’ (10:33), which tradition reads derogatorily as an allusion to Israel’s rejection of God immediately after Sinai. The second ‘punishment’ was that visited upon the murmurers (Nu. 11:1, 13, 18) for demanding meat and not satisfying themselves with the heavenly Manna.

Given the Torah’s penchant for linking similar themes, we might suggest that this would indeed have been a most appropriate place to insert Moses’ encampment plea given that the two concluding verses of the preceding passage (10:33-34) employ the verb *nasa*, ‘to journey,’ three times: *Vayis’u*, *nose’a*, and *b’nos’am*), providing the perfect link to the phrase *Vayyehi binso’a ha-aron*.

R. Shimon b. Gamliel adds that ‘in time to come this passage will be ‘displaced’ from its current position and returned to its proper place. According to Rav Ashi, the ‘proper place’ is the *Parashat ha-Degelim* , the section descriptive of the tribes travelling under their individual banners (Nu. 1:52 – 2:34).

It isn't easy to find a plausible explanation for the employment specifically of the letter *nun*. The Spanish Bible commentator, Rabbeinu Bachya ben Asher (1255-1340) suggests that it points to its *gematria*, or numerical value, of fifty. The significance of this number in our context, he believed, is that ‘it refers to the preceding fiftieth (Masoretic) section which he identified as the ‘proper place’ for the *Vayyehi binso’a* verses. Given the vagaries of textual transmission over the centuries, however, and the fact that the two great centres of its research, represented by Ben Asher and Ben Naphtali (10th cent. CE), had independent scribal traditions, it is difficult to verify Bachya’s identification with any certainty.

An even more fanciful suggestion has been made that the demarcating letter *nun* served as an abbreviation of the word *ner*, ‘light,’ in the sense of a comment on our sidrah which opens and takes its name from the subject of the *Nerot*, ‘lights,’ of the Sanctuary’s Menorah. However, given that this inverted *nun* recurs nine times in the Masoretic text, seven of which appear in Psalm 107 which makes no reference to lights, we cannot regard this suggestion as worthy of consideration.

We give the final word regarding the use of symbols to demarcate sentences that have become ‘displaced’ to Professor Saul Lieberman. He drew our attention to the fact that the inverted *nuns* function like similar signs in early Greek manuscripts, such as the letter sigma (Σ) – not unlike our inverted nun (נ) – which was used to mark passages that were in the wrong place.

A further example of displacement in our sidrah occurs in relation to the quails which were displaced from their habitat and

‘swept up from the sea by the wind and strewn over the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and about a day’s journey on that side, all around the camp, and some two cubits deep on the ground’ (11:31).

Our final example is drawn from the field of psychology, wherein the Freudian term ‘displacement’ is employed to describe a defence mechanism whereby a person mentally deflects feelings or impulses of anger or aggression away from their deserved recipients onto another person or object. The most common example is a situation wherein, if a boss blames and screams at his employee, the latter may be disposed to deflect his anger by screaming instead at his wife on his return home.

We may apply this to the episode of Miriam and Aaron’s grievance against their brother, Moses (12:1-2). It expresses itself in what is presented as two totally independent, yet confusingly inextricable, causations: Moses’ foreign (Cushite) wife, and, more seriously, his superior leadership rank. Both are introduced by the verb ‘to speak.’ However, the ‘fact’ of his marriage is introduced by the verb *dabber*, ‘to speak harshly,’⁹ whereas their assertion that God spoke to them as well as to Moses – with the implication that

they had an equal claim to leadership positions – is introduced by the less assertive verb *amar*. This demonstrates, we suggest, that they spoke out publicly and strongly only about Moses' wife, a fact that could not be denied, whereas they knew that they couldn't convince others of their equal claim to leadership. Hence they only aired that jealous feeling to each other, privately, as evinced by the phrase, *halo gam banu dibber*, 'Did He not also speak to us?' (12:2).

This may be underscored by the fact that, when God denounces them, He addresses exclusively their unwarranted attack on His chosen leader, indicative that it was exclusively their jealousy on that score that had been gnawing at them both. The reference to his wife was, purely and simply, 'displacement,' a way of dissipating their strong inner feelings of jealousy and frustration.

NOTES

1. See Tal. *Ber.* 10a, 21b; *Yev.* 3b, *et al.*
2. On displacement, see J. Rajchert, "Emotional, cognitive and self-enhancement processes in aggressive behaviour after interpersonal rejection and exclusion." *Eur J Psychol.* 2015;11(4):707-721.
3. See Tal. *Chul.* 24a; Rashi on Nu. 8:24).
4. See *The Jewish Study Bible* (eds. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), *ad loc.*
5. See Nu.9:9-12.
6. Other examples of changes of names are Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17:1-5), Sarai to Sarah (vv.15-16), Jacob to Israel (32:29), and Hoshe'a to Yehoshua (Nu. 13:16). In the latter source

it states that Moses was the one to change his name, rather than God. So we cannot be sure to what extent the original name may have continued to be used side-by-side with the new one, especially by friends and acquaintances. In the case of Jacob's 'changed' name, the Torah itself continues to refer to him as Jacob – in the very next verse and subsequently - even after the name change.

7. See Tal. *Shabb.* 115b – 116a; See *Rashi* on 10:35.

8. Tal. *Shabb.* 116a.

9. See *Rashi ad loc.*